



The Case for Open Space

There is no doubt that green spaces play a critical role in our quality of life. Sanctuaries, parks, playing fields, street trees, greenways and even small spaces such as traffic circles define the community in which we live. These resources however, are not just “niceties” but play a central role in the health and economic viability of our community. Sufficient funding for park maintenance, effective zoning by-laws, and a commitment to the long-term protection of key properties in our community are necessary investments in our green infrastructure if Brookline is to develop and sustain a healthy community.

Health

“The US currently spends more for health care than any nation on earth – 14% of our Gross National Product. With huge and mounting debt in every sector and a population which is both aging rapidly and increasingly dependent, curtailing health care costs will be a priority of government and doing this will involve reinventing our notions of what constitutes efficient and effective health care. Emphasis will be on prevention. During this process, parks and recreation has the opportunity to become a significant factor in the wellness revolution. At the municipal level there are already some precedents for state or local health agencies funding targeted to specific facilities or services of recreation and park agencies, which have measurable wellness outcomes.” *Godbey, Geoffrey, 1993 “The contribution of Recreation and Parks to Reducing Health Care Costs: From Theory to Practice.” In Trends: Justifying Recreation and Parks to Decision Makers., v. 30 no 4.*

Pollution Control

“Human activity places a stress on urban environments that green spaces help relieve. Trees and other vegetation absorb ozone, carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and other noxious air pollutants. Trees remove dust and particles from the air, including dangerous heavy metals. The transpiration of water by plants helps control and regulate humidity and temperature. A single tree can remove as much heat from the air as five average-sized air conditioners” Trees and vegetation also break the wind, moderating temperature in winter. The result is a decrease in energy consumption, along with its costs and associated pollution.” *(Michael Hough, City Form and Natural Processes, New York: Von Nostrand Reinhold, 1984 pp 39-46.)*

“Studies made in cooperation with electric utility companies show that when the costs of planting, watering and maintaining trees are considered, tree planting is a more cost effective energy conservation and carbon dioxide reduction strategy than many other conservation measures.” *E.G. McPherson “Cooling Heat Islands with Sustainable Landscapes” in Proceedings of the Sustainable Cities Symposium, Chicago, 1991*

Crime

A study by the University of Illinois found that citizens living near green spaces enjoy more social activities, have more visits with their neighborhoods and have a stronger feeling of belonging to their community. At the same time, a study published in 1997 Harvard School of Public Health, showed that lower rates of violence occur in neighborhoods where people feel a greater sense of belonging. This is known as “collective efficacy” which is a mutual trust among residents and a willingness to intervene in the supervision of children and the maintenance of public order. As a New York Times article noted at the time, cutting public support for neighborhood institutions such as parks is shortsighted and can lead to increased violence.

Business Re-location

One of the most important factors influencing a business location decision is quality of life. Recreational opportunities are an important part of the quality of life that firms and workers seek. “In America’s new service and technological economy, quality of life for our workforce has become a competitive imperative. Liveability is at the top of the list when businesses look at where to invest and locate.” *Will Rodgers, President, Trust for Public Land before the national Town Meeting for a Sustainable America, May 2, 1999.*

Taxes

Communities around the country are learning that open space conservation is not an expense but an investment that produces important economic benefits. Protecting open space eliminates the costs of new government services, including schools, water, trash removal, sewers, policing and fire protection – the primary burdens on local government budgets. There are many studies that cite land conservation as being less expensive for local governments than development. In a 1998 study conducted by the Trust for Public Land, it was found that “in the long term, Massachusetts towns that had protected the most land enjoyed, on average, the lowest property rates – perhaps because they had less development, which requires roads, schools, sewer and water infrastructure, and other services.

Flood Control

Parks in stream valleys or urban wetlands absorb storm water much more cheaply than in artificial systems. Large open spaces also allow rainwater to be absorbed slowly and to percolate into underground aquifers – reducing the danger of flash flooding or erosion due to rapid runoff. (*Michael Hough, City Form and Natural Processes, New York: Von Nostrand Reinhold, 1984 pp 39-46.*)

Flood control of the Muddy River has been a major issue in Brookline, causing millions of dollars of damage. The good news is that the Muddy River restoration project is currently underway to relieve this problem and re-vitalize the Emerald Necklace Park System. For more information on this project, go to www.muddyriverproject.org.

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