

OCL Community Image Steering Committee meeting March 15, 2011

Attending: Therese Driscoll, Katie Hayduke, Joe Hucko, Tony Malavenda (co-chair), Sarah McIlvain, Don McLaughlin, Greg Munno, Clyde Ohl, Greg Michel, Fran Nichols, Donna Rohde, Sheena Solomon, Merike Treier (co-chair), Rachel Pollack, Sandra Barrett

Public Spending and Commitment to Public Spaces:: Jessi Lyons, Cornell Cooperative Extension; Andy Maxwell, Director of Bureau of Planning and Sustainability for the City; Glen Lewis, City Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth, Steve Harris, City-County Forester

Andy Maxwell, Director of Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

We'd like to highlight our assets, whether it be downtown area, open spaces, neighborhoods.

There is plenty we could do if money not an object, but in this era it is necessary to make strategic investments.

The challenge is setting priorities, pushing ahead with different planning efforts, macro level city-wide planning efforts.

How we deal with asset management, resource allocation, will be addressed by some of the other speakers.

How are we doing? I think we are doing ok. We are getting to a place where we are being more strategic. We are forced to be strategic by finances.

At neighborhood level it is kind of challenging. For different neighborhoods sentiment is different, priorities are different. You will hear different thoughts and wishes related to a particular neighborhood. It is a challenge to take that to the citywide level and do capital improvement and asset management investment in a fiscal crisis.

Goal: To establish priority with regard to broader community.

Glen Lewis, Parks Planner, Dept. of Parks, Recreation and Youth, 10 years in Parks office

Sandra: We are focusing here on public space, the plantings, the infrastructure, to some extent the activities that happen in them, but primarily on the infrastructure.

Lewis: If we had to choose an image that really captures parks and public spaces, it would include not just beautiful green spaces but also people. Green spaces are nice, but infrastructure is for people to utilize.

Sandra: How does that translate when you are planning a space? We were talking earlier about the newer parks at Columbus Circle, and at Fayette and Warren. How does that philosophy translate to what you do?

Parks and public spaces have great beauty and amenities. We have aesthetic resources, but those resources need to be made available to people. We can lobby for resources, to enhance those spaces as those spaces are used.

Sandra: How do you rate the success of public spaces downtown?

Public spaces are successful if they are used. Case in point: Inner Harbor added fire works, concerts five years ago. Suddenly people are aware of it, despite all of the money invested in resources before that.

There are large spaces where public events can take place but also smaller spaces which lend themselves to more intimacy, City Place, between the State Tower Building and City Hall Commons, or green space that is Fayette Park, another successful space but in stark contrast to Clinton Square. There other public spaces in a community that are very active: Thornden Park, with families, teams, etc. It is easy to commit resources to Cummings Field, Meacham, because there are going to be 500 kids and the parents coming to see them place. They drive our resources. **(Usage drives spending.)**

Another thing that is sometimes not so easy to capture is the vibrancy of the space. There are lots more people running through downtown, or taking a walk, more active usage.

Sandra: Is your primary responsibility in Parks Planning events or infrastructure? Infrastructure.

Steve Harris, City and Onondaga County Arborist

Harris's work is divided between city and county. Among his responsibilities: Designs at city lot 21, City lot on the other side of Hanover Square and Farmer's Market, they have a design for integrating trees and catching storm water. I do design review with many other people.

Sandra: Can you tell us how you fit into the parks department?

The forestry division is just one person (Harris.) Overall structure: A superintendent of grounds who oversees all the people who provide maintenance, oversees mowing contracts. I manage street trees and park trees, and 95 percent is managing street trees.

Trees are infrastructure. They provide many benefits. For every dollar invested, we probably get four dollars in return, in heat island mitigation, energy reduction through shading, pollution mitigation. Trees improve air quality. Of course our oldest and youngest suffer most from airway diseases and artificially high temperatures created by paved surfaces make air quality worse. Trees mitigate that. They capture storm water. They are an anger management tool. They have been shown to improve attitudes, whether in a housing development or on our residential streets. They pay us back over time, the only piece of infrastructure that accrues value over time. If you look at history of street tree management, you can say we manage trees reactively and we have been disinvesting in our tree resources. I say that more clinically than as a criticism. I understand what we are doing and why. But if you look at 1951, we had 49,000 street trees. In 1978, we had 39,000 street trees. After the Labor Day storm we had 31,000. Today we

have the same. Since the Labor Day storm, we have planted about what we removed. And we also have about 10,000 in the parks.

The reason I say we manage reactively is that I manage when people ask me to, rather than in an efficient, block management way. To sustain our urban forest resources people need to understand the benefits, what they are, and we need to do this in neighborhood level. That's an opportunity we can start doing. One of the opportunities that we don't have is a Tree Committee. Many cities big and small do have them, and they set policy. We had one briefly, had one in place after the Labor Day storm, didn't last.

