

Private funds are the new trend in public parks

In exchange for modest advertising, companies are helping cash-strapped cities keep their open spaces in shape.



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Reporting from Boston — Boston Common isn't aging gracefully.

The 376-year-old park's paths and curbs are cracked. In some areas, grass can't grow.



But cash could be coming in the form of corporate sponsorships. Many urban park systems like Boston's — limited by strained budgets yet increasingly popular — are finding new ways to keep their parks in good shape.

"Governments are more stressed than they have ever been because the economy has taken their tax base away," said Dan Biederman, the president of a private consulting firm that

manages public spaces. He was hired to find sponsorships for Boston Common, and previously used them to revitalize Bryant Park in New York.

The city has yet to announce any agreements, but park systems across the country are fostering partnerships with businesses or nonprofit organizations to keep their public spaces from deteriorating. It's unclear just how much money parks are receiving, but directors say corporate and nonprofit relationships will only become more vital in the future.

"We know the golden era of municipal government being able to do this alone is over," said Dale Larsen, the director of the Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department. In the last three years, the department's operational budget has been slashed by 30%. About 600 positions have been cut.

Creative solutions in Phoenix include allowing nonprofit groups to take over youth centers, or giving a group of equestrian enthusiasts the ability to maintain the shuttered Horse Lovers Park.

Judith Kieffer, executive director of the Los Angeles Parks Foundation, said corporate sponsorships for the system's 420 parks are essential to do what the city can't with limited funds. For example, in a Mid-Wilshire park, visitors can see small signs crediting Ralphs supermarkets for dugout benches.

"It's not a solution, but it's a great way to make our parks better," she said. Ralphs paid \$10,000 for the Mid-Wilshire benches, and Nike paid \$200,000 for synthetic courts, for example.

Partnerships between schools, museums and even local health foundations have emerged in various cities, said Catherine Nagel, executive director of the City Parks Alliance, a national network of park leaders.

"There are all kinds of models out there," she said.

In Portland, Ore., Columbia Sportswear committed to assist the parks department with maintenance needs for 10 years in one of the city's oldest parks. In exchange, there are three small bronze plaques in the main entrances to the park. The Pittock Mansion, a historic home in the west hills of Portland, slowly transferred day-to-day operations to the nonprofit Pittock Mansion Society.

"Partnerships don't happen overnight," said Zari Santner, the director of the Portland Parks and Recreation Department, which oversees 196 developed parks. "It takes a lot of effort, persistence." Santner said her department works with more than 100 groups to support the parks.

In Austin, Texas, the parks department recently gave one employee a new assignment — to seek sponsorships full time.

"I think this is the wave of the future," said Sara Hensley, the director for the Austin Parks and Recreation Department. "If we don't do this we will not survive."

Chicago's Millennium Park, nestled in the center of the city, has a bridge named after BP, a cycling center named after McDonald's and a promenade named after Chase.

More than \$220 million has come in from the private sector, said Ed Uhlir, the project design director for the park, which opened in 2004.

"The park would have been pretty bland if these people hadn't stepped forward," he said, adding that the 24.5-acre space has become a model for other cities.

Going forward, the private sector will become more involved in the management and financial health of urban park agencies, said Rich Dolesh, the director of the National Recreation and Park Assn.

"It's the new normal," he said. "It's the new reality of what urban park agencies are facing."

In Boston, one concern is that corporate advertising must be modest and in keeping with the tradition of Boston Common, the nation's oldest public park. The 48-acre park is a focal point for the city and highly regarded as a historical treasure.

So don't expect the common to be named after a cellphone or soda pop.

"We're not talking about neon lights," said Henry Lee, president of Friends of the Public Garden.

On a recent sunny afternoon, Steve Rich was one of the many patrons enjoying the common. He sat with a friend near Frog Pond, eating a sandwich.

Rich, a college administrator, said he trusts that any corporate sponsorships for the park would be done tactfully.

"If public funding is tight, it's not a bad thing," he said.