

Signs of Spring for the Parks

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Parks have usually had a strong claim on people's affections and a weak claim on New York City's funds. But now, after a hard winter of neglect, there are tentative signs of spring. Capital funds are available for rehabilitation. Far-sighted plans are being made to use them. And since capital improvement without maintenance is pointless, sensible priorities are being assigned to the scarce operating funds.

What better harbinger than the fact that Central Park's Sheep Meadow, which had become a dust bowl from overuse, has been resodded and this spring will be green for the first time in years? Or that a badly needed preservation plan has finally been completed for Brooklyn's Prospect Park?

In the days when the city robbed Peter to pay Paul, capital construction funds were used for the operating budget. Now, with little but capital funds available, there is more money for park buildings, monuments and landscaping. But if this means a chance to repair the Memorial Arch, the Boathouse and the Litchfield Villa in Prospect Park, or the Dairy and the Maine Monument in Central Park, that only addresses part of the problem. In all boroughs, park maintenance is more critical than ever. Earlier restorations succumbed quickly to neglect and vandalism. One sensible approach is to appoint park managers who can carry

out preservation and maintenance plans now under study. Prospect Park will soon have such an administrator, paid from Community Development Funds.

In all cases, reconstruction projects are being designed to minimize maintenance. To cope with reduced staffs, facilities like skating rinks, golf courses and boathouses are being assigned to concessionaires; instead of their customary losses, some are already yielding profits. Private groups like the Friends of Prospect Park are being licensed to help with such things as restoration of the Vale of Kashmir.

Deterioration and security will be the parks' most persistent problems. Since fear results as much from the general perception of a park as from a lack of guards or supervisors, the physical upgrading can be important psychologically. Public programs also help. Those that brought people back to Central Park were eventually overdone, but they made their point; the park is a fine place to go. If Prospect Park is to serve its neighborhoods, it will need similar events, from New Year's Eve fireworks to small entertainments.

When Gordon Davis, the Parks Commissioner, recently declined to become chairman of the Planning Commission, he was gambling that he could make real improvements in the city's parks. He might deserve a statue in one of them if he succeeds.

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