

Singer: Healthy downtown Rochester needs open space

Patti Singer, @PattiSingerRoc 2:44 p.m. EDT July 12, 2016



Aerial view of the Midtown area of downtown Rochester with an empty Parcel 5, Mid right. (Photo: Jamie Germano/@jgermano1/Staff P, Jamie Germano/@jgermano1/Staff P)

Rochester is staring at a blank canvas.

What the city creates on Parcel 5 will define downtown for the rest of this century, just as the Kodak tower defined the city for the previous one.

If Rochester is going to be a vibrant and healthy city, this plot on the site of the former Midtown Plaza cannot be a casino, a performing arts center or any other building.

Instead, as thousands of people realized as they swayed to the sounds of Trombone Shorty on the [final night of the jazz fest](#), this last rectangle of the former Midtown Plaza must be a masterpiece.

The one-acre plot, they suddenly saw, needs to stay open. That's not the same as empty.

Open space is developed through thoughtful, deliberate discussion with planners and residents into parks where people meet, exercise and enjoy activities or quiet moments. The greenery also helps lower downtown temperatures, clean the air and absorb storm runoff.

Scores of cities across the nation could attest to the benefit of making green space instead of buildings.

"Cities with a good parks system and access to open spaces are also cities that you look at and say, 'these are economically healthy and viable cities,'" said Adrian Benepe, senior vice president and director of city park development of the Trust for Public Land.

"Young people who are mobile will go to the cities that offer amenities like parks and open spaces," he said. "... You simply won't find a thriving downtown anywhere in the United States in any city without good downtown civic places. You can look in city after city to see examples."

The Trust for Public Land uses mapping technology and demographic data to rank the 100 largest cities in how well they meet the need for parks. Rochester, with approximately 210,000 residents, wasn't big enough to make [ParkScore2016](#). But Benepe said we could measure ourself against similar cities.

For example: Madison, Wisconsin, 243,000 residents, was tied for 10th, Jersey City (257,000) tied for 36th and Buffalo (258,000) was tied for 52nd.

Research on the benefits of urban green space is evolving. An analysis in 2011 in the [Journal of Public Health](#) showed weak links between a planned city oasis and physical, mental health.

But the [Annual Review of Environment and Resources in 2013](#) said "the effects of nature on mental and physical health have been rigorously demonstrated ..."

The number of parks in residential neighborhoods is irrelevant if downtown, where workers spend half their waking hours, doesn't offer a place of respite.

"We were not meant to just have concrete and asphalt surrounding us," said Heidi Burke, senior program officer at the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. "We were meant to have green spaces. The deep breaths that that brings and the ease and the stress relief that comes from being in those spaces, we can't put a price tag on it because of how much it can impact our lives and our health."

Rochester also has to decide what to do with the Inner Loop, so ultimately the design for green space needs to be about more than Parcel 5.

But the location of that plot is making it the focal point of what has to be a downtown renaissance. Given its location in a commercial district, there's an expectation that development should mean revenue.

"The other piece that comes up is well, will that bring in money," Burke said. "I certainly can appreciate that. We also have to invest in our people. We have to invest in people spending quality time downtown, enjoying the space. We're investing in the health of our residents. I think that should be considered in all of this."



A large crowd gathers to watch Trombone Shorty & Orleans Avenue at the City of Rochester Midtown Stage during the final evening of the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival on July 2. (Photo: CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDCSTAF, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Burke said the Greater Rochester Health Foundation has not made decisions about funding any projects that would involve Parcel 5, but it supports green space for physical and mental health.

She said that Trombone Shorty concert sparked an excitement that there should be more such events in that space.

Green space needs to be designed to meet the needs of residents, according to research published last year in [Risk Management and Health Policy](#).

“What fails is building a big concrete plaza with a big chunk of modern art in the middle,” said Benepe. “That’s a formula for disaster. If you have a lot of nature, green space, flowers and most important, a wide variety of activities, that becomes an attractive magnet for people and a magnet for economic development.”

He gave New York City’s Bryant Park and Union Square as examples.

Closer to home, Burke talked about the Buffalo waterfront with its permanent features and its concerts and pop-up activities.

“You can’t just put down grass and walk away from it — if you build it, it they’ll come.”

The volume of the debate of what to do about Parcel 5 is as loud as Trombone Shorty. The more noise, Burke said, the harder it is to deny the obvious.

"I think there are ways to show the economic benefit for green space like there's economic benefit to a building," she said. "It shouldn't be hard to say it's important for our people to have green space."