

# Mayor, it doesn't wash

## Chester Smolski

One of the major achievements in the city of Providence over the past five years has been a vastly improved parks system. From the recently refurbished Hopkins Square in the North End to the newly constructed Market Square near the downtown, the restoration of open spaces in the city has been a distinct contribution to the urban environment. And nowhere are these improvements more manifest than in the 430 acres comprising Roger Williams Park, one of the principal city assets that is enjoyed by both resident and non-resident alike.

Since 1975 almost \$5 million has been spent on city parks, with approximately one-half of this amount provided by the Mayor's Office of Community Development — an indication of the strong support given by the mayor to the program. This city effort, together with the strong leadership of a young, vigorous and dedicated staff of professionals, is the right combination for the continuing successful ventures of the Parks Department. So it comes as a complete shock to discover that the Board of Park Commissioners has suspended the Parks Superintendent on the charge of mismanagement.

Whether this move was orchestrated by the mayor is open to question, but there can be no doubt that the wrong person and department was singled out for mismanagement, incompetence and lack of supervision. If the mayor wants to correct such faults he might very well look to other departments to find some substantial and substantive evidence of this misuse of city funds and personnel. Consider some of the following examples.

Mayor's Office of Community Development — For the two-month period from March 8 to May 8, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development imposed a freeze on all spending by this city agency because the "poor bookkeeping and accounting procedures" did not allow for a subsequent outside audit.

In another case, the application from MOCD to HUD for approval of the \$8.6 million to be spent in this fiscal year was returned because a neighborhood group questioned the lack of citizen participation and the group chosen to represent their neighborhood. In a lengthy statement to the mayor, HUD cited the lack of significant citizen involvement in the planning process; the lateness of a citizen participation plan (what was supposed to be implemented on August 1, 1978 was begun only in January, 1979); the lack of general citizen representation on the Citizen Review Board; and the questionable citizen's group chosen in South Providence, with the requirement that another election be held.

Another case involved the state A-95 Physical Resources Committee which reviews all requests for federal funds, including housing. Due to frequent inconsistencies, lack of information and late requests on various proposals, it became necessary recently for the chairman of the committee to write the mayor (the only community so notified) stating, in part, that "the committee had experienced difficulty in evaluating proposals for housing developments in the City of Providence because the Housing Assistance Plan had been amended without informing the A-95 Clearinghouse; because unofficial comments, both oral and written, have reached the Clearinghouse second hand; and, most significantly, because the committee has been required to make recommendations without benefit of offi-

cial comments from the Office of the Mayor."

**Sewer Plant** — The Providence sewage treatment facility was closed for repairs in late 1978 and in January 1979, 29 workers were released. A few days later these workers were put back on the payroll. Exactly what they do in a plant which is closed is difficult to determine. Even more difficult is trying to get information about this "workforce." According to a recent news story, "How the city of Providence, which perpetually cries 'poor' in relationship to its sewer problems, can afford a \$10,000 a week payroll (that's \$500,000 a year) to pay men who are not working is an on-going mystery."

**CETA Office** — The ostensible reason for the Board of Park Commissioners' meeting was to discuss the loss of 47 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act jobs to the Parks Department. Instead, five city supervisory persons appeared to testify against the Parks Superintendent. These 47 CETA positions could be extended for another year but, as the Parks Superintendent indicated, the CETA Office application had not met federal regulations for this waiver and would likely face certain rejection.

Mismanagement, incompetence and lack of supervision, unfortunately, are problems common to some city agencies. Why the parks superintendent, with his proven record of achievement, should be singled out is the question.

There have been some exciting developments in the city of Providence over the past five years, changes which have brought national recognition to our capital city in recent issues of two major magazines. Providence is making a name for itself, and the mayor of the city can justifiably claim considerable credit for putting the city in the national limelight. But if he is behind this scheme to fire the competent parks superintendent then he demeans himself, his office and his city.

There are too many major decisions to be made on the future of this city, and it would be petty of the mayor to get involved in a decision, whether for personal or party reasons, to fire a proven manager. If he wants to find examples of mismanagement, let him look to other departments; there are enough there without using the parks superintendent as a scapegoat.

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