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Fixing up Deiner Park essential to New Brunswick's revitalization

A spate of now high-end residential buildings, changing storefronts on George Street, and crowds of theater-goers and restaurant patrons on weekend nights all showcase New Brunswick as a city being revitalized. But one crucial component of the city's urban fabric has been woefully overlooked: its parks and public spaces.

The lack of a vibrant urban park in New Brunswick is puzzling not only because of the ongoing,

large-scale redevelopment but also because Rutgers provides a population of 30,000 students who would like nothing better than to have a "destination" park for studying, people-watching, eating lunch, and enjoying nice days. I know this from personal experience — I spent two years at Rutgers earning my master's in city and regional planning — and professional experience, working on public space improvements near universities in Newark, Atlanta and Providence.

There are several opportunities to create great parks and plazas in New Brunswick, but none stands out like the virtually abandoned Deiner Park, adjacent to the Johnson and Johnson corporate headquarters and Rutgers River dorms. At 6 acres, the site is large enough to allow for a program of interesting activities to draw Rutgers students, faculty and staff, as well as New Brunswick residents. The park also has great views across the Raritan River and is probably the most scenic location in the city.

What's holding back Deiner Park from becoming a great public space isn't its design. There's nothing there to draw people to the park, and anyone who does go there is greeted by broken lamps and dying plants.

Deiner Park does not seem to be a high priority for either Rutgers, which is charged with managing the park, or the New Jersey Department of Transportation, the park's owner. Not only do they need help in providing basic park maintenance, but they also need to create a plan for the park's revitalization. Despite \$5 million that was available in 2000 for such a plan, only \$2 million remains because the parties involved couldn't create the plan in a timely fashion.

What's needed is a governing group dedicated to keeping the park vibrant and in superb physical condition, based on the best examples from parks all over the country. One highly successful model for park turnarounds is Bryant Park in New York City, where

a nonprofit group, using private funding, transformed what was one of New York's most dangerous parks in the 1970s and 1980s into a public space known around the world for drawing huge crowds, attending to small details, and increasing real estate values.

Furthermore, with the planned improvements to the pedestrian environment on College Avenue, now is the right time to redevelop the park. Rutgers, NJDOT, and other stakeholders should act to include parks in New Brunswick's renaissance, and make a revitalized Deiner Park the city's signature public space.

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