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How do you fix an urban park? Bring in more women, planner says



Kids played in Holladay Park's fountain one recent Friday afternoon.

By Casey Parks
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Holladay Park was home to drug deals, a steady homeless population and neverending litter.

But Dan Biederman has seen worse. The urban park planner once turned New York's crime-ridden, drug-filled Bryant Park into one of the nation's most treasured parks.

Biederman didn't hesitate when the developers behind a forthcoming Lloyd Center remodel asked Biederman if he could transform Holladay, a 4.5-acre green space that sits just outside the mall.

Revitalizing small urban parks often requires an easy solution: More female visitors. They'll come if you offer events and activities, Biederman says. But all-day programming requires more money than most local governments can spare.

More local agencies nationally are turning to the private sector for help in developing robust public parks. Pioneer Square and Director Park both have consistent programming. Now, city leaders and mall developers aim to use Holladay Park to prove that new private investment in activities can transform public spaces.

"This is a park that we've invested a lot of time and money into over many, many years," said Mike Abbate, Portland's parks director. "We have done things to try to activate it, but we realize that it takes some concerted effort to organize programs, and we haven't been able to do it."

Green space in decline

Holladay Park is one of the city's oldest public green spaces. The city acquired the Northeast Portland property in 1870 and has repeatedly reinvented it. Crews installed a concrete fountain in 1964 then replaced it with a spouting fountain in 2000. TriMet built the MAX line, with a stop adjacent to the park, in the 1986. And a few years ago, parks staff installed new lighting and pruned trees back to bring in more natural light.

But residents consistently told parks staff they felt unsafe there. In 2011, nearby business leaders came to the city and said Holladay was keeping people out of the neighborhood. They begged city leaders to do something.

"It's not the park; the park is an award-winning design," said Sue Glenn, Portland's zone manager for North and Northeast Portland parks. "It's behavior."

Glenn said city leaders had seen great success with all-day activities at downtown's Director Park -- but they couldn't replicate that success at Holladay.

"We didn't have the money, frankly," Glenn said. "We were in budget reduction mode."

Lloyd District rebirth



The park might have continued to languish if not for a spate of development.

American Assets Trust is building nearly 660 apartments nearby, doubling the neighborhood's residential population. And next year, Dallas-based Cypress Equities will remodel the Lloyd Center. The new mall will have more outdoor storefronts and overlook the park.

Cypress representatives asked Portland Parks & Recreation if they could bring someone in to transform the park.

"Biederman is one of the best firms in the country," Abbate said. "I could see Cypress was really trying to get the best talent they could find, and that's a good thing for us."

Biederman saw great potential in Holladay. The park's orientation with the street, for instance, gave it great advantages.

"It's at grade. It wasn't hidden away," he said. "It has specimen trees that are nice. There were tons of people around."

His company began a pilot program there earlier this summer. Because a TriMet Max stop backs up to Holladay, most of the people were moving through the park, rather than spending time in it. To keep people in the park, Biederman's company planned classes such as yoga and zumba. The planners brought in a free library, ping pong tables and a piano. They planned concerts for every Wednesday night and Friday afternoon of the summer.

Biederman's company was looking for one figure as a sign of success: How many women hang out in the park?

"An overwhelmingly male environment is one that does not feel safe to many women and children. A female-plus-child dominant environment tends to feel safer to all users," said Matt Jacobs, a consultant for Biederman's company.

Last winter, the park's makeup skewed up to 70 percent male at times. The only park visitors were homeless people living there.

Now, only a few months after Biederman's crew began planning activities for Holladay, the park's makeup is nearly 54 percent female and children, with an average of 1,061 visitors a day hanging out. Zumba attracts about 25 participants, and each small concert has drawn between 30 and 45 people.

Seeing success

At a stakeholder advisory meeting last week, Portland Police officers said this was the first summer they could recall where there was zero violent crime in the park.

Events programming isn't a cure-all. Downtown Portland's O'Bryant Square, for instance, has poor sight lines and needs significant structural upgrades. So far, no one has stepped in the way Cypress has at Holladay offering to pay for fixes at O'Bryant.

But for now, success at Holladay Park looks like this: Last Friday afternoon, the Madrona Viola Duo performed for an hour. Twenty-somethings played ping pong. Kids ran figure eights through the fountains. Park rangers and park hosts -- which Cypress pays the city to provide -- roamed the perimeters.

And on the east side of the park, two elderly women sat on a bench alone, talking as if they didn't have a care in the world.

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