

The Power of Parks: Meg Cheever's Introduction at OPT412

I'm Meg Cheever Founding President of the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. Welcome to the inaugural ***OPT412: Optimizing Pittsburgh's Future***.

What is this event? It's a gathering of lots of people from different backgrounds who care about the future of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh was the Steel City back in the 19th and into the 20th century. Today, in the digital age, we have a growing tech hub. Tremendously exciting research is happening right here. But people often stay in their comfortable orbits. We're hoping that OPT412 can contribute to connecting our tech community to the broader community.

We have an amazing line up of smart and talented speakers -- and lots of what they have to say might challenge us -- but that's OK. We want to hear it all.

And yes, Pittsburgh has had marvelous success lately as a destination of choice. The press has been fantastic. That press -- as former Mayor Tom Murphy can testify -- took 25 years to generate. But now that we're seen as a ***cool*** place, what do we need to do to make sure that 25 years from now Pittsburgh will still be advancing? That we will have set the stage for future success? And what kinds of efforts in our broader community are needed to sustain growth and to encourage everyone in our town to participate in and grow our new economy.

And why is the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy producing this event? What do parks have to do with technology and the future of Pittsburgh?

More than you might think.

I'm going to show you a few quick slides to demonstrate how parks matter...

As Pittsburgh continues to attract young people there are two key things that talented young people want and expect in the cities they're considering -- good transportation and good parks. Aside from jobs, parks and transportation are high on the list of attributes of what constitutes a vibrant city. In Pittsburgh, this is particularly important because with our older population we're facing a looming worker shortage. As baby boomers begin to retire in great numbers in the next few years, the Pittsburgh region faces a worker shortage of some 100,000 people. There are far fewer workers in the younger age group than in the baby boomers. So, in order to simply maintain our local economy at the level it is -- much less grow -- we need to attract tens of thousands of people to Pittsburgh in the next decade. Given the importance of parks in the minds of millennials and others, taking our park system to excellence is a key element of attracting the people needed to maintain the vitality of our economy and our city.

Imagine if you were trying to recruit someone to move to Pittsburgh. It could be a person you are trying to secure as faculty at your university -- it could be someone you'd like to accept a job at your company -- it could be a friend you want to persuade to move here. And you're trying to convince them that Pittsburgh is a great town. Where would you take them?

You'd take them to the parks.

The building that is now the Schenley Park Cafe and Visitor Center would be a great place to take your guest to lunch. It's located close to campus across from Flagstaff Hill.

But back in the late 1990's this historic park building had been boarded up for 10 years due to the city's lack of funds to staff or maintain it. Taking a possible recruit past this derelict structure would very likely undermine your recruitment effort.

Behind the building, the path down into the park was overgrown with brambles and weeds and was very forbidding. You couldn't be sure how to get into the park and you certainly couldn't be sure what you would find once you did.

Fifteen years ago the Parks Conservancy, -- the non-profit 501c3 organization which is the private partner to the City of Pittsburgh and the community to help improve the parks -- to search for more resources, private resources, to add to the mix -- raised the funds to fix the Visitor Center. So for the last 15 years it's been a quiet lunch spot in a lovely park setting.

And many of you have probably arrived here passing by Schenley Plaza, Oakland's great public space -- maybe you even had lunch at the PORCH Restaurant. Some of you may not know that Schenley Plaza was a parking lot for decades.

Until we helped transform it into a park in 2006.

It's quickly become part of the fabric of Oakland and has welcomed more than 1 million visitors since it opened.

Next you could make a neighborhood walking tour part of your recruitment effort. Let's say you live in Highland Park. You could show your guest your house and then walk over to the park's Entry Garden and reflecting pool which has become a gathering spot for the neighborhood and -- some would say -- even stabilized the neighborhood.

That garden looked like this until our public private partnership restored it to life.

These pictures let you see why parks matter. Excellent parks are selling points for a city.

In our 20 years of operation the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy has raised \$92 million and completed 14 major capital projects in partnership with the City and the community. To the many of you who have been part of the Pittsburgh parks revitalization through volunteering and support, thank you.

Caring for the park system used to be a purely public function, but beginning with the development of the Central Park Conservancy in New York, today's cities are either benefitting from or wanting to launch a public private partnership to help their parks. And other cities aren't standing still. They're using parks as differentiators, as strategic advantages, some are adding new parks.

New York boasts the innovative and imaginative High Line built at a cost of \$200 million which gets 5 million visits a year.

Chicago recently invested \$475 million in Millennium Park, considered to be the city's most important project since the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

And in Atlanta a \$4 billion effort is underway to built a belt line around the city -- a comprehensive transportation and economic development effort which includes a 33-mile trail network.

And **Minneapolis** -- one of the 14 cities against which we benchmark ourselves in the Pittsburgh Today Index -- Minneapolis, enjoys the best park system in the United States according to the Trust for Public Land yet It is currently

exploring a referendum to invest \$300 million more across its park system over the next 20 years.

