

# RESEARCH AND OPINION

## PARK PUBLIC POLICY: PAST AND FUTURE

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### INTRODUCTION

On May 14, 1998, the Park People of Milwaukee County, with the financial support of the Wisconsin Humanities Council and the cooperation of the League of Women Voters, sponsored a symposium on Milwaukee County Parks. Held at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM) Golda Meir Library, the forum featured many prominent policy makers who participated in a panel discussion moderated by Stephen Percy, director of UWM's Center for Urban Initiatives and Research.<sup>1</sup> It was Percy's 1995 report on Milwaukee's parks,<sup>2</sup> especially as it related to issues surrounding the community's commitment to Milwaukee County's parks, that had originally sparked the interest of Diane Buck, president of the Park People.

In 1997, funded by a grant from the Wisconsin Humanities Council, the Park People implemented a project to research the history of Milwaukee County parks and examine current issues and challenges surrounding the parks today. Oral history interviews were conducted with past policy makers and those connected with county government.

Interviewees included:

- **Bill O'Donnell**, county board member from 1948 to 1976 and Milwaukee County executive from 1976 to 1985;
- **Bob Mikula**, landscape architect and director of Milwaukee County parks until his retirement in 1986;
- **Kurt Bauer**, director of the Southeast Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) from 1961 to 1997;
- **Avery Wittenberger**, *Milwaukee Journal* reporter for 35 years;
- **David Schultz**, former Milwaukee County executive;
- **Don Turek**, executive director of the War Memorial from 1957 to 1996;
- **Norman Gill**, longtime head of the Citizen Governmental Research Bureau (now the Public Policy Forum);
- **Don Weber**, county board member from 1960 to 1966 and assistant to County Executives John Doyne and Bill O'Donnell;
- **George Donovan**, former member of the Park Commission;

- **Fred Tabak**, county board supervisor; and
- **Joy Teschner**, founder of the Park People and former member of the Milwaukee County Park Commission, the Ozaukee County Board, and the Mequon City Council.

These interviews raised many questions, answered some, and provided a picture of what the past had contributed to today's parks.<sup>3</sup>

To deal with these questions and images, the Park People planned a symposium to bring the public, current policymakers, and government officials together to examine the status of the parks today. Symposium panelists included:

- County Executive **Thomas Ament**;
- **Dennis Wedall**, budget director of the Milwaukee County Parks;
- **Paul Hathaway**, associate director of the Milwaukee County Parks;
- **David Meissner**, director of the Public Policy Forum;
- **Karen Ordinans**, chair of the county Board of Supervisors;
- **Margaret Harvey**, chair of the Park People and landscape architect;
- **Dan Diliberti**, county supervisor and member of the Parks, Environment, and Education committee;
- **Penny Podell**, county supervisor and also a Parks, Environment and Education committee member;
- **Phil Evenson**, director of SEWRPC; and
- **Jim McGuigan**, county supervisor.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand today's Milwaukee County park system, it is necessary to review the first 150 years of the parks. Professor Emeritus Fred Olson presented such an historical overview to the forum.

During the first 60 years of Milwaukee's history, most parks were private spaces and beer gardens. In 1889, just before the phenomenal local growth period of the 1890s, the first city park board was formed. Its efforts produced Milwaukee's first seven public parks: Riverside, Lake, Sherman, Washington, Humboldt, Mitchell, and Kosciuszko. In 1907 the county Park Commission was created, and in the 1920s this body did what the early city board had done: it bought land for park use

and in the 1930s received federal funds to develop park land under the New Deal. In 1937, the city of Milwaukee and other suburbs relinquished most of their parks to the county government, and the county continued the effort of developing park land under the guidance of the members of the county Park Commission. By that date almost all park development in Milwaukee County was occurring under county auspices. During the 1960s and 1970s, many changes occurred socially, economically, and even within the structure of the county government, including the change to a county executive system. These events had a lasting impact on the parks and their governance. A significant result was the dissolution of the Parks Commission. Now the policy and decision-making body is the county Board of Supervisors, with the day-to-day operations subject to a department of county government.

### COMPETING USES

Throughout the history of Milwaukee's parks, a tension has existed between their use for active recreation and their use as environmental or green space. Indeed, the park managers have had under their jurisdiction many non-park agencies, including a zoo, General Mitchell Airport, and the county stadium. While these are no longer part of the park system, such issues as developing golf courses, baseball and soccer fields, and swimming pools, have historically given rise to the debate over whether to dedicate resources to recreation and park development or toward passive use. This issue, and others, are still current and were addressed during the panel discussion.

Pivotal events in Milwaukee's park history created some of the current tensions. Professor Percy asked the panel to respond to the challenges facing the parks today as a result of the decision in the 1930s to transfer most of the City of Milwaukee parks to county government control. Most agreed the move was, in general, a positive one: the decision broadened the tax base for the parks' budget and forced park facility users, many of whom lived outside the city limits, to contribute to park development and maintenance. By expanding the scope of the





park system, a more regional view was taken, and therefore the county government could plan for more flood plain and wetland environmental protection throughout the county.

