

Central Park Follies

There is a new version of an old drama called Up In Central Park. It is taking place at the Arsenal, and nobody knows who the players are. Directions call for the presence of commissioners and planners but they're almost all gone. There are rumors that the Arsenal is empty.

The plot, to use the word loosely, is sometimes pure farce. Half the funds have been taken away by Mayor Beame from the Central Park rehabilitation plan to be given to parks that have no rehabilitation plans. With priorities for "reconstruction" of such expensive items as jacking up the skating rink out of the old pond into which it is sinking, nothing much will be left for drainage substructures and horticultural repairs, the basis of the park and plan.

But the plot thickens. The present administrator, Edwin Weisl, says that he cannot find even a memo of the priorities of the three-stage rehabilitation scheme worked out so painstakingly by his predecessors; when they left, they apparently forgot to write anything down or they took all the memos with them.

As a subplot, there is an alleged scandal about tree planting in the last administration. This administration has seen to it that there will be no tree planting scandal; it has drawn a neat line through the appropriate capital budget item so that there will be no tree planting at all.

But there is some action. According to Mr. Weisl, the kiosks and restaurant at the Bethesda Fountain will be removed as a first step toward Mall restoration. This emergency first aid, which commanded a three-page press release, is still a long way from dealing with the problems of destructive overuse compounded by neglect.

It is time for the city to get on with the job of staffing and programing before the Parks Department, as well as the landscape, disintegrates. At present, rumor and paranoia, in and out of the department, have reached epic proportions. In addition to prompt administrative action, proper priorities and funding must be set for the thorough and thoughtful rehabilitation plan for Central Park, which is being as badly eroded in the process of political transition as the park itself.

There is an epilogue. On March 26, Central Park will be proposed by the Landmarks Preservation Commission as the city's first scenic landmark. That will make it possible to put up a plaque to commemorate it.