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Period Garden Park: 'A little gem in the heart of Madison'

**Neighbors work to rejuvenate historic downtown park
Kathryn Kingsbury on Thursday 06/05/2008 , (3)
Recommendations**

Joe Bonardi says there's a simple benchmark that tells him the city park in his neighborhood is becoming safer.

"Only men were walking through the park at the beginning" when he started volunteering last April at Period Garden Park, a tiny patch of land in downtown Madison on the corner of East Gorham and Pinckney streets. "There were no women."

Now, he says, he has neighborhood women telling him they feel safe hanging out in the park for the first time in years. "We're doing our utmost to make it clean and safe," he says of the small volunteer crew he's organized to revamp the park.

At a little over 10,000 square feet, Period Garden Park (see www.periodgardenpark.org) is among the city's smallest parks. It's often mistaken by passersby as someone's front yard. And indeed, it once was.

The park originally belonged to Judge Elisha "Boss" Keyes, the "despotic" (according to a newspaper account) Republican Party chair who became Madison's first postmaster in 1861 and its first Republican mayor in 1865. In the 1970s, it was rescued from parking lot status by neighbors, donated to the city and converted into a garden park meant to reflect the architectural heritage of the Mansion Hill District, once the stomping grounds of Madison's upper crust.

Period touches include curving brick paths, sandstone steps, Victorian period planters, statues and black iron fencing. But over the past few years the garden's milieu became dominated by dead and dying shrubs, and its northern corner was so darkly overgrown it was a little creepy to walk through even in the middle of the day.

Bill Barker, president of the Madison Parks Commission, recalls walking into that back corner a few years ago during a tour of the park system and finding "a great goddamn big knife in there, as big as a sword. It was clear someone was sleeping back there and that was their protection."

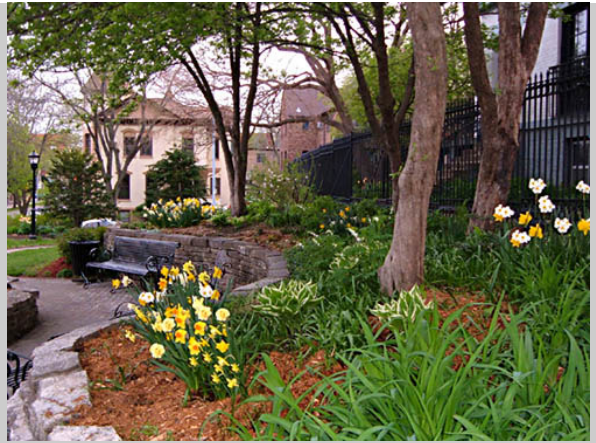
After years of walking by the park and wishing it could be nicer, Bonardi contacted the city Parks Division to find out how he could help clean up the park. It was a rude awakening. The city, he found, "has no money at all in the budget for improvements or maintenance of that park."

Laura Whitmore, the Parks Division's community relations coordinator, confirms that the city's budget provides for only the most basic upkeep. And that's not just true for Period Garden Park, but all city parks.

Maintenance, says Whitmore, "varies from park to park and neighborhood to neighborhood. In general, what we do is mow. That's it."

The problem, in a nutshell, is that Madison has about 270 parks, including greenways and golf courses, and not enough staff. Whitmore says the number of parks staff has not kept pace with the division's growing workload. Park staff has not increased significantly in recent years; there are now 147 fulltime staffers. Since 2001, the city had brought 15 new parks into the system, which now encompasses 6,100 acres.

"Year after year," says Whitmore, "we do more with less."



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Joe Bonardi: 'We want people to come by and have their lunch, hang out after the Farmers' Market.'

(Credit: Joe Bonardi)

Once upon a time, the Parks Division had the staff to maintain the park system's 40 to 50 flowerbeds and gardens, but that hasn't been done since the 1980s. "Maintaining flowerbeds is up to neighborhood groups," says Whitmore. "If neighborhoods don't, it doesn't happen."

The city offers the People for Parks Matching Fund, which this year will make \$100,000 in funds available for parks projects for which matching funds are raised. This amount is projected to drop back to \$75,000 next year. The money goes for plants and capital improvements. But generally the labor is donated by volunteers who, Whitmore estimates, contribute upward of 10,000 hours a year.

Barker agrees that funding for parks is stretched to the breaking point – and will likely get tighter still.

"We have a storm coming and we need to be battening down the hatches right now," he says. "If we are going to maintain the level of open space, we're going to have to depend on philanthropy. The city can't pay for it anymore."

In addition to heading the Park Commission, Barker is a board member of the Madison Parks Foundation, a private nonprofit that supports the city's park system. The foundation is now working to create an endowment to support park improvements.

But the contributions of neighborhood groups have become essential. "My goal is a friends group for every park in Madison," says Barker, who calls Period Garden Park "a microcosm" of what needs to happen for the entire park system.

Over the last year, Bonardi has become a cheerleader for Period Garden Park, approaching everyone he can think of — local property owners, businesses, foundations, residents — for donations. (These are tax-deductible, thanks to a program of the Madison Parks Foundation that helps friends-of-parks groups set up 501c3 accounts.)

With the help of Capitol Neighborhoods Inc., Bonardi and a volunteer crew have replanted the garden's entire rose bed and cleared its northern corner of weeds and brush. They've also added a fountain to the center flowerbed and period-appropriate urns to flank the wrought-iron benches (all bolted down, of course).

"Joe has been absolutely astounding in what he's done," says Ledell Zellers of Capitol Neighborhoods. "He really does things right." Whitmore agrees: "Since Joe's been there, the park has never looked better."

Plans for a Victorian-style garden shed have been scrapped for now after an unsatisfactory back-and-forth with the city planning department. "The building-code issue proved to be awkward," says Bonardi. The proposed location was too close to the property line and hence neighboring buildings, according to the city. And the city's preferred location, argues Bonardi, would have made the shed a good place to hide behind.

Future plans include offering free classical music concerts and promoting the park as a site for wedding photography.

"We want people to come by and have their lunch, hang out after the Farmers' Market," Bonardi says. He estimates that about \$4,000 of improvements were made last year, with another \$5,000 worth of landscaping to be completed by this fall. All will come from donations, some already in hand.

Currently, the park is being cared for by a handful of volunteers, including state Sen. Fred Risser (D-Madison), who calls the park "a little gem in the heart of Madison." It doesn't bother him that he's weeding the one-time lawn of one of Wisconsin's most influential Republican Party bosses. "You go back a little further and that area was owned by Native Americans," he says.

Bonardi believes the improved upkeep, combined with the presence of volunteer gardeners in the park (he estimates they're there at least 20 hours a week), has discouraged people from mistreating the space. "There just isn't what there used to be" in terms of camping out, drug activity and vandalism, he says. "The park has become much safer."