

# The Focus-Grouped Park

Cities are building new parks at a rate not seen for 100 years. Jon Weinbach on the increasingly heated debate about what to put in them.

By JON WEINBACH

June 29, 2007; Page W1

There's a new status symbol for American cities and it's not a soaring office tower or retro stadium. To many civic leaders, nothing says progressiveness and prosperity like an elaborate urban park.



**Hudson River Park, New York; 550 acres; Opened 2003** Construction, partly on top of old piers, is continuing along Manhattan's West Side. It's the largest open-space development in New York since Central Park, with green spaces, trails for bikers and Rollerbladers, and free wireless Internet.

On a scale not seen since the "City Beautiful" movement of the late 19th century, public green spaces are proliferating. In Irvine, Calif., work has begun on a \$1.1 billion recreational area that will be 60% larger than New York's Central Park. Private donors in Houston financed the bulk of a \$93 million downtown greensward, while the mayor of Louisville, Ky., wants to ring the city's borders with 100 miles of trails. In all, 29 of the nation's biggest cities have added nearly 14,000 acres of new parkland in two years -- the equivalent of about 11,000 football fields.

But even grass and trees can be complicated. Citizens and planners across the country are getting tied up in a larger debate about what a

park should be -- one that often pits people who believe in peace and quiet and the soulful contemplation of nature against those who prefer zip lines, Frisbee golf and hang-gliding.

In the Twin Cities, some residents don't agree with the decision to build a public sports field with artificial turf. Park builders in Dallas are trying to find room in one new project for a backgammon area. And an effort to rehabilitate Manhattan's Washington Square Park has been met by three lawsuits so far -- including an attempt by preservationists to keep the city from moving the central fountain about 15 feet to the east. "You'd think we were proposing to build a nuclear waste dump," says Adrian Benepe, the city's commissioner of parks and recreation.

At a public meeting earlier this month in Louisville, about 150 people came to weigh in on Floyd's Fork Greenway, a 27-mile stretch of parks, bike paths and canoe launches to be built along a scenic creek. After the presentation, residents furiously scribbled suggestions on project maps that hung around the room. Among them: "A nature trail can't run along a highway!"; "Leave an area large enough for a hot air balloon launch"; and from one particularly agitated person, "Many people were not notified of this meeting." Ralph Stanton, a goateed tile contractor in his mid-50s, was concerned that the park plans didn't include a trail wide enough to accommodate all three of his horses. "Kentucky is the home of the Derby, but we've got to go to Indiana to ride," said Mr. Stanton, clutching his cowboy hat. "They ought to get the horse people more involved."



Ben Garvin

**Gold Medal Park, Minneapolis; 7.5 acres; Opened 2007** Built on a set of old parking lots, site aims to foster quiet activities like picnics and strolls rather than sports. It was financed by a \$5 million donation from former United Health Care chief executive William McGuire.

## Symbols of Democracy

For decades, local and federal governments had cut back on park budgets as funding needs grew for education, health care and safety. That marked a change from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when urban parks were held up as symbols of democracy, public health and progressive social planning -- and received generous government support. There was another surge of park building during the "Great Society" era of President Lyndon Johnson, but as more city residents fled for the suburbs, many urban parks were not properly maintained -- and green spaces deteriorated or disappeared.

Federal money is still hard to come by. The Land and Water Conservation Fund, a program that provides grants for state and national parks, will receive about \$28 million this fiscal year, down nearly 80% from 2002. Another initiative, the Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Program, has not been funded in five years.



The Trust for Public Land Archives

**BeltLine, Atlanta; Over 1,200 acres; Opening unknown** The initiative, which awaits funding,

would double Atlanta's park acreage. It calls for converting this former quarry into the city's largest park.

A number of factors are spurring the current parks boom, from research about the health benefits of green space to interest from private

donors and corporate sponsors. Developers who once fought with conservationists are now pushing the idea, after discovering that successful parks -- such as Manhattan's Bryant Park and Atlanta's Piedmont Park -- can dramatically increase property values.

City leaders are also using parks as a marketing tool. In an effort to draw young professionals and graying suburbanites, a number of cities including Denver, Philadelphia and San Diego have gentrified their downtowns recently. But politicians are finding that most of the new residents grew up with access to running trails, sports fields and the like -- and expect to have the same access in the city.

The largest increases in park space over the last two years took place in sprawling municipalities like Houston and Jacksonville, Fla., but even densely packed older cities such as Cleveland (with 187 new acres) and Philadelphia (22 acres) are finding ways to create new open space, often on former military bases or industrial sites. Seattle's nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park, opened earlier this year, was built on a former oil-transfer site. Other cities have focused on building parks on reclaimed brownfields -- industrial or commercial sites tainted by pollution -- especially near valuable waterfront or downtown real estate. Pittsburgh, the long-time hub of the U.S. steel industry, redeveloped a 283-acre slag dump along the Monongahela River a few years ago, converting it into a residential complex and 200 acres of green space.

New York is in the midst of "the biggest period of park construction and redevelopment since the 1930s," says Mr. Benepe, the parks commissioner. Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who sat on the boards of two local park foundations before taking office, recently increased the parks department's operating annual budget to about \$355 million -- double the total in 2000. The city's most ambitious projects are building a park on top of an abandoned elevated railway line in Manhattan and converting the Fresh Kills landfill in Staten Island to a 2,315-acre recreation area.

As cities increasingly rely on corporate donors, real-estate developers and private, not-for-profit entities for park funding, they're facing some criticism. When Chicago's Millennium Park, opened in 2004, named prominent areas after corporate sponsors such as SBC, Boeing and British Petroleum, some traditionalists cried foul. Several cities have recently devised guidelines for sponsorship and naming rights -- in Denver, a company has to contribute 50% of all capital costs to get its name or logo on a new park.

But in most cases, the arguments revolve around one issue: the purpose of a park. In Chico, Calif., work on the city's new master plan for Bidwell Park has been hamstrung by a fight between preservationists and disc golfers who have been using a remote part of the park to play the Frisbee-inspired sport. Environmental advocates say the golfers are damaging trees and compacting the soil. At a meeting earlier this month, two golfers said their course should not be treated any differently than bike or hiking trails.



**Millennium Park, Chicago; 24.5 acres; Opened 2004** Some have criticized the park for naming prominent areas -- including the Frank Gehry-designed BP Bridge, pictured here -- after corporate sponsors.

Planners for downtown Houston's 12-acre, \$93 million Discovery Green park, which is set to open next year, wanted to create a "critical mass of activities" to generate buzz in a long-forgotten area of town, says Philip Myrick, vice president of Project for Public Space, a New York nonprofit that helped conceive the park's programs. Throughout 2005, the group conducted about a dozen small meetings with different "stakeholders" -- ranging from Hispanic community leaders to downtown employees to elementary-school students -- and held workshops for anyone interested in contributing ideas. The Hispanic community wanted open space for events, while the students proposed adding a "zip line" ride, a pulley suspended from a cable wire that allows thrill seekers to fly through the air.

The final park plans included a dog area, a jogging trail, a puppet theater and a "birthday veranda" for parties -- but no zip line.

## Bocce Ball and Dogs

"Just having a baseball diamond, a grove of trees and a couple soccer fields is really the old model," says landscape architect James Burnett, whose firm is designing a \$80 million park in downtown Dallas that will cover a sunken eight-lane freeway. The current plans for the site, tentatively called Woodall Rodgers Park, include a bocce ball court, a backgammon area, spaces for leashed and unleashed dogs and a botanical garden. "The program list can get very long," he says. "The discussion is always heated."



**Great Park of Orange County, Orange County, Calif.; 1,347 acres; Opening 2009 (projected)** Plans for the \$1.1 billion project, on

a former military base, include a 2.5-mile man-made canyon and a massive wildlife corridor. Most visitors will need to drive there, since it's far from residential neighborhoods.

In some ways, the skirmishes over space mirror previous controversies over park land. After Central Park opened in the 1800s, New York City commissioners were overwhelmed by

public requests for boat rides and more activities, even though landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted imagined the park as "purely passive space," says Witold Rybczynski, a professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania and author of a 1999 biography of Mr. Olmsted.

