

# Turning 100, Fort Worth's park system faces challenges

By MIKE LEE

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FORT WORTH — In September 1909, an architect drew up Fort Worth's first park plan. He recommended a big plaza at the courthouse. Linear parks along the Trinity River. Playgrounds. Tree-lined boulevards.

"In the competition of cities for new and desirable population, no other element of advertisement is worth so much as an ample and attractive park system," George Kessler wrote.

At the time, Fort Worth had 11 parks covering 505 acres, including Trinity Park and Rock Creek Park, which later became the Botanic Garden. The oldest piece, Hyde Park, was donated in 1873, near the site of the present-day City Hall at Throckmorton and Ninth streets.

Now Fort Worth is preparing to celebrate the 100th anniversary of its park system. Some of Kessler's ideas were carried out. Others went by the wayside. And the parks — 243 of them covering about 11,000 acres — are facing new challenges as the city catches its breath from the rapid growth of the last decade and deals with budget crunches.

"As you look at our history, the issues are not having enough funds to both keep up with growth and aging infrastructure," Parks Director Richard Zavala said.

Instead of boulevards for carriage rides, residents are clamoring for baseball and soccer fields. And the park budget is stretched thin — leading to maintenance delays and other tough choices.

## Highs and lows

A decade after Kessler's report, the Fort Worth park system was at what could arguably be called its zenith. Private landowners donated hundreds of acres, and the city went on a park-buying binge during the teens at the same time it was acquiring land for Lake Worth.

There were more than 30 acres of parks for every 1,000 residents. The exact number is hard to calculate because some parks were acquired in phases.

Regardless, historians have said the parks were central to city life in the 1920s as Sunday drives to Casino Beach, Mosque Point or Inspiration Point became a tradition.

Flash-forward to the present, and the number has fallen to 15.9 acres per 1,000 residents despite a city ordinance that requires developers to donate land for parks in every subdivision.

Part of the problem is that Fort Worth's population grew by 28 percent from 2000 to 2009. A lot of that growth happened in the older urban areas inside Loop 820, where it's hard to buy land for parks.

The system has added more parks since 2000 than in any decade since the 1970s. The acreage was just smaller. Out of 64 parks acquired since 1990, 19 are smaller than 5 acres — not even enough room for two baseball fields.

"We have a pressing need for community parks" — larger parks with room for team sports and parking — Zavala said.

The city has \$9 million set aside for new community parks — enough for about six.

### **'Anyplace you can find'**

Brian Haddock has a standard response for inner-city kids who want to join one of his league's soccer teams.

"I usually kind of tell them to just hang on, just wait — we're working on it," he said.

Soccer is booming in Fort Worth, as are other youth sports. Haddock's club, Fort Worth United, has tripled in size in the last four years. He started a second league for kids who can't afford to play on high-dollar traveling teams.

Their problem: no place for games.

The inner-city league practices on leased fields near the Resource Center at Campus Drive and Interstate 20 in south Fort Worth. But soccer is such an intense sport that a day's worth of games can wreck a field for months. Haddock tried holding games on the practice fields, with predictable results.

"Our surface is in really bad shape from running that league on it," he said. "It's a Catch-22 — we can't get the teams off of it to repair because they don't have anyplace else to go."

It's the same with youth baseball, said Scott Cronian, commissioner of the 500-player Eagle Mountain Youth Association.

"We end up using open places in parks, schoolyards, anyplace you can find," he said.

### **'Need-to-haves'**

A month ago, Zavala faced a bank of TV cameras and microphones. A news helicopter circled overhead. Crews in rubber boots were wading through the muck at the bottom of a fish pond in the Japanese Garden. Nearby, a half-dozen dead fish floated at the top of another pond — killed in an accident during routine maintenance.

"Just another day in the life of a park director," Zavala said.

Dead fish don't happen every day, but maintenance headaches are a big part of the park system.

Heritage Plaza, a collection of fountains and plazas overlooking the Trinity River at the north end of downtown, has been closed for more than two years, at least partly because the city lacks the money to maintain the pumps and repair the concrete walkways.

And lack of maintenance contributed to the deaths of four people who drowned in the central pool at the downtown Water Gardens in 2004, generating national headlines. It cost \$3.2 million to redesign and remodel the park before it reopened in 2007.

The parks department's budget has stayed essentially flat for the last few years even as the acreage has grown.

That means less routine maintenance — less mowing, fewer playground repairs. The koi ponds at the Botanic Garden are cleaned every two years instead of every year. And the parks department has been saddled with other duties over the years, such as graffiti abatement, gang intervention programs at the recreation centers and mowing street medians.

Zavala said he tries to cope by prioritizing the parks' needs. "We rank all the playgrounds — if we've only got \$100,000, we want to do the one that needs it the most," he said. "We can pretty much produce lists and say, 'These are the " need-to-haves.'

### **Two systems?**

Private groups have stepped in to help in some areas.

Since 1968, the nonprofit Streams and Valleys has provided money and volunteer labor to beautify parks along the Trinity River.

