

Keep It Green

Hartford Shouldn't Turn Over Neighborhood Parks To Developers

October 3, 2004 By CHRISTOPHER ALLEN-DOUCOT

Parks are essential components of a healthy city. Large parks full of trees and wildlife are oases amid the asphalt and concrete. Hartford is particularly blessed to have a park system planned by its famous native son, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

On my morning walks in Keney Park I have been awed by mammoth 100-year-old oaks and thrilled by deer, fox and turkeys. Large parks such as Keney are the lungs of a city, providing fresh air and cooling shade.

Smaller neighborhood parks have a role as well. They are the de facto backyards for the thousands of city residents who dwell in apartments without yards. Unfortunately, many of these parks are not officially designated by the city as parks and are thus at risk for development. A confluence of circumstances have come together to threaten two of these parks in the Northeast neighborhood.

In the case of the first proposed development, the Grandparents Housing Initiative, the city is attempting to respond to the needs of some 6,000 Hartford children who are being raised by grandparents. The idea to build a supportive housing community for these nontraditional families is sound. Unfortunately, there is no public financial commitment to this worthy project.

This forced the developer to abandon the initial proposed site, the former Clark School on Clark Street, and submit a new proposal to build eight three-family houses on the field behind the abandoned former school, which neighborhood children use as a park.

Despite two denials for zoning variances and stiff neighborhood opposition, the city council voted to approve the development of this green space. Ground has yet to be broken on this project because community activists have so far held up funding approval. In a meeting with the mayor last year, we were told that the project had to be built on this site and nowhere else in the neighborhood because the numbers don't work anywhere else.

That is, the city is willing to sacrifice open green space for development but not willing to find the fiscal resources to claim any of a multitude of abandoned buildings or vacant lots in the area for this project.

In meetings with the city council we asked where the kids were supposed to go once this park is no more. The council responded that the kids could go down to Brackett Park on Westland Street. Located on the site of the former Brackett Northeast school, demolished in 1968, Brackett Park has a sprinkler for cooling off kids in the summer, basketball courts, a baseball diamond, a large playscape and a gazebo.

Over the years the park has not received the same level of maintenance as some of the premier parks in the city, and so the baseball diamond is overgrown, the basketball hoops are without nets and the ground has plenty of broken glass. Still, the park is well used by area residents. During the dog days of summer, dozens of kids danced merrily under the cool spray of the sprinkler, and now kids climb over the jungle gym.

Unbeknownst to these kids, during the past six months developers Al Geary and Abraham Ford Jr., the former head of the city's license and inspection department, have been meeting with city officials to create a plan to develop housing on the park. At a meeting of the Earle Street block watch, Mr. Geary and Mr. Ford unveiled plans to "improve the community" by replacing the park with 29 two-family homes that will sell for \$175,000 to \$200,000. The proposal would likely involve a massive public subsidy.

In essence, their plan calls for the expenditure of \$1 million to take away a park used by hundreds of kids without yards and create private yards for 60 middle-class families. In the discussion following the presentation, Mr. Ford adamantly stated that the park is not a park but rather a landfill. He and Mr. Geary said that since it is run down and underutilized, they are justified and indeed providing a service to the neighborhood by developing it. John Palmieri, the city's development director, says the proposal is part of the city's effort to revitalize neighborhoods by infilling underutilized space.

Following this logic it would seem fairer and more appropriate to rehab the dozens of abandoned buildings or to build on the vacant building lots in the vicinity of this park. The way they're doing it, the kids lose two parks.

Hartford's homeownership rate is among the lowest in the nation, at about 25 percent. There was a massive exodus from the city in the past two decades. Rejuvenating what appears to be a dying city poses a real challenge to our city leaders. Few potential homeowners are going to spend \$175,000 for a home surrounded by decay when they can purchase a home in a nice neighborhood outside the city.

The current course of the city seems to be driven by developers looking to

maximize profits by developing the cheapest land the city has available.

The city would be much better off in the short-term and the long-term by cleaning and staffing all the parks and directing development to the empty buildings and lots nearby.

Parks are an asset, a reason for people to buy homes. They are a place to for kids to play today, as well. Leaders are entrusted with protecting the common good. Mr. Mayor, make Clark and Brackett official parks. Lead the developers to the brownfields and join the community in appreciating the precious green space of our city.

Christopher Allen-Doucot lives in north Hartford with his wife, Jackie, and sons Micah and Ammon. He is a founder of Hartford Catholic Worker.