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Park revival takes root

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Pingpong, piano, programs begin to transform Holladay Park



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Nicholas Pearson and his son Gabe enjoy pingpong at Holladay Park. Summertime use of Holladay Park increased dramatically this year, with more women and children especially visiting the public space.

Portlanders will play pingpong in the rain. That's one of many lessons Alicia Hammock learned this month.

Hammock is in charge of programming at Holladay Park in Northeast Portland, which received a multimillion-dollar commitment this summer from the new owners of the Lloyd Center across the street. Version 1.0 of the new Holladay Park rolled out in late July, when pingpong tables, a playable piano, Foosball and a mini-library were set up for passers-by.

From July through September, Holladay Park, staffed daytime by park rangers and hosts, experienced a rebirth. Families with children and seniors from the nearby Holladay Park senior residence began to discover noontime concerts and afternoon Zumba classes.

Now the Portland rains have begun, and park visits have slowed. But there are still a hardy few willing to play pingpong in Holladay Park, just as there are still Big Chess players ignoring the showers in downtown Director Park, where Hammock has overseen programming for a couple years now.

Here's another thing Hammock has learned from this summer's pilot project at Holladay Park: yoga classes don't work there, but for a different reason than at Director Park. At Director, yoga classes were discontinued because women attendees felt they were getting ogled by men. Saturday morning yoga at Holladay didn't work because the MAX trains on the park's southern border and the Multnomah Street traffic to the north created too much noise for yoga. "It's not peaceful enough," Hammock says.



Photo Credit: PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE: ADAM WICKHAM - Graffiti and vandalism have begun to crop up at Holladay Park, including a recent overnight torching of the park's Book Nook.

Count Linda Lauderdale among those impressed by the new Holladay Park. Lauderdale and her husband live at Holladay Park Plaza, a residential facility for seniors, a few blocks from the park. She says she rarely went through the park. But a visit this summer changed her thinking.

"I was just astonished when I walked through there and saw all that was happening," Lauderdale says.

Lauderdale and her husband attended noon jazz and evening bluegrass concerts. She says she was "a little disappointed" that only 20 to 25 others were present. But she took action, publicizing the Holladay Park activities schedule in her building's newsletter, which she edits. She says building residents have written back to her, impressed by how safe the park felt to them.

Park bureau employee Hammock keeps her own log of the comments made to park hosts by visitors. They're impressive. "We continue getting comments every day: 'Thanks for getting our park back,'" she says.

The most consistent questions directed at park hosts, according to Hammock, have to do with the park changes themselves. “People really want to understand why (the park) is programmed and how long is it going to be programmed. And people are always curious how it’s being paid for.”

Cypress Equities, the Texas-based developer who bought the Lloyd Center and property to the east of Holladay Park this summer, sees enlivening the park as a means to getting more families to shop at the Lloyd Center. As part of that strategy, they are remodeling Lloyd Center so its entrance opens onto Holladay. Currently, a parking garage fronts the park side of the mall.

As for how long the programming will continue, Matthew Jacobs, project manager for Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corp., the New York-based consultant hired to oversee the changes at Holladay, says he’s still working on it. Cypress funded the programming this summer, with the expectation that other businesses surrounding the park would begin to contribute. That last part is still a work in progress, according to Jacobs.

“I’m confident we’ll find the money, but we’re banging the tin cup right now,” Jacobs says. “They (Cypress) don’t want to be alone in this.”

Jacobs, who has overseen the rejuvenation of neglected parks across the country, says he was surprised that a food truck placed across the street from the park over the summer failed, given all he’s heard about the popularity of mobile food in Portland. On the other hand, a survey of about 5,000 people who work in the area around Holladay Park provided some ideas for future programming.



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Holladay Park is staffed by Portland Parks Rangers such as Sydney Wheeler, pictured here, and park hosts. Neither has the ability to arrest or detain troublemakers, but park consultants feel they contribute to a more welcoming atmosphere than police would.

