

The greening of Lawrence

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\$2.6m grant will help clean Spicket River, create riverside path and chain of city parks

By David Rattigan, Globe Correspondent | July 22, 2010

A little more than a year ago, the land behind La Fruiteria warehouse on Manchester Street in Lawrence was a brownfield site. Now it's a playground.

"It's perfect," said Glenny Lara, 30, a resident of the nearby Arlington neighborhood who brings her young daughters to the park three times a week. "I can come here and bring my kids and enjoy it, instead of staying indoors."

Manchester Park is on the banks of the Spicket River, across from an old mill building that the Winn Development Corp. plans to convert into a mixed-use development. Following a yearlong cleanup — aided by technical assistance and a \$200,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency — the park opened in June 2009.

"This entire site was filthy," said Art McCabe, manager for the Lawrence Community Development Department, describing land, including the park, that the city believes will become a jewel for local residents.

On July 7, the state's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs announced a \$2.6 million Gateway City grant to design and construct The Spicket River Greenway, a 2.5-mile stretch of riverfront paths that will connect neighborhoods and six city parks.

Lawrence was one of five cities to receive a total of \$6 million through the Gateway City Parks initiative in Gateway Grants, which supports significant park projects of underserved urban populations.

The Spicket River runs through one of the city's poorest and most densely populated neighborhoods. City leaders see the greenway as both improving quality of life for residents, and continuing a large-scale "greening" of the city.

Since 2001, with more emphasis in recent years, the city has made an effort to create more green space — through renovating parks and playgrounds, by turning small vacant lots into "pocket parks," and by adding community gardens, which allow residents to grow their own flowers, vegetables, and fruit in individual planting boxes.

Often, as in the case of Manchester Park and the Dr. Nina Scarito Park (developed in 2006 and also part of the Spicket River Greenway), the community gardens are built at existing parks. Soon the city will take vacant lots and turn them into pocket parks that feature gardens.

"We've identified 20 lots we'd like to do," said McCabe, who anticipates phasing in four to five within the next year. "We're starting out in the Arlington district, but we have lots identified in other parts of the city, too."

The value of green space in cities has long been acknowledged, dating to Frederick Law Olmsted's creation of Central Park in New York City and Boston's Emerald Necklace. In Lawrence, the various green projects have been supported by partners such as the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission and Groundwork Lawrence. The US Environmental Protection Agency has taken an interest in the city as well, with grants and technical assistance.

The Spicket River Greenway, expected to be completed in 2012, will create a chain of green spaces from Manchester Park to the Merrimack River. Similar to Boston's Emerald Necklace, it will create a series of walking paths, contemplative areas, and link parks and playgrounds.

Green space has "demonstrated over and over again that it improves property values, quality of life, health of people in the neighborhood, and reduces crime," McCabe said. "The more you have people using things like this, the less you have that kind of activity."

The project will include large-scale pruning of the vegetation along the river, flooding remediation, and a cleanup of the river itself, McCabe said.

From a bridge on Spruce Street overlooking the river, a variety of debris shares the space with fish and turtles below. Visible are a car bumper, a shopping cart, a traffic cone, two computer monitors, a bicycle, a chair, and siding.

Neighbor Juan Rivera, 44, said he, his brother, and some friends cleared some of the trash in the river, and would be willing to join a larger volunteer effort.

“If we all get together we can clean this up,” he said.

Neighborhood involvement is a key to the project’s success, and to that of the other urban improvement projects.

“With the parks we build, and the programming we do, if the community doesn’t want it there, or it isn’t in the right place, or isn’t what they need, there’s less stewardship and ownership of it,” said Heather McMann, executive director for Groundwork Lawrence Inc.

As an example, she noted that the city has more than 40 parks, which are difficult to maintain with a limited city budget. The efforts of volunteers then become key to the area’s success.

Ana Luna, executive director of Arlington Community Trabajando, a neighborhood community development organization, is certain residents will show their support.

“This is going to be a positive thing,” she said. “It will bring more of the green areas we need, and create a lot of encouragement in the community. Once people see something positive in a vacant lot, it encourages the neighbors to keep the area clean as well.” ■