



Go Green – Existing Parks and Public Space

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Can you “Green” an old park?

Every year and every budget cycle, it seems we are asked to do more with less. Especially in these economic times, we have to stretch each dollar to the maximum. One of many buzz words getting so much attention is “Green “. But if you are dealing with a number of older established parks, can you still do “green”? And how can going green help your bottom line? In this article, we look at ways to go green with well established parks and find ways to even save some maintenance dollars.

Conservation and Recycling : Two Keys to Green

CONSERVATION: Conservation was a buzz word throughout the 1970’s...and one of the many words we should all be using in the green parks movement. Conservation can be stated as the wise use of resources. Let’s begin with using less in an effort to conserve AND go green.

Mow less – conserve fuel. We hope you have already created a mowing schedule that is flexible with the weather conditions and mows less when the grass is not growing. Take this a step further by reducing the overall areas that you mow and create “Low-Mow” buffer areas. These are areas of your parks that do not get recreational use, but may be a buffer area to adjacent properties. You can let these be mowed once a month or twice year, depending on the adjacent use and community opinion.

To enhance your existing parks sites while saving on mowing, try a native plant mix. Over seeding existing lawn areas which are not used for recreation can be a good use of land. This creates a habitat for small mammals, insects and birds. A short grass and short forb mix can also be very pleasing with its varying colors and textures. This can be maintained with monthly mowing while the plants get established and reduced to one or two mowing a year once the plants are a filled in.

There’s never a shortage of tasks that the mowing crew could be doing instead of mowing!

Water less – conserve water. The use of irrigation in parks can be necessary for highly used sports turf, but in many cases irrigation can be reduced or eliminated when we plan wisely. Use of natives in our ornamental plantings makes a big difference in the need for water. Many non-native ornamental species are also well suited for the mid-western weather and do not require watering beyond the initial establishment period. Good planning of the plant material makes all the difference. If your agency is planting flats of annuals throughout the park system, consider use of perennials in some of these locations to reduce the need of on-going watering.

RECYCLE: Recycling should be a full circle approach to making a park greener. By providing a recycle can with your standard receptacle, you promote recycling in the community. This is an effort that must begin with a thorough review of the implementation process from purchasing the bids to storage of recyclables until recycler pick-up. Added to this is a good marketing and education system to let the community know your new initiative. Park visitors may take a few months to get use to separating recycling, but with informative signage, you invite the community to become part of the solution.



Next, take your recycling full circle with the use of post-consumer recycled site furniture. Here are a few items we have been incorporating into parks at Upland Design.



Benches of recycled plastic bottles can be both durable and comfortable. The one above is located

at Sandholm Woods in Geneva Park District. Product is by Recycle Design.

Below are wheel stops of recycled plastic and asphalt. These are at Nature's Pointe Park, Fox Valley Park District. The wheel stops blend well with asphalt and allow water to flow under them. Project is available through Brewer Products.



Recycled content can be found in play equipment, site furniture, and even in the shirts that your crew wears.

Another recycled product that can be incorporated into a park is crushed asphalt and concrete. With the right specification, you can allow recycled materials created in the Chicago area to be used as a compacted sub-grade material. This is a great way to complete the recycle chain.

FINAL THOUGHT: When we are looking for ways to go green, if we seek out ways to CONSERVE and RECYCLE with each program, maintenance item or replacement project, we will find more ways to Green our parks and open space. Doing these small items can add up to a better world, and might even save money.

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