

## ‘Active’ parks celebrated, even among homeless advocates

by David Kroman



Occidental Park in Pioneer Square has been "activated" with chairs and musicians.

Credit: Downtown Seattle Association

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When Mayor Ed Murray announced last June that the Downtown Seattle Association would manage Westlake and Occidental parks, there was quick pushback from homeless advocates, concerned that the new private management would push homeless people out of public spaces. But after three months of “park activation,” in what seems to be a rare moment of small city consensus, even the skeptics are taking to the larger crowds and the brightly colored folding chairs dotting Seattle’s urban parks.

Anyone who's walked in Pioneer Square or near Westlake Mall this summer has likely seen the ping-pong tables, musicians' tents and food trucks filling spaces that had been largely filled with transients. Although raw numbers of users are difficult for Seattle Parks and Recreation to track, the parks certainly appear to fill during lunch hours more than even last spring. Representatives from Seattle Parks and Recreation, the Downtown Seattle Association, the Alliance for Pioneer Square and even the leadership of the homeless-advocacy newspaper Real Change are, thus far, declaring the experiment a success.

The busy parks are a result of the city's decision to outsource management to the Downtown Seattle Association. The program, still in its pilot stage, means for every dollar spent by the city, the DSA spends \$10. Additionally, the city agreed to a contract with a private firm, Biederman Redevelopment Ventures Corp., which helped with the initial "activating" of parks or, in other words, displacing or drowning illegal behavior with games, musical performances, chairs and food. The firm, started by Daniel Biederman, is most well-known for its work in Bryant Park in Manhattan.

The Seattle City Council's Parks, Seattle Center, Libraries and Gender Pay Equity Committee voted Tuesday to advance an ordinance essentially ratifying the agreement already in place. "The partnership is functioning far better than expected," says Deputy Superintendent of Parks and Recreation Christopher Williams.

To hear representatives from Parks and Recreation and the Downtown Seattle Association talk, Seattle's downtown parks are simply a burden the city no longer wants to bear. For years, the spaces have built the reputation as havens for drug use and low-level crime, known as "public disorder." Despite the creation of a parks district last year, which stabilized parks by creating a funding channel independent of the city's general fund budget, Parks and Recreation wasn't able to answer the cries, mostly from downtown retailers and residents, to clean it all up. "Downtown parks need a heck of a lot more resources than the parks district can provide," says Victoria Schoenburb, Parks and Recreation's Center City Parks Initiative manager.

Although not directly connected to other cleanup efforts, the private management of parks is one of a long string of city-led initiatives including the 9½ block strategy to clamp down on drug dealers, the Law Enforcement Assistant Diversion (LEAD) program to funnel low-level offenders into rehab programs, and the citywide ban on smoking in parks.

Under private management, oversight is split between DSA staff, private security guards, the city's Park Rangers and the Seattle Police Department.

The line between pegging park residents as miscreants or simply homeless has proved thin, forcing the DSA's Joshua Curtis to defend the handling of disorder in the parks under the new arrangements. "There's obviously behavior we can't allow," he says. "But a lot of the folks are just trying to spend their day there." The end goal, he says, is to make people feel safer, not to push out the poor.

Among the skeptics last June was Real Change newspaper founder and homeless advocate Tim Harris, who believed the city would prioritize the space for shoppers and downtown workers. But he's changed his tune. "My observation is that I still see homeless folks in the parks," he says. "They use the programming as anyone else. I've certainly ratcheted down my concern level."

Harris' feeling resonates at least through the brick promenade of Occidental Park, where one Real Change vendor, Steven Allen, sits on his tent beside the foundation of the future Weyerhaeuser building smoking a cigarette. "We've been keeping an eye on [the changes]," he says, gesturing to his Real Change vendor badge. When asked if he's been made to feel less comfortable, either due to the smoking ban or the parks' activation, he takes a drag, answering, "No."

Bill Gholston is a ranger who spends his days in Occidental Park. Everyday he's in uniform, talking to the people playing chess or drinking coffee. On a cool Tuesday, he's getting into a discussion with two men, both homeless, about the origins of words. "It matters, man," he says.

From his perspective, the change in parks is a good thing. "It's more welcoming," he says. "It brings in more people." As for his friends arriving from shelters or waking up in their tents, he hasn't seen a decline. "People police themselves. If they want to smoke, they'll just cross the streets. But no, I haven't seen fewer homeless people."

Determining the success of a park is difficult. "It's very hard to measure in a numeric or statistical way the success of a park," says Parks' Schoenburg. "It's more than people counts, but what people are doing in the park."

DSA's Curtis says one measure of success is the male-to-female ratio of a park. "Female safety is a lot more of a concern," he says. "So if you can get that one to one-male-to-female ratio, people can feel a lot more comfortable." Since beginning the pilot, Curtis puts the number in Westlake Park at about 1 and a third men for each woman, which he called an improvement from last year. Occidental, he says, is still tilting toward men. Early Tuesday afternoon, women and children pretty much equaled the number of men among the roughly two dozen people at Occidental's tables and chairs to eat or listen to a singer. But most of the dozen or so people around the edges of the park were men, including a half-dozen gathered at a chess match.

The DSA has done some subjective surveying of park visitors as well. So far, says Curtis, satisfaction is at about 84 percent, although they don't have past numbers for context. Still, he adds, "I can tell you that the feedback before and after is really night and day."

Stepping back, Real Change's Harris is feeling optimistic about the city's approach to cleaning up downtown. "I think human rights and social services advocates are working really well

together right now," he says. "We're pretty much on the same page on how to handle street disorder downtown. People are focused on longer-term solutions."

That's not to say that all is easy. "There are tensions," says Harris. "Downtown is becoming more and more affluent while the numbers of poor people downtown seems to be increasing." But when it comes to the parks, this has an unusual feel: a city effort that's getting support from every direction.