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## **Neighborhood's Parks Snatched Away**

### **City Should Make Up For Loss Of North Hartford Green Spaces To Development**

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Simsbury's recent vote to buy 424 acres of open space for \$13.9 million - a splendid "green space" collaboration between residents and responsible elected officials - stands in stark contrast to repeated refusals by Mayor Eddie Perez and the Hartford city council to preserve even the smallest pockets of open space in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Contrast, if you will, these two unhappy events in Hartford. Today, construction is nearing completion on 40 units of subsidized "grandparent" housing in the impoverished Clay Arsenal neighborhood in north Hartford.

City officials could have demanded that those units be created by rehabilitating some of the abandoned buildings that adjoin the site along Clark or Barbour streets. Instead, the mayor and council allowed the developer to bulldoze a playground and its dozen healthy old trees behind the J.C. Clark School - a field where neighborhood children once played baseball, football and "fetch" with their family dogs, close to their own homes.

At the city council hearing before the vote to destroy the playground, scores of poor neighborhood families who came to protest were told not to worry - they had only to walk a few blocks down Westland Street to play in Brackett Park.

A year later, that same council, at the same mayor's recommendation, voted to sell Brackett Park to another development group (which happens to include the retired head of the city's Department of Licenses and Inspections).

Although the land, a former school site, is shown in green on city maps and labeled "Brackett Park," and although the city has for years maintained playground equipment in Brackett Park, city officials insisted it was legal to sell the parkland because, due to an apparent oversight, it was never formally deeded to the city as a park. The developer plans to break ground this spring.

If the sale of Brackett Park was legal, it was also shameful. Are Hartford's poorest children and families truly so invisible? Would elected officials in neighboring towns resort to claims only of legality, and ignore what is right? Where is the sense of community that seems so abundant in Simsbury - and so absent here?

What could those who voted to abandon a public good - a precious bit of green space in an urban neighborhood - have been thinking? Does the mayor who purports to support homeownership understand that parks enhance property value, in Hartford as well as Simsbury?

Perhaps city officials, at least in an election year, will consider an opportunity to make amends. Vacant lots and abandoned buildings - so-called "brown space" - dominate the landscape of the Clay-Arsenal and Northeast neighborhoods. As much as green space is a public good, brown space is a public malady. Like the bruise on an apple, brown space festers and spreads quickly through a neighborhood. With the green space going or gone in Clay Arsenal, city officials surely have a moral obligation to convert that brown space to the color green.

A dozen vacant lots and abandoned buildings, several of them contiguous, line Barbour Street between Capen and Westland streets. Most of this land has been neglected and vacant for more than a decade. The abandoned buildings are fire hazards and eyesores; the vacant lots are used for illegal dumping and drug dealing. Most of them are owned and neglected by outside speculators who care nothing for Hartford.

We urge the mayor to use existing laws to take title to this land and then seek developers to build two-family homes, maximizing homeownership and owner-occupied dwellings. As part of this reclamation process, the city could dedicate a portion of this land, of equal acreage with the green space that has been so wrongly developed, as a park. This new park should have trees and benches around the perimeter, a gazebo and picnic tables at one end, and room for kids to hit a ball and dogs to chase a stick.

If the Barbour Street development were successful, it could be repeated and serve as a model across the city for neighborhood stabilization. And if the mayor and council could become as zealous in reclaiming brown space as they have been in allowing their political cronies to bulldoze green space, the landscape of our neighborhoods would be transformed.

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