Healthy People, Healthy Watershed: Bringing Little Brook Back to Life

Muriel Lawty, a real estate agent and gardening enthusiast, has big dreams for her neighborhood, a pocket of Seattle called Little Brook at the north edge of Lake City. “It’s like a wild rose getting ready to bloom,” she says.

Five years ago, Lawty moved into a ground-floor apartment in Little Brook. It was one of the few affordable places she could find that would also accommodate her planters of herbs and the passionfruit vine that now dangles above her doorway. At first, she was discouraged by the lack of green spaces and gathering spots where neighbors could get to know one another. About 3,000 people live in this community, a dense cluster of apartment buildings, public housing, and a few single-family homes. Many are first-generation immigrants, and collectively they speak more than a dozen languages. At the center is the neighborhood’s only park, Little Brook Park.

Less than an acre in size, Little Brook Park had deteriorated into a spot for drinking, drug-dealing, and other illegal activity. In 2009, the city launched a community outreach program that included regular barbecues and outdoor movie nights at the park. Parents started bringing kids to the park to play. These days, you can find a dozen or more children there on any given day, climbing monkey bars and slipping down slides. A program run by United Way in collaboration with city, state, and federal partners offers free lunches in the summer, and kids can join games, face-painting, and other activities organized by AmeriCorps volunteers.

Still, one small park is not enough for a neighborhood with so many young children and few other public spaces. Lawty sees possibilities for more parks and a more vibrant community.

At the back of Little Brook Park, beneath a cluster of alders and maples, flows the creek of the same name. A tributary of Thornton Creek, Little Brook Creek passes behind apartment buildings and under parking lots and crosses under Lake City Way. Although it is mostly hidden from view, Lawty believes that this little stream holds great potential for connecting neighbors with nature and each other.
The creek starts its journey underground in Shoreline and emerges beneath some cedar trees near the northern boundary of Seattle. It travels partly through pipes and culverts. In places where it runs above the surface, its banks are eroding. In winter, the creek sometimes floods and dampens nearby apartment buildings.

But like the rest of the Thornton Creek watershed, Little Brook Creek still has “good bones,” says Jonathan Frodge, a stormwater scientist with Seattle Public Utilities. He says cutthroat trout probably still live in the stream’s upper reaches; in the 1990s, residents persuaded the city to replace a culvert after they spotted salmon trying to migrate up the creek a couple miles south of the Little Brook neighborhood. Frodge can recite a list of places where the city could liberate the creek from pavement and expose it to the open air, make it less flood-prone, and perhaps run bicycle trails or footpaths along the banks. A healthy creek could be a habitat corridor not just for fish, but also birds and pollinating insects.

In February, Mayor Ed Murray announced an integrated planning approach for Lake City involving all city departments and expanded community input. The Shared Vision for Lake City will invest in parks and make the area more walkable.

The life of the creek and the vitality of the neighborhood are intertwined. “That’s why we want to restore some of these natural areas, because if we do that, outcomes for these kids are better,” says Mark Mendez, who leads a program for teens in Lake City for Seattle Parks and Recreation and the citizen-run Thornton Creek Alliance. For six weeks in the summer, the teens in the program explore the Thornton Creek watershed, testing water quality, pulling invasive ivy and knotweed, and learning how to preserve nature in the city. Many families in the area live below the poverty line. “These are kids whose families have multiple barriers. If we can make it a little more beautiful for them, raise their quality of life, that can have effects that we can’t even imagine,” says Mendez.

Arah Reyes, a high school sophomore who lives in the Little Brook neighborhood, says Mendez’s program gives her “somewhere to calm down and to look at nature.” When she works on projects to fix up the watershed, “I feel like a better person,” she says. Mendez says the teens in his program could help establish new parks, make educational signs, and restore native plants along Little Brook Creek.

Ultimately, the transformation of the neighborhood and the creek will require the combined energy of neighbors and the city. Lawty is already talking with property owners along the creek about ways to take care of the watershed and has urged her landlord, George Hoder, to improve and protect a section of stream that flows at the edge of his property, next to where Lawty has planted a vegetable garden. Hoder has enrolled in the nonprofit Adopt-A-Stream program.

Lawty plans to form a citizens’ group focused on the creek, with help from the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. “We’ve got people who have come from all over the world here and all walks of life,” she says. “What I would like to see is a neighborhood that can be an example of how you bring people together.”
Open Space Opportunities Along Little Brