

## Public parks move to private management in Seattle

by David Kroman

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Credit: Seattle Office of Arts and Culture

Seattle mayor Ed Murray threw a bean bag at a cornhole board. A busker picked tunes on his guitar. A chef from local restaurant Soul Kitchen plated Southern food.

Seattle marked the transfer of some of its main public parks to private management in grand fashion. As part of a string of efforts to “clean up” downtown, Murray announced Thursday that the city would turn over management of Westlake and Occidental parks to the Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) as part of a trial contract lasting one year. Support for the partnership

spans from enthusiastic, to unsure, to downright opposed. It's a model used in other American cities, including Manhattan and San Francisco, but not yet tested in Seattle.

From this point on, the onus of managing two of Seattle's most used parks will fall mostly on the DSA, with help from Seattle Parks and Recreation, the Seattle Parks Foundation, Alliance for Pioneer Square and Friends of Waterfront Seattle. The city's investment will be minimal – a dollar to every ten spent by the DSA, adding up to an estimated \$60,000 in taxpayer funding. DSA will take over Westlake immediately, while Occidental will follow later this summer.

The aforementioned programming would, in theory, attract more people to the parks and encourage them to stick around, replacing negative activity such as drug dealing with positive activity like, say, cornhole. "By bringing in as much positive energy," said DSA President Jon Scholes, "...it's harder to operate as a drug dealer."

This question of cleaning up "public disorder" – as the city calls low-level offenses like drug-use and theft – has been gaining momentum lately. Last December, the Seattle Police Department introduced its Neighborhood Response Team, a patrol force focused specifically on things like urination and general unpleasantness. The Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, which aims to rehabilitate rather than arrest low-level offenders, functions parallel to that squad.

Quickly thereafter came the "9 and a half block strategy" a new approach to increase law-enforcement and to identify drug dealers in that radius around Pike Place Market and Westlake Park. That program kicked off with a bang when the SPD and the FBI announced they had arrested nearly 100 suspects after months of undercover work.

Timed with the city's other efforts was the move to ban smoking in all public parks. Murray and other city officials have said the smoking ban is not related to this new partnership or other efforts to deal with public disorder. "The smoking ban comes from a different place," said Murray. That said, the current legislation to ban smoking got its start when representatives from the DSA, the same organization taking over management, sent a letter to the city urging they act.

Additionally, the ordinance as written calls out Westlake and Occidental parks (as well as Victor Steinbrueck Park) as places that will receive extra attention. On at least one occasion, the smoking ban was discussed in a meeting about public disorder. So while it may come from a different place, there is certainly overlap.

What does a privately managed public park look like? Bryant Park in Manhattan is held up as the ideal (recent slashing incident aside). A late seventies report about the park wrote: "If you went out and hired the dope dealers, you couldn't get a more villainous crew to show the urgency of the [present Bryant Park] situation."

But, with the help of the Rockefellers, a private body formed and hired Daniel Biederman to essentially fix the park. He spearheaded an effort to fix paths, create new entrances, host events and add landscaping. Now Bryant Park is teeming.

Seattle has brought on Biederman's firm to work his magic on Westlake and Occidental. "Programming is critical in city spaces that are not scenic wonders," Biederman wrote in a statement. "The idea is to spread throughout the park this activity."

Also, thanks to 9 ½ blocks, there will be more SPD officers around the clock.

Former Councilmember and mayoral candidate Peter Steinbrueck, who now heads Steinbrueck Urban Strategies, said the approach could be very successful, if done right. "I think there are good examples of well managed private/public spaces," he said, pointing to Bryant Park as well as Union Square Park in San Francisco. Private entities like DSA, he said, are, in a lot of ways, better suited to manage, clean and enforce rules than the city.

But, said Steinbrueck, the partnership needs to be well thought out and well vetted. One concern, which he doesn't think is imminent, is that a private body could use the public space to generate revenue. "Over-programming and over-commercializing a public park in my opinion is not a good thing." Still, he sees potential.

Real Change Director Tim Harris, on the other hand, is not convinced. "These are public spaces and to me it's very problematic," he said. "In their view they're going to make it as comfortable as they can for shoppers and not for people they feel don't belong."

"There's nothing that needs to be revitalized about these parks. I see everyone sharing space in Occidental Park and everyone seems to pretty much get along. I'm not buying this line that parks need to be revitalized."

This critique of these revitalization efforts – that they unfairly target the homeless — have been consistent, especially from Harris. While he said he supports and has worked with the DSA in their efforts to clean up drug use, he feels like homeless advocacy organizations like Real Change have been left out of recent discussions. "This is the first I've heard about this," he said.

Anticipating such criticism, Vice President of the Metropolitan Improvement District within the DSA Joshua Curtis said, "Let me be clear: These parks will be open to everyone." He argued that revitalized parks lead to more pathways into social services. "Engaged and active spaces benefit both the poor and the affluent."

Additionally, DSA President Scholes said DSA did hold a roundtable at Plymouth Housing to brief homeless advocates.

For Scholes, changing how parks are managed is a response to public demand. “There’s clearly a hunger,” he said. As this partnership is a pilot program, it’s as of yet unclear how far that hunger will take the DSA.