

Posted on Fri, May. 21, 2010

Changing Skyline: City's parks need a green transfusion



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Philadelphia spends less on parks than almost any big city in the nation, so it's not surprising that even Center City's jewel, Rittenhouse Square, is increasingly dependent on the kindness of friends. Without those \$50 checks from park lovers, not a single impatiens would be planted in the square's borders, the grass would grow to our calves, and the benches would become heaps of broken slats.

These days, however, the support group that keeps the park looking spiffy, the Friends of Rittenhouse Square, is itself in deep trouble. Individual and corporate donations are way down this year, partly because of the weak economy. The square nearly went without Christmas lights in December after the city withdrew its contribution.

Things are so bad that the Friends are weighing what is considered extreme action in these parts: permitting a food concession inside the park and other income-generating activities. There is serious talk of turning the square over to a special services district, similar to the Center City District, and taxing nearby properties.

If the richest neighborhood in Philadelphia is having trouble supporting the park that serves as its front lawn - and the unofficial living room for the entire region - just imagine the situation in other parts of the city.

The blowup in Rittenhouse Square, which prompted 250 people to turn out for a Friends membership meeting last week, has exposed the fragile foundation of Philadelphia's parks policy. For decades, the city has skimmed on funding the Fairmount Park system - 63 parks spread over 9,200 acres - and left it to private groups such as the Friends to make up the shortfall. The city, which just incorporated Fairmount Park into the Recreation Department, now plans to add 500 acres in various locations to this overburdened system.

These numbers tell the story: Philadelphia's operating budget for parks this year (which does not include special projects) is \$12.6 million. By comparison, Chicago's parks district spends \$392 million - about 30 times as much - on 7,200 acres.

Want another shocker? In New York, Bryant Park raises \$8 million a year from private sources to keep its four, city-owned acres in top form - two-thirds of what Philadelphia devotes to its entire system. Six-acre Rittenhouse Square gets by on a \$410,000 operating budget, with about half of that coming from the Friends.



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

Rittenhouse Square gets by on \$410,000 a year from all sources. In contrast, New York's Bryant Park receives \$8 million annually.



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Rittenhouse Square is seriously underfunded. New sources of income are needed.

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No doubt, all of Philadelphia's friends groups have worked hard to compensate. The \$4 million they collectively raised last year was a huge supplement to Fairmount Park's modest operating budget. The Fairmount Park Conservancy, a citywide support group, managed to come up with an additional \$2.1 million. (Full disclosure: I donate to the Friends of Rittenhouse and other Philadelphia parks groups.)

But while every little bit helps, several park experts told me that Philadelphia's volunteer groups could be doing better. Many of the groups lack the fund-raising skills and institutional infrastructure necessary to tap big corporate and foundation grants. So, now that the fizz has gone out of the economy, is it any wonder that amateur fund-raisers are struggling to hold up their end of the lopsided bargain with the city?

Just how badly the Friends of Rittenhouse are performing became evident during last week's membership meeting. Because word went out beforehand that the Friends favored a cafe, the battle lines were drawn around that particular issue. Fearful that the park would be overwhelmed, residents of the square's tony condos focused their ire on the concession and other plans that they thought might disrupt the park's serenity.

What struck me, however, was something else: The Friends haven't been very successful in raising money the old-fashioned way, through member contributions.

There are 2,100 condos on the square, and a few hundred additional rental units. Yet the total number of Friends donors this year stands at 470. Not all live on the square, either.

In the newspaper business, such a lackluster ratio is known as "poor penetration."

All told, those member contributions barely covered the Friends' landscaping budget. Judging by the crowds that descended on the park last month for the annual Rittenhouse Row festival - an event that made it virtually impossible to find an unoccupied spot of grass - the park's constituency extends beyond the neighborhood, beyond the city even.

As many nonprofits know, fund-raising is an art. That's why people get paid to do it. The unpaid board of the Friends of Rittenhouse clearly needs help, as do the other groups.

Because the Rittenhouse Friends haven't exhausted the usual fund-raising sources, it seems premature to propose a food concession as the solution of first resort. That's like going nuclear without bothering with diplomacy.

The idea was suggested by the Friends' consultant, Daniel A. Biederman, the public-space guru who brought Bryant Park back from the brink. He also advocates a host of corporate sponsorships, the kind that could result in small donor plaques being placed around the square.

For all its flaws - the loose paving bricks and graffiti scrawl - Rittenhouse Square remains a near perfect example of an American urban park. It accommodates everyone from the nanny set to hipsters with Hacky Sacks. It is also one of the few refuges in Center City from the drumbeat of commerce. Those qualities shouldn't be tampered with lightly.

Rittenhouse Square isn't Bryant Park, located in a purely commercial district. Nor does it face the challenges of Philadelphia's Franklin Square, a forsaken public space brought back to life with a variety of commercial activities, including a burger shack.

Still, Rittenhouse Square and other city parks can learn from their experiences. It's worth noting that three of Philadelphia's four historic squares - Franklin, Washington, and Logan - are now run by what are, essentially, professional management entities. (The National Park Service oversees Washington Square.) They're all better for it.

By now, it should be clear that caring for the city's parks is serious business. Philadelphia parks won't get their due until they're treated that way.