

Home > Business

Expert: Parks critical to Providence's economic development

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PROVIDENCE — Residents who consider Providence to be on the verge of its next renaissance may find that flowering starts in the city's parks — places other American communities have seen become economic engines, said an expert in such things.

"Parks are really centerpieces for economic development," said Adrian Benepe, senior vice president and director of city park development for The Trust for Public Land and a former New York City parks commissioner.

The Providence Preservation Society invited Benepe to speak here Thursday night as the city gets ready to write "the next chapter in a 40-year story" of revitalizing itself, said Steven Durkee, director of development at Cornish Associates and a society member.

Benepe played the part of visual tour guide for a "trip around America" by PowerPoint as he spoke during the kickoff event for a yearlong society speaker series. "Not Always Easy: Building the New Urban Experience" begins at a time when city leaders have a vision for transforming Kennedy Plaza into a vibrant public square and as work progresses on the former Route 195 highway land to prepare for public parks and other development.

"You can't have a great city without a great park system," he told an audience gathered in the chilly banking hall of 111 Westminster St., the vacant 26-story skyscraper the preservation group would like to see saved.

He described how places such as Atlanta, Minneapolis, Chicago, Seattle, Chattanooga, Tenn., and Louisville, Ky., have, or are in the process of, transforming communities through park developments undertaken by public-private partnerships.

"I come from a city that has become somewhat renowned for its park system — it was not ever thus," said Benepe who started work as a New York City park ranger in 1973. "The big turnaround came with Central Park."

The Central Park Conservancy — a public-private partnership formed in 1980 — helped restore the 800-acre green space that is the city's symbolic heart.

The restoration of Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan, which had descended into an open-air drug bazaar, followed. And then the movement spread throughout the city.

Benepe eventually rose to oversee public-private partnerships that catalyzed development of several signature New York City parks, including the High Line and Brooklyn Bridge Park.

The High Line — at \$200 million a spectacularly expensive park — spurred construction of nearly 40 buildings worth billions of dollars along the public park built on a historic freight rail line elevated above the streets on Manhattan's West Side.

While Providence cannot invest that much money in its parks, Rhode Island's capital city is not nearly in the financial straits in which New York found itself when its parks partnerships began, he said.

"These partnerships started at one of the lowest points in the city's history," Benepe said. "Providence is not now where New York City was in the 1970s."

Providence also has aspects absent in some communities across the country — elite higher-education institutions, historic architecture, a vibrant arts and culture scene, he said. On top of which, it's already done major public infrastructure work — moving railroad tracks, rivers and a highway — to prepare for redevelopment.

"Cities across the country would kill to have what you have," Benepe said.

Still, he cautioned, Providence, or any city, has to engage companies, philanthropists and volunteers — an "army of the

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Also, cities have to collapse regulatory hurdles and engage their government employees in the public-private system.

"If it's just the government, parks can go down ... it took 35 years to bring them back up," in New York, he said.

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