

JOHN STOSSEL: Making Parks Decent Again

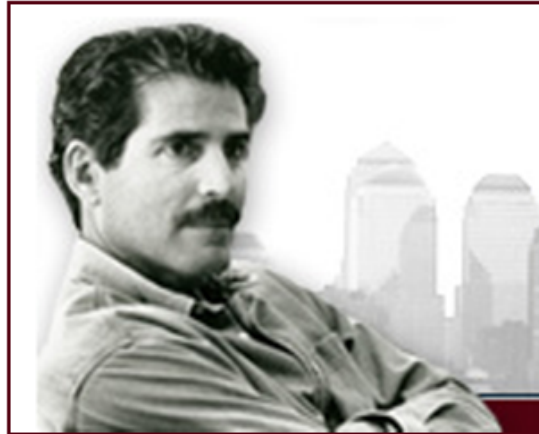
By John Stossel

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America is filled with parks that are filthy, dangerous and badly maintained. The governments in charge plead: We can't help it. Our budgets have been slashed. We don't have enough money!

Bryant Park, in midtown Manhattan, was once such an unsavory place. But now it's nice. What changed? Dan Biederman essentially privatized the park.

With permission from frustrated officials who'd watch government repeatedly fail to clean up the park, Biederman raised private funds from "businesses around the park, real estate owners, concessions and events sponsorships. [S]ince 1996, we have not asked the city government for a single dollar."



Sounds good to me. But not to Shirley Kressel, a Boston journalist who debated Biederman on "Stossel" my FBN TV show.

I asked her what's wrong with getting the money from private businesses, as Dan does.

"Because it goes into private pockets," she said.

So what?

"Because it's very good [for Dan] to use to use the public land for running a private business, a rent-a-park, where all year 'round there's commercial revenue from renting it out to businesses. He keeps all that money.

People don't realize that."

So what? I don't care if they think the money is going to Mars. The park is nice, and people don't have to pay taxes to support it.

The park is certainly more "commercial" now. The day I videotaped, there were booths selling food and holiday gifts. The public seemed fine with that.

Biederman is not finished with his efforts to save public parks. He next wants to apply his skills to the Boston Common.

The Common is America's oldest public park, and like many others, it's largely a barren field. Biederman doesn't want to seek business funding, as he did with Bryant Park, because the area is not as commercial.



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Instead, he would combine the Bryant Park and Central Park models. I know something about Central Park because I'm on the board of the charity that helps manage it.

When government managed Central Park, it was a crime zone. Now it's wonderful. Those of us who live near it donated most of the money that renovated and now maintains Central Park. It's not a business arrangement.

Kressel says she'll fight Biederman's plan for Boston.

"[W]e don't need to teach our next generation of children that the only way they can get a public realm is as the charity ward of rich people and corporations," she said. "We can afford our public realm. We're entitled to it. We pay taxes, and that's the government's job."

The Central Park model "doesn't work for 98 percent of the country," she added.

I don't know what'll happen to the rest of the country, but it's working in Central Park. Why not try it in Boston? It's working for the public.

"It's not, because these people, the money bags, get to decide how the park is used and who goes there and who the desirables are and who are the undesirables. Undesirables are primarily homeless people. ... Homeless people have to be somewhere. If we don't make a system that accommodates people who don't have a place to live, they have to be in the public realm."

Biederman has a ready answer: "We have the same number of homeless people in Bryant Park today as we had when it was viewed by everyone as horrible in the early 1980s. What we didn't have then -- and we have now -- is 4,000 other people. The ratio of non-homeless to homeless is 4,000 to 13 instead of 250 to 13. So any female walking into Bryant Park who might have in the past been concerned about her security says, 'This doesn't look like a homeless hangout to me.' The homeless people are welcomed into Bryant Park if they follow the rules. And those same 13 people are there almost every day. We know their names."

Once again, the creative minds of the private sector invent solutions that never occur to government bureaucrats. If government would just get out of the way, entrepreneurship and innovation, stimulated by the profit motive, will make our lives better.