According to Jacobs, 23 percent of respondents said they wanted food vendors, 29 percent thought a farmers market in the park would be a fine idea, and 18 percent wanted more concerts.

Crime was almost nonexistent outside the vandalism apparently perpetrated by a group calling themselves Holladay Park Kids (see companion story). Only four of the park's chairs — not chaining down the chairs is a trademark of Biederman Redevelopment — were stolen.

"Not too bad," Jacobs says of the theft rate.

Despite the vandalism, Jacobs says he supports the decision to have Cypress pay for park rangers — and not police — in the park during the day. "It changed the perception, the way people approached the park," he says.

A key barometer for a park's redevelopment, according to Jacobs, is the ratio of men to women and children. When women start visiting a park and bringing their kids, it signals that they perceive the park as safe and encourages others to join them. At Holladay this summer, slightly more than half the visitors were women and children, according to Jacobs, up from 30 to 40 percent before the programming began.



Photo Credit: PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE: ADAM WICKHAM - Summertime use of Holladay Park increased dramatically this year, with more women and children especially visiting the public space.

Hammock says the plan is to introduce full programming again in May. Meanwhile, Friday noon concerts are scheduled to continue through the end of December.

As for the rain, Hammock says, “We’re trying to book performers who are OK with inclement weather.” Just to be on the safe side, she’s also looking into tents to cover the performers, and maybe something that can easily be erected and taken down to shelter the small crowds who come to hear the music.

Jacobs says long term, some kind of pavilion is probably going to be necessary to keep attendance high during the rainy season.



Photo Credit: TRIBUNE PHOTO: PETER KORN - Youths who call themselves Holladay Park Kids and admit to vandalism in the park use the tag HPK (on skateboard) as graffiti on park equipment.

'I want to do drugs and drink in my park'

Holladay Park, just south of the Lloyd Center, is used to tugs of war. Not the rope and one team pulling against another battles, but the kind occasionally waged in a city where the forces of order and disorder mark their turf.

For decades the park, with its stately shade trees and a busy MAX stop on its southern edge, has been listed as a gang hotspot, a designation that allows police to issue park exclusions to visitors suspected of gang activity. Fourteen-year-old Shiloh Hampton was shot and killed in Holladay three years ago. Since then, the efforts of community groups and police have produced results. North neighborhood district attorney Jim Hayden says actual gang activity at Holladay has been minimal the last couple years.

Last summer Cypress Equities, a Texas company, bought the Lloyd Center and a nearby property and committed upward of \$3 million toward rejuvenating Holladay Park as the centerpiece of its redevelopment efforts at the shopping mall. The company hired New York-based Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corp., which specializes in revitalizing unsafe and neglected public spaces with evening concerts and daytime classes and activities.

This summer the Holladay Park revival began to take root. In August, the park had more than 30,000 visitors, almost 1,000 a day. Park hosts and rangers, on duty throughout the

day, guided park-goers to the pingpong tables, the upright piano and a series of regular programmed events that ranged from Zumba classes to concerts. Police officers told Alicia Hammock, in charge of programming at Holladay, that the park has become one of their easier beats.

The battle for Holladay Park appears to be mostly won. Except, someone is tugging back.

Three weeks ago one of the park's pingpong tables was tipped over into a planter and cracked. Then, a mini-library called the Book Nook was torched overnight. All the books were destroyed. Graffiti bearing the tag HPK, which had defaced the park earlier in the summer, began to reappear on furniture and artwork. HPK was spray-painted on the park's portable toilets. Many mornings, when park hosts and rangers arrive for work, they find that Holladay's chairs and tables have been overturned and tossed into bushes.

HPK stands for Holladay Park Kids, a loosely organized group of teens, some homeless, who have gathered in and around the park over the past few years, and who freely admit they are causing most of the destruction.

The Holladay Park kids claim they help keep the park safe by harassing more dangerous visitors. They're happy to show off their "smileys," linked metal chains with combination locks on the end that can be used as maul-like weapons.