An editorial from the local paper praises the concept. It says: **“the parks are an embodiment of the city’s much-vaunted quality of life and an advantage in convincing members of the mobile, emerging workforce that they should build their careers and lives in this region.”**

And Minneapolis averages 69 days a year -- more than two solid months -- when the temperature does not get above a freezing 32 degrees!

Our park system in the City of Pittsburgh has 158 parks from tiny parks to 600-acre Frick. And one thing that’s a little unusual about Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy is that it is focused on partnering with the city on the entire city park system. That puts us ahead of many cities, strategically speaking, because most conservancies are focused only on one park or one group of parks -- and usually in a neighborhood with above average resources.

We’re very fortunate here in Pittsburgh that Mayor Peduto and his team and we share a vision of parks as the most democratic spaces in society. We are all committed to working to achieve park equity across all city neighborhoods. What could be more inclusive?

Our public private partnership has made real progress in the last 20 years.

This photo from a few years ago shows a small neighborhood park that was known as Cliffside Park on Cliff Street in the Hill District just a couple of hundred yards from the boyhood home of playwright, August Wilson.

After a very thorough community listening and planning process
We raised the funds to completely refurbish this park.

This park will re-open this summer.

The neighbors are keeping their eyes on the park which has become a source of neighborhood pride, and the neighborhood has been so pleased with the renewed park that last month they proudly - and successfully petitioned the city to rename it August Wilson Park.

This is one small example but there are wonderful parks in all of our neighborhoods -- many of them very historic. That's an advantage right there to have the physical system in place. Yet to really compete with the best of cities we need to make sure that **all** the parks in **all** the neighborhoods in the system are brought up to the same standard of excellence.

Our city park system has enormous potential.

But...

- Valuable old trees are under threat from Emerald Ash borer and oak wilt and other pests.
- Playground equipment and surfacing needs to be replaced. Ballfields need to be upgraded.
- Trails need to be built or improved.
- Much more green infrastructure needs to be sensitively added to the park landscapes to capture stormwater.

And we could use a lot more technology to help manage the park landscapes more efficiently apps to improve the user experience in the parks, and to make more people aware of what the park system has to offer and we could surely use technology to help us more accurately measure park usership. A big challenge.

And the City is facing a particular financial challenge too. Back in 1994 the Allegheny Regional Asset District was created. It has been an amazing safety net to our city parks. In the years since 1994 the ARAD has contributed \$108 million to the City for parks. In the 20 years since the founding of the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy in 1996 we have raised \$92 million for the city's parks. That an additional \$200 million for city park improvements added to what the city can contribute from its budget. But it's important to know that under the ARAD statute, a park must be 200 acres in size to be considered a "Regional Asset" and be eligible for funding. Perhaps it's the law of unintended consequences at work, but, because of this size requirement, the only City parks eligible for ARAD funding are Schenley, Frick, Highland, Riverview and Emerald View parks. That's **five** parks; leaving **153 parks** which are to be supported only by the city budget and whatever can be privately raised -- 153 parks not eligible to be supplemented with ARAD funds.

So, parks such as Allegheny Commons -- which includes a regional asset, the National Aviary, within its border -- is not considered a "Regional Asset".

Nor is Mellon Square, an internationally recognized masterpiece of mid-20th century modernist American landscape architecture and one of the most popular gathering spaces for workers downtown.

Nor is Arsenal Park in Lawrenceville -- the site of the single worst civilian disaster of the American Civil War.

Now, let's talk about parks and STEM education for a minute. From around the region we hear that STEM education (science, technology, engineering and math) is extremely important to prepare students for the jobs of the future that we'll need to fill. Well the parks can help advance STEM education too.

The Environmental Center in Frick Park burned back in 2002.

This summer we will be cutting the ribbon on the new \$19 million Frick Environmental Center which has been designed to meet both the rigorous LEED platinum and Living Building Challenge standards.

But even while the construction is taking place, the park is being used as an extension of school classrooms.

We are providing an outdoor learning experience to **more than 1,000 kids** in grades K - 12. Our programs are voluntary -- the schools decide whether to sign up -- and we've grown from 2 schools to 18 schools in just 6 years because schools and teachers have decided that the programs work.

Students come with their teachers for multiple sessions **IN THE PARK**. The park becomes their science lab. They use tools and sampling methods used by scientists to measure everything from stream PH to tree diameter to understand the park ecosystem.

They use tools like GigaPan and Google earth to make predictions about park and watershed health and they have fun being outside.

And why does fun matter? Because the students are really engaged in the experience so they're more motivated. They ask deeper questions and they remember better. As one student said "You can actually see the stuff without looking at pictures."

So the parks **can** help with STEM education -- and as these kids learn to love the parks -- the park champions of the future are being formed.

Parks can shape and enrich our community. But in today's world just assuming the municipal government will have the resources to take care of the parks is outmoded thinking.

The new environmental center will open this summer. You're all warmly invited to visit and experience it for yourself.

And if you agree parks are a vital community asset, please join us in seeking innovative ways to bring more resources to the effort to take our park system to a new level of excellence because great cities deserve great parks.