

Opinion



GUEST COLUMN

Putting the green back into Atlanta's parks, green space

By Tom Salyers

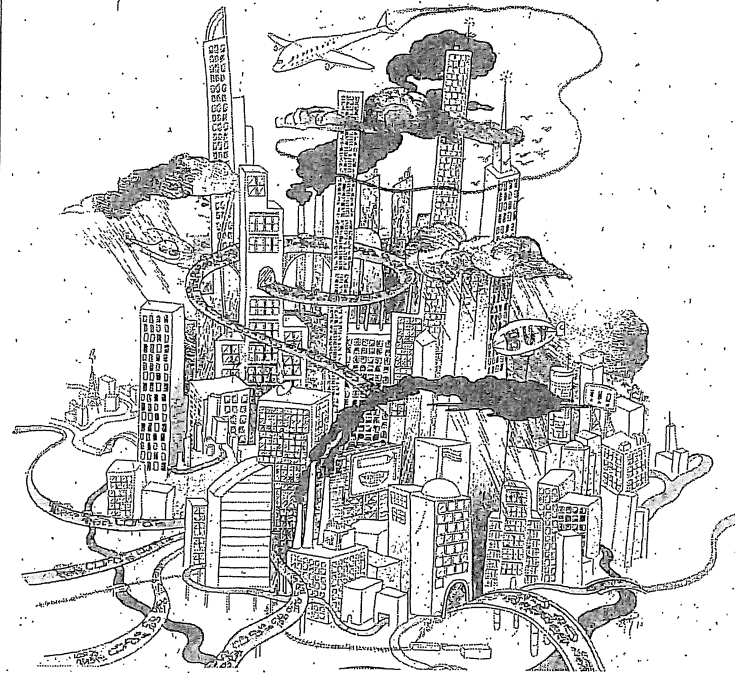
Last month, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar spoke at the national meeting of the American Society of Landscape Architects about an issue of importance to cities everywhere, particularly Atlanta. The issue is urban parks, and I could not agree more with his call for revitalizing our communities by creating and reviving parks.

I recently returned to Atlanta after a 16-year absence, to become executive director of Park Pride. In that role, I have had the chance to get an up-close-and-personal look at parks all across Atlanta and DeKalb County, and I can tell you that our region would benefit from the kinds of initiatives that Salazar describes.

Parks and green space are vital to the health of Atlanta and its citizens. And while we live in one of the greatest cities in the country, we are in the unenviable position of bringing up the rear when comparing the amount of our city's parks and green space acreage to that of other cities.

People need parks. They help our environment by removing pollutants from the air, reducing water pollution, lowering temperatures in the summer, and offering a habitat for wildlife. They increase safety by lowering crime rates and — when well-maintained — providing a place for at-risk youth to stay off the streets.

They improve our health by offering a place for physical activity, which can help ward off obesity and other diseases, and by providing a place for respite



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to aid our mental health. They build community by creating gathering places and can stem the downturn of commercial areas and support neighborhood stabilization.

Finally, they stimulate investment in surrounding areas. For instance, Centennial Olympic Park has helped drive about \$2 billion in investment nearby.

When I left Atlanta in 1994, Woodruff Park (or, Central City Park, as many were still calling it), was little more than sidewalks surrounded by planters, a couple of fountains, and some patches of grass.

Today, it's an urban oasis of thriving trees providing ample shade, calming music piped in through hidden speakers, an

open-air "reading room," a venue for free concerts on Wednesday afternoons, and the soon-to-be home of a playground (that's right, a playground in downtown Atlanta.)

I attended a Woodruff Park advisory committee meeting recently where I was thrilled to hear several downtown residents refer to Woodruff Park as being in their front or back yards because, well, it is.

Have you been to Piedmont Park lately? It has become a showcase thanks to the hard work of countless people who have helped bring the park to a level that few of us could have imagined back in the 1980s and 1990s.

Stay tuned for a fall opening

of a new in-town jewel: the Historic Fourth Ward Park back behind City Hall East (or the old Sears Building on Ponce, as it was called when I moved).

It's a terrific example of public space that will serve at least two purposes — a beautiful park and a water-retention facility to help solve our city's storm water issue. Perhaps the best part is that the original plan called for burying the retention tanks at a price tag that far exceeded the cost of this new park.

Of course, the biggest news lately for parks and green space is the Beltline. This forward-looking project will link our parks — from Piedmont and Maddox parks on the Northside to Stanton and Murphy's Crossing parks on the Southside, and many more. The 1,300 acres of parks and green space that the 22-mile loop will add to our city will be a shot in the arm that we really need.

While the can-do spirit of Atlanta is very much alive, and we can point to success stories like those above, there is much more yet to be done.

Our parks can clearly use the sort of public investment that Salazar supports through the Urban Revitalization and Livable Communities Act, which would rehabilitate existing and develop new urban parks and recreational infrastructure.

Here's hoping that lawmakers at the local, state and federal levels will heed the call for investing in urban and suburban parks. After all, we need parks.

Tom Salyers is executive director of Park Pride, a nonprofit dedicated to expanding Atlanta's parks.