"We're peacekeepers," says a 15-year-old girl who calls herself Turtle. "We kick out people who bother people."

A 20-year-old sometime heroin abuser who calls himself Yuma and makes reference to Hunter S. Thompson's books says he returned to Holladay Park this summer after a period out of town, and he's noticed the change at Holladay. "Without a doubt, it's much nicer," he says.

So why does Yuma contribute to the park's destruction?

"Half the time we're just too fu.... up to know what we're doing," he says. "Half the time it's kind of like a dog marking its territory."

Yuma says one of their group torched the Book Nook, but not out of malice. Come evening, with the park rangers off duty, drugs and alcohol take effect. "He was really (expletive) up," Yuma says of the youth who started the fire.

Rangers have limited authority

Park rangers do not have police powers. They can issue park exclusions to those who don't follow park ordinances, but that's about all. Mike Linder was issued three Holladay Park exclusions over the summer. He's 15 and looks it, if not younger, a boyish face beneath a mop of blond hair, quick with a smile that can instantaneously turn devilish.

"This is my park. I want to be able to do drugs and drink alcohol in my park," Linder says.

Asked about the families and children who have begun to flock to Holladay, Linder says, “It’s not the place for them. We were here first.”

Park ranger Sam Sachs spent much of his summer on duty at Holladay Park. He had a number of conversations with the youths, telling them they were welcome to enjoy the new activities as long as they didn’t drink, use drugs or damage equipment. He issued exclusions to three of them.

“For the most part, they’re pretty much on board, but there are three or four who are ringleaders that are doing the bad things,” Sachs says. Those three or four have a different point of view, according to Sachs.

“It’s their park and they want everyone to know it’s their park,” he says.

As a park ranger, Sachs can’t legally detain kids he sees causing destruction. Which makes it almost impossible to get police to arrest one of the kids — they run off before officers arrive. One time this summer, Sachs says, he called police while surreptitiously watching a youth who had been excluded from the park. Ignoring an exclusion is grounds for a criminal trespassing charge. Police, he says, detained the youth but later released him without filing charges or taking him to a juvenile detention facility.

“I can’t do anything to stop them,” Sachs says.

Sachs’ boss, Galina Burley, director of the park ranger program, says sometimes park rangers call police when excluded people are seen in the park, but can’t get the officers to respond.

The lack of police response, says Sgt. Leo Besner, is mainly the result of the police force having higher priorities. Besner, part of the police bureau’s north precinct neighborhood response team, says over the summer officers did perform a directed mission at Holladay Park and made arrests for disorderly conduct and pot smoking. But a constant police presence in the park isn’t possible.

“We’re a lean organization right now, we’re staffed very minimally, and what we’re really trying to do is juggle the priorities of the precinct,” Besner says.

Park exclusion violations by teens who most likely will be long gone by the time police arrive? “That is one of the lowest priority calls that we have,” Besner says.

“I understand why rangers are frustrated, but I can’t offer an immediate solution, just because of the very nature of what it is,” Besner says, adding that neighborhood response team officers will talk to rangers and possibly spend more time in Holladay Park.

The graffiti and vandalism takes a toll on park hosts, whose first order of business many mornings is picking up the scattered furniture and removing the graffiti, says parks and recreation urban parks coordinator Hammock.

“It’s a big one because it’s a nagging one,” Hammock says. “It’s inconsistent and it’s a morale dagger for the staff because you don’t know what you’re going to come into. And it also effects the morale of park users.”

One response coming through loud and clear is from Cypress Equities. With the money they've got invested in the Lloyd Center and other nearby properties, Cypress isn't walking away from Holladay Park.

Matthew Jacobs, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corp. project manager, says his firm has taken on much more daunting antisocial activity than the Holladay Park Kids are presenting, starting with the violent criminals BVRC dealt with at Bryant Park in Manhattan 22 years ago.

"You can admit defeat and put up security cameras, or you can keep filling the park with positive activities," Jacobs says. "You can burn the books. We'll put more books there."