Creating greater Efficiency: We can lower unit cost of management of trees, just by managing at the block level. We can't get more efficient spending existing dollars. If we increase our budgets X amount we can manage twice as much.

National Grid: They don't act randomly. They spend quite a bit of time and money managing right of ways. Their right-of-ways have to go from carrying single phase, and more and more, having to convert to triple phase (several levels of line). They are getting ready to do massive upgrade to 45 foot tall poles throughout their network. They have good contractors and bad contractors, Bad contractors did some work in Sedgwick. Bad work makes tree structurally unsound and passes costs onto municipality. If not pruned to standards the result is ugly. The company will work with us in advance to remove those trees. The "pruning" can turn healthy trees into something that needs to be removed. The only solution is that they tell us in advance when they are getting ready to prune a corridor and we tell them just remove that tree, and if they are willing to pay for it, that is what we do, and if we have to cost share, willing to do that too because that saves us both money in the long run.

Glen Lewis: In terms of National Grid, they have incentivized appropriate tree planting (trees that don't grow to great heights under power lines.)

Steve Harris: I operate by responding to requests from homeowners from all over city, when I go to look at tree, I look at nearby trees, and may hire a contractor or in-house team to deal with those. Just the cost for vehicle miles traveled, and having to travel from place to place, the costs are higher. If we were able to manage all of Westcott for instance, bid all trees on Westcott out, we would see the unit cost to manage trees go down, and storm management costs reduced. But we would spend more money to get those cost efficiencies.

Tree planting is dealt with in the same way. We have a master plan, I have been using that plan to guide my thinking on the urban forest but because we don't have a Tree Committee to remind our decision makers that that plan exists and instructs. I want to get that in place if I can. Different Tree Committees are structured different ways. Usually have citizens on them.

Burying of power lines? Talk to National Grid.

Related to county program, county as part of amended consent judgment is planting 8,500 trees starting this year, in the city.

Why did the Tree Committee disband after the Labor Day storm? Administrations moved on perhaps. Not known for sure.

Is there any reason not to have a Tree Committee?

If we are not ready to integrate trees into the decision making process. They help set ordinance policy, provide political grounding for trees. That might be a reason an administration might not want to do it. If we're not ready to commit resources in the world of scare, competing resources, with a tree committee now you have political clout for trees that wasn't there before.

Jessi Lyons: Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County

Our primary program right now is our urban forestry program. We have a volunteer program to learn how to maintain trees, the importance of urban trees and how to plant and maintain across the city and county. The point is that we want people to make the right decision right away while they are young trees, so that we don't have problems with utility lines; choosing trees that are appropriate across the city.

To that end we primarily focus on teaching people why they need to care about trees in the first place. Part of that is getting people out into the community, most of them volunteers. What they value about the program, is that they get access to places they wouldn't normally have visited. The goal is teaching people about what can happen in a place, bird-watching, gardening, getting the education that creates a sense of value on a community level and gets some work done across the city.

Restarted Master Gardener Program: It has been 17 years since we had that program. Those people will help to continue that education in city but will also take part in volunteer projects like streetscape plantings.

Master Gardener Program: Variety of Experts, from various sources, Cornell, ESF, Coop. Ext. to find the best research related info about gardening , pruning, pests, disease, appropriate species, fertilizers, storm water. People pay to participate in program and then they have to commit 200 hours of service between education and community work. Once they are educated, they can share with a lot of people, become a major resource.

Aside from taxpayer dollars, what are some of the other funding sources that you use or tap?

Andy Maxwell: All of our departments use grants in some ways. Parks Dept. primarily funded off of City General Fund. Grants include ones for Watershed Protection, Forestry, others.

Comments:

Neighborhoods: Common thread among all neighborhood groups is that they want their neighborhoods cleaner and neater looking.

Response: If there is a dumping or trash pickup issue, Parks Dept. will join forces with DPW temporarily.

What's available to residents if they want to clean up their neighborhoods, plant trees in their neighborhood? Is there a guide available pointing people to different departments, persons within city?

Response: Yes. DPW prints a large folio brochure and goes to all the relevant contact people. Yard waste pickup, rules for licensing dogs, basic park rules, etc. in that pamphlet. In terms of volunteerism, there is a group of organizations, Neighborhood Watch type of organizations, that are neighborhood based or church based and they may organize clean ups.

It has been an informal process, but since about 2000, tree planting (grant based?). Based on what neighborhood contacts; we could probably formalize that process. Neighbors help find location of trees, help plant.

Meadowbrook, did they come to you? If someone wanted to do that in a median, where would they go?

Response: Any city employee in the department could appropriately resource that request, resource to Parks Commissioner, could make it appropriate priority. So many points of entry on different requests.