The Army Corps of Engineers straightened the river and added levees in the 1950s and 1960s to prevent flooding.

"Essentially, the 13 or so founders of Streams and Valleys wondered who was in charge of beautifying it," Executive Director Adelaide Leavens said. "The city is always strapped for funds; they didn't have the money or the energy to undertake such a massive project."

Streams and Valleys built the first section of the Trinity River hike-and-bike trail and added the dams that make the river usable.

Joggers, cyclists and even kayakers now flock to Trinity Park and other parks along the river. The annual Mayfest in Trinity Park draws thousands of people.

The park system has had other success stories — the Fort Worth Zoological Association has been running the zoo since the 1990s and has turned it into a nationally recognized institution.

The Fort Worth Garden Club and other groups support the Botanic Garden.

Volunteer groups are also trying to help restore neglected parts of the system. Historic Fort Worth Inc., which has listed Heritage Plaza and Lake Worth's Inspiration Point as endangered, paid for an engineering study at Inspiration Point. Streams and Valleys paid for a similar study at Heritage Plaza.

A few miles away, though, Mary Blakemore has been trying for years to get the city to build a jogging trail in Hillside Park.

The 24-acre park has been around since 1911 and has one of the best views of the downtown skyline. But the city closed the small swimming pool in the 1980s. It was 12 years before residents raised enough money to reopen it.

Blakemore worries that there are two park systems — one backed with private money and one for low-income residents. "We pay taxes, and we don't get anything for it," Blakemore said.

Leavens, with Streams and Valleys, has the same worry.

"Should a park system need an advocacy group? Shouldn't it be part of the regular city budget?" she said.

## **Making deals**

The chronic budget shortfalls have meant trade-offs in other areas.

For example, voters approved \$3.2 million for a community center for far north Fort Worth in the 2004 bond program.

To stretch those dollars, the city teamed up with the YMCA of Metropolitan Fort Worth to build a fitness center. At \$5 million, the center is more expensive — and nicer — than the city or the Y could have afforded. But instead of a neighborhood recreation center, local residents got a members-only gym that sits next to baseball and soccer fields.

The Trinity River Vision project will plow millions into Fort Worth's parks, mostly at Gateway Park. But there's a catch — a lot of the new facilities at Gateway Park will be in the flood plain and could be inundated every couple of years. And parts of the existing Riverside Park could also be used for flood storage.

The latest trade-off may be in Rosemont Park, which covers 48 acres on the north side of Seminary Drive and includes tennis courts and a stone pavilion. The city Parks Advisory Board recently approved a deal with the Fort Worth school board to put a new elementary school in the park.

In exchange for the use of the land and part of the construction cost, the park system will get to use the school gymnasium and other rooms as a community center. The school system, in turn, will give the city a lease on 5 acres on the south side of Seminary Drive for use as a playground.

It has riled some park preservationists, who say the city shouldn't give away parkland, particularly in the inner city.

"I have watched our parkland be gobbled up, all for worthy causes," said Joan Kline, who fought the city for years to get a new park in Ryan Place on the south side. "I just have not seen the advocacy for the protection of open. In these developed areas, it's just very hard to replace."

## **Gas money**

Last month, workers dismantled a 149-year-old cabin in the Log Cabin Village. It was beginning to sink. A new foundation was poured, and crews spent part of March putting the building together log by log.

The money for the project came from natural gas royalties produced at other parks — something that wouldn't have been possible without the drilling boom in the Barnett Shale.

Over the next 20 years, the city expects to reap about \$1 billion from under parks, water plants, airports and other city land.

Park supporters see it as the golden egg for the park system.

"It seems Fort Worth has a real opportunity to reinvest in what the public knows to be a real benefit in our community — the public parks," said Jerre Tracy of Historic Fort Worth.

But the gas money is expected to come in over several years, with a lot of strings attached.

If a park has received a state or federal grant, any bonuses or royalties have to be spent at that park.

That ties up about half the projected revenue — and a lot of it will go to the Nature Center, which gets fewer visitors than many of the central-city parks.

But in the long term, Zavala said, he's optimistic despite the tough times.

"At certain points, the people will come forward and say, 'We're willing to ' he said. pay a little bit more to get some of this back,'

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### Parks through the decades

Years	City population*	Number of parks*	Total acres	Acres per 10,000 people
1950-59	356,268	80	6,883	193.2
1960-69	393,455	101	7,760	197.2
1970-79	385,164	138	9,075**	235.6
1980-89	447,619	179	9,630	215.1
1990-99	534,694	203	10,189	190.6
2000-09	686,850	243	10,946	159.4

\* At end of decade

\*\* includes Gateway Park

Note: Historical numbers are hard to calculate because some parks were acquired in phases.

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### 2008 attendance

Park	Attendance
Nature Center	37,730

Japanese Garden 118,000  
Botanic Garden 700,000  
City pools (seven) 85,493  
Golf courses (five) 186,077