

Urban parks contribute to improved living

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They have been called "the lungs of the city." Studies have shown that these green spaces have less noise, cleaner air and are cooler in the summer than the rest of the built city. These green oases, offering a retreat from the busy world around them, are our urban parks.

In addition to altered physical conditions, these green spaces provide one of the major amenities to the quality of life in cities, being associated with pleasure, recreation, human encounters and communal celebrations. And some authorities would go so far as to say that there is a strong correlation between parks and quality cities, i.e., the best parks are in the best cities.

Providence plans bode well for 'green space'

Perhaps the best known park in Rhode Island is the Providence owned and operated Roger Williams Park, a 415-acre retreat located in the southern part of the city in South Elmwood. Having undergone considerable improvement with major city and federal funding over the past few years, the park continues as a major attraction and landmark to Rhode Islanders.

The importance of the park was singled out in a survey of 81 percent of the state's residents done last year by Alpha Research associates. When asked to identify those aspects of Rhode Island which contribute most to the quality of life in the state, 76 percent of the respondents chose the park, second only to the 89 percent who placed the state's colleges and universities in first place.

Roger Williams Park is also the most popular park in the state, with one-third of the respondents indicating that they visited this park most often. But there is an irony here, for the respondents identified this facility as a state park rather than a city park. There is little question that Roger Williams Park is a regional park that draws visitors from throughout Rhode Island and from nearby states, but it is a sad commentary that the city of Providence gets little, if any, credit for its efforts and expenditures in this area.

Although best known, Roger Williams Park is just one of the 107 identified open spaces in Providence that comprise 1,015 acres, or

eight percent of the total city area. These 107 parcels are city owned and maintained. Additionally, one federal holding, the five-acre Roger Williams National Memorial, 10 state properties, such as the Children's Center and Rhode Island College, and 27 private parcels, including Providence College and La Salle High School, total 506 acres. The total 1,521 acres of green space in Providence represent 12.6 percent of the total land area, or one in eight acres.

Compared to another old city, Cleveland, at eight percent, Providence compares favorably in the amount of open space, but compared to a very old city, London, it does not do well: 16 percent of Inner London and 32 percent of Outer London are in open space. Providence does less well compared with new cities: the new towns of the United Kingdom average 20 percent open space as does the American new town of Columbia, Maryland.

Important as is the amount of open space, it is also essential that urban parks be in places accessible to people. Here is where the neighborhood park becomes the focus of interest. In Providence many of the 25 neighborhoods have adequate open space, with playfields, school grounds and tot lots available. But five neighborhoods have less than five acres of open space within them and one, Manton, has none. Lack of adequate open space can be an issue in such neighborhoods, as it should be.

There is hope for the downtown Providence open spaces. With the soon to start construction of the auto restricted zone in Kennedy Plaza, there will be the opportunity to refurbish and upgrade this potentially attractive city hall park. And more important, with the demolition of the railway bridges associated with the capital center project will come the opening up of this part of the downtown with an additional projected 30 acres of open space, a major opportunity to enhance the appearance of the city center.

With the emphasis and publicity on new construction in the downtown, one must not forget the importance of those spaces that can add pleasure to city living and make city living more attractive to potential residents. Increasing the amount of green space in the downtown and several neighborhoods, together with a better system of adequate maintenance, can do just that.

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