But now that prime urban real estate is much more scarce and expensive, "it's much more challenging to satisfy everyone's notion of what a park should be," he says. As a result, many of the new projects share a theme-park quality, with neatly organized areas catering to different groups. "You want to please as many people as possible, but we've become so different," he says.

Few parks today match the cost or scope of the Great Park of Orange County in Southern California, on the site of the former El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. The decision to build the park came after years of battles over the fate of the base, which closed eight years ago. In 1994, county voters narrowly approved a plan to convert the base into an airport, but opponents stalled the effort until 2002, when voters approved a measure overturning the airport plan in favor of a park.

The Navy handled the sale of the base, dividing it into four parcels. In 2005, Lennar Corp., the nation's second-largest home builder, bought all four lots for about \$650 million. In order to build on the site, Lennar had to turn over a chunk of the land to the public for park development, contribute \$200 million toward the creation of the park, and spend another \$201 million on infrastructure. For its part, Lennar plans to create a sprawling, 3,400-unit residential development around the park, as well as a 750-acre "Lifelong Learning" area that's slated to include a college campus and senior housing.

The park won't begin to open until 2009, though its first attraction, a balloon ride that will take riders 500 feet in the air, is scheduled to debut on July 14. (The balloon will be orange, naturally.) Last March, the park's designers announced a projected cost of about \$1.1 billion -- not including the funds needed to construct a planned set of museums or a botanical garden.

## **No to Advertising**

To generate revenue, the park is exploring sponsorship, naming rights and sublease options, as well as charging fees for parking and certain events and activities, like evening softball games. However, earlier this month the park's board of directors voted not to put advertising on the new balloon ride, despite estimates that it could bring in as much as \$250,000. (Visitors may be charged for parking though.)

Like most park projects, this one has youth sports organizations and enthusiasts of every stripe angling for prime turf. Last year, the board asked for suggestions how to develop the park's 165-acre sports area -- and got an avalanche of proposals. The list includes a "casting pond" to teach aspiring fly fishermen, a research center to study children's exercise habits, and a "California Sports Hall of Fame" honoring local athletes. Mike Meier, a 56-year-old hang-gliding manufacturer from Orange, Calif., concedes his request for hang-gliding space probably won't get top priority. Nonetheless, he spent "about 30 or 40 hours" putting together a 12-page proposal, which included sketches of a bowl-shaped hill where beginner-level pilots could learn how to take off. "It wasn't a Madison Avenue-like production," he says. "I'm not holding my breath."



Craig Hartley

**Discovery Green, Houston; 12 acres; Opening 2008** The park -- located between the city's two recently built sports venues, the Toyota Center and Minute Maid Field -- is expected to cost \$93 million.

In contrast to most urban green spaces, which are centered around pedestrian access, few people will be able to walk to the Great Park -- aside from residents in Lennar's new homes. (The site is in a remote area a few miles northeast of Interstate 5, far from anything resembling a neighborhood.) There are plans to create a light-rail service that will connect an enlarged train station in Irvine with stops at the park and a nearby shopping center, but even Roy Cooper, the park's operations director, admits that transportation is a major obstacle. "If we provide alternative, convenient transportation, we might have a shot at getting people out of their cars -- but this is Orange County," he says.

**Write to** Jon Weinbach at [jonathan.weinbach@wsj.com](mailto:jonathan.weinbach@wsj.com)

## RELATED ARTICLES AND BLOGS

Related Content may require a subscription | [Subscribe Now -- Get 2 Weeks FREE](#)

Related Articles from the Online Journal

- [New York Building's Record Price Shows Office Market's Strength](#)
- [Milan Preps for Its Citywide Makeover](#)
- [Circuit City Enters New Turnaround Stage](#)

Blog Posts About This Topic

- [187 acres of new parks in Cleveland](#) brewedfreshdaily.com
- [News: Somerton gets money for a soccer field, park upgrades | city, soccer,...](#)

yumasun.com

[More related content](#) Powered by Sphere 