Broadening the scope of the parks also increased the client base. Panelists discussed who, precisely, these groups are, how they have changed in the past 20 years, and what is being done to address their needs. Dennis Wedall pointed out that while there are many special interest groups participating in a wide range of activities such as golf, boating, walking, or soccer, such special interests often are interchangeable. The client base cannot therefore be viewed as blocks of people with competing interests but rather as a fluid constituency using the parks for many activities.

The diverse and fluid nature of the constituency, however, has presented challenges to park governance, especially with new recreational developments. People no longer want to swim laps; instead the water park concept has come to the fore. Soccer leagues are blossoming throughout the county, sometimes replacing other popular activities like tennis. Other more environmentally challenging activities have developed, such as in-line skating and mountain biking. Tom Ament pointed out that the county has been doing its best to adapt to and address these changes in active recreation while balancing the demands of proponents for passive recreation, thus indirectly responding to many of the interviewees' concerns that with the dissolution of a Park Commission of community leaders, park issues would no longer be addressed effectively. The question, therefore, is "who speaks for the parks" and how the county responds to those interests.

In order to adequately address recreational changes and demands, the county must, according to many of the panelists, survey the attitudes and needs of the user groups and conduct research to formulate plans and policies for park development. Wedall described one such survey of the county's swimming facilities conducted by UWM for the Park Department.<sup>4</sup> Information gathered from the survey eventually resulted in the development of new aquatic centers. Another source of community input has come from the establishment of various "friends" groups, such as the Friends of Boerner Gardens and the Friends of the Mitchell Domes, that sponsor events to get people into the parks, often for more passive recreation like walks or enjoying the Riverside Nature Center. These groups, as well as the Park People, advocate for the parks and push for such issues as safety and restoration of park facilities. Ament admitted that politicians must meet the needs of today's constituencies and have a way of hearing what the people want. However, as panelists Margaret Harvey and Jim McGuigan stressed, the most vocal park proponents are often those with transportation and those who vote. As society has become more mobile, there has been a move away from the local, neighborhood parks

in the more urban areas of Milwaukee in favor of such facilities as "Cool Waters" of Greenfield Park, a suburban super-center water park. While this does provide a recreational outlet for many families in the Milwaukee area, those unable to access the facilities due to lack of funds or transportation may be harmed, especially if they have no nearby recreational areas.

## FUNDING CHALLENGES

The most contentious issue surrounding the parks, and almost any debate in government, is the question of funding. Historically, many of Milwaukee's park facilities have been free or have included a nominal charge, a tradition carried over from the city's Socialist past. Many interviewees and panelists advocated taxation as the primary funding source for parks while others suggested that more efforts should be made to supplement this income with an expansion of public-private partnerships, when logical, in order to maintain park quality. Others proposed a regionalization of park funding to include contributions from counties surrounding Milwaukee County.

As both interviewees and panelists pointed out, the primary budget challenge facing the county today is the pressure to increase funding for social service needs, crime prevention, courts, and prisons at the expense of such programs as parks. Some blamed state funding mandates and others simply acknowledged the changes in society. According to Dan Diliberti the Park Department, unlike other county departments, receives no federal or state funds; as a result its budget continuously gets squeezed. Solutions offered from the floor varied. For example, Phil Evenson maintained that parks logically should be supported by taxes because they enhance adjacent neighborhoods and land value. He suggested that if it gets to the point where tax revenue alone is insufficient to maintain the park system and acquire more open space for environmental protection, a new regional property or sales tax referendum may be proposed as a funding solution. He admitted, however, that the Milwaukee County Stadium tax and the bitter debates it caused may have "poisoned the well" for any new, regional taxes to support a Milwaukee County institution.

Many panelists agreed, arguing that adjacent counties should contribute to Milwaukee park funding because a great number of parks visitors come from surrounding areas. But no one likes new taxes, especially for facilities not located in a voter's own area. This attitude could change, argued Dave Meissner, if voters are approached in a marketable manner. He pointed out that when the Public Policy Forum conducted a survey of 2000 voters, people initially resisted any new taxes, but when presented with the possibility that a sales tax would be specifically earmarked for the parks, the majority of voters responded positively. He also presented the case of Denver, Colorado,

where a regional tax for its parks was adopted in a referendum.

Ament had other funding ideas. He did not see the potential for state support of local parks, a source suggested by some panelists and interviewees, citing a denied request for state forestry funds to repair storm damage to parks. He did not believe that a new tax to support parks would pass, but maintained that parks have the highest priority within the county government. Jim McGuigan added that a merger between counties to support regional parks would not occur without a crisis like the Depression of the 1930s; when Milwaukee County residents and members of surrounding communities see the parks disintegrating or disappearing, a cry will ring out and something will be done. Before this happens, he saw possible surcharges on non-Milwaukee County residents or restrictions on their park use. A more palatable suggestion, however, was an increase in public-private partnerships to support not only the current activities in which the partnerships exist, mainly capital ventures, but also operational partnerships as well.

Diliberti outlined many of the current public-private partnerships which have formed in the past four years.