Let's say city owned vacant lot, or a median, how resource intensive is a community group taking on a project like that?

Response: Every situation different, every project location, different. If someone wants to turn vacant lot into community garden, costs money. We've done those. We assess the scope of project and if it can fit within the priorities of Parks Dept. or if we have to look at creating a partnership where other resources can be found.

Many new parks association formed in recent years; can't think of one segment of city where isn't one. There are new associations being formed all the time. Parks Conservancy is over several of these organizations. Most recently new Schiller Park Association, wants to organize to take care of parks within their TNT area.

Are Parks Associations helpful to Parks Department?

We do not have a template for a parks association. In the case of Onondaga Park, they have resources, want certain kinds of amenities. Schiller much more hands on/volunteer. Lincoln Park Assoc. organized around marketing a new neighborhood in the city. They have a very different agenda than sustaining long-standing neighborhood. We try to be all things to all people; try to meet your interest and energy with an equal amount of energy and resources. Thornden Park Association has the chili cook off and Shakespeare Festivals.

Once tree is planted, is maintenance an issue, got to water them, how does that work?

Most trees, if you get right trees selected for space, water is not an issue, pruning is the issue. Most are cared for through Cornell Cooperative Extension. Otherwise the trees don't get cared for unless homeowner requests it.

Typical maintenance on trees 9-15 years when it should be every six.

Now you need a permit to plant, much of the last planting wave was to replace the Elm, a lot of trees planted where power lines already were. We inherited those 40 year old problems.

To plant appropriately will cause downsizing of urban forest.

Utility lines lower today.

Discussion of Creek Walk: Which city department will ultimately manage it? Maintenance working out over different departments.

Discussion of inclusion of permanent stage at Clinton Square: Issues related to cost, flexibility. At Hanover square, it was tried to put in more permanent stage. That lasted less than a year, because of maintenance issues.

Tree funding?

Department of Environmental Conservation NYS, Steve Harris and Jessi Lyons recently wrote a grant.

The US Forest Service has an urban and community forestry division. That is one source that frequently supports communities, funds trees. Located at ESF, direct access to Forest Service as a larger entity.

Tree funding privately? National Grid, Home Depot.

Soil and Water Conservation sell small seedlings in bulk.

Are there any communities that you all look to as models?

Dewitt and Fayetteville have tree commissions that are very successful.

New York City has leading edge park system. Cincinnati comparable to ours, Milwaukee has nice park system. I like looking at how they manage their issues. On the people side of things, I like paying attention to Baltimore Community Foundation: How they fund, fuel and support their people programs.

Philadelphia Green, Vacant lot stabilization programs, getting community involved in creating urban farms. They have a very large horticultural society, Horticultural Association, community art and murals very effective to support those spaces, Philadelphia flower show is the major funder of Philadelphia Green.

Emerald Ash Borer

Ash Trees: city has 2000 Ash, maybe significantly more. It could be double or triple that amount. And on private property, city must deal with the Ash from a code enforcement and outreach angle. The education is going to be huge. We are currently working with county and city to come up with a plan.

Once we have the Emerald Ash Bore, it will be a cycle of infestation and removal.

Eradication not considered an option. Best hope: Cities where there are concentrations of Ash, such as Milwaukee, they inject trees with pesticide that lasts two to three years. But as long as Ash elsewhere are not treated, the solution is temporary.

Public acceptability: The pesticide is safe to inject, but it is a neurotoxin that translates to the leave and leaves fall to ground.

We are selling the pesticide as a management tool to allow us to remove Ash on schedule, not to retain the Ash.

Because Ash are a small percentage of our trees it is probably best to remove them.

Once of the things our committee struggling with, how do we make argument to allocate more resources? Do you have any advice on making this point?

Andy Maxwell: Promotion of grass roots organization, such as Parks Conservancy (Mike Behnke, president and Emmanuel Carter, vice president). Public and private dollars brought together to care for spaces.

Glenn Lewis: Downtown business people can speak to their interests in downtown spaces. Group that is active and vocal. From the perspective of being business owners, powerful position to lobby from.

Jessi Lyons: If you can get people invested it makes it easier for county/city to support it. In applying for grants, sometimes all you need to have city back you.

If community will take some ownership over a project, from a programmatic or maintenance standpoint, there are grant resources available to organizations that aren't available to the city.

Look at Philadelphia Green's vacant land strategy (Neighborhood Transformation Initiative.) It is a model in creation of new green space that has been adopted and absorbed by community.

What would it take to appropriately plan and manage the parks system that we should have?

There has been a shift of resources: Ten years ago we had an arborist, forestry superintendent, two tree trimmers, couple of laborers, and all of those people worked in forestry.

More recently grounds maintenance superintendent, more people in that part of the department.

Looking at putting resources where there are people.

Next Public Session: Noon, Wednesday, March 22