- The Lake Park Bistro contributed \$1 million to renovate the Lake Park Pavilion and the Park Department receives \$2,000 a month in rent from the restaurant.<sup>5</sup>
- The Children's Museum at O'Donnell Park and the Pavilion Restaurant are both privately run.
- A private organization runs some of the county's golf courses and the GMO put \$1 million into the renovation of the Brown Deer Park golf course.

Other corporate sponsors include Midwest Express, Firststar, the county Labor Council, and Pepsi-Cola for a variety of public events in the parks. Sports associations contribute to park facilities by sponsoring and maintaining baseball and soccer fields. Diliberti stressed that the Park Department does not issue blanket support for private enterprises in the parks. For example, it rejected the privatization of the McKinley Marina and the Wisconsin Soccer Association facility. Jim McGuigan highlighted the Milwaukee County Museum as a successful public-private partnership; the county contributes \$4.3 million annually of \$10 million it costs to run the museum. A private group operates the museum and the county owns it, the balance of funds being made up by admissions and donations.

## SALE OF PARK LAND

Both the interviewees and members of the symposium audience were concerned about the possible sale of park land by the county to raise funds for parks and other budget needs. As stated by Fred Olson, 15,000 acres of Milwaukee County land makes such real estate



vulnerable, as sale of this prime land would be a boon for the county coffers. One parcel in questions was the county grounds near Mayfair Road. An audience member expressed the need for the county to retain green spaces in this rapidly developing area, as well as in other areas of the county. Ament responded that there was no plan to sell the county's park land. He stated that, in fact, the county has acquired more land than it has sold, and sales only amounted to 17 acres in the past decade. McGuigan supported this, stating that the newspapers and media choose to highlight small parcels of land that are sold rather than the pieces which are acquired. There is also a plan to purchase more land adjacent to parks and a system in place to insure that any land sold is not environmentally sensitive according to such agencies as SEWRPC. And a park enhancement fund does exist where money from park land sales goes.

### MAINTENANCE, PRESERVATION AND ACQUISITION

Another funding concern raised was that of acquisition versus maintenance. New development projects are more exciting and have greater public appeal than repairing parkways and plowing snow. According to Wedall, the largest single item in the Park Department budget goes not toward recreation or development, but toward maintenance, including repairs, plowing, and cutting grass. The department essentially provides the recreational facilities for other organizations to use. If these services were to diminish, people would notice it and not only the parks but the community in general would suffer.

The issue of park preservation and restoration was, apart from budget concerns, one of the main issues brought up by audience members, interviewees, and panelists. The broad philosophy of the county government toward the parks is multifaceted. Evenson stated that it aims to provide recreational facilities, open space, and environmental protection. McGuigan added that it strives to keep land undeveloped in flood plain and wetland areas. Especially important is the public land that provides a natural buffer along the Lake Michigan shore to maintain water quality, a function that must be balanced with the recreational demands of the public.

The county also tries to maintain the historical intent of such parks as Washington, Riverside and Lake. Because these parks were designed by the famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, their presence makes Milwaukee County a place of national importance from a historic preservation perspective. Penny Podell noted the county's acquisition of the Lake Park lighthouse and its efforts to restore Lake Park's ravine areas in cooperation with the Wisconsin Conservation Corps. It also works with such groups as the Park People to maintain the historic and native planting and

landscape of the parks through programs such as a volunteer effort to remove invasive weeds.

The cooperation between public and private groups is, according to most of the panelists, one of the primary ways to help the parks and maintain their integrity. A program such as the Riverside Urban Environment Center, which provides an outdoor science laboratory for school groups, is funded by private donors and run by volunteer groups. Such programs, according to Diliberti, could not have been mandated by the county. It is only through the community's interest and actions that more of these positive developments can occur.

### CONCLUSION

Panelists agreed that in the future, funding would remain the biggest test for the parks. Another significant challenge is to provide recreation *and* green space for members of the community who need it most, yet who have a shortage of park land nearby. The problem is that available parcels are located at the outskirts of the city and in the suburbs, not in the inner city where the facilities are most needed. Also important is communicating to the public the positive actions of the county government toward parks and their policies, and educating the public about the value of parks and all their functions. Panelists argued that it is difficult to raise issues and receive public feedback if the public does not have full knowledge of the county's actions in the parks; therefore, increasing community awareness remains a major challenge for the future. As parks are not static, the county and policymakers must continually respond to changing needs and constituencies in order to insure that the parks continue to be a positive aspect of Milwaukee County.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Percy, a professor of political science at UWM, was also the director of UWM's Master of Public Administration Program at the time of the symposium.

<sup>2</sup>Percy, Stephen L. *Parks and Recreational Services in Milwaukee County: County Resident Recreational Interests, Park Use and Assessment of Park Quality*. Publication #73, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, 1995.

<sup>3</sup>The oral history tapes and abstracts are available to the public and may be requested from the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the Milwaukee Public Library, or the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Urban Archives.

<sup>4</sup>Percy, Stephen L. and Peter E. Maier. *Assessment of Seven Target Swimming Pools: A Report Prepared Under Contract to the Milwaukee County Department of Parks, Recreation, and Culture*. Publication #77, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>1998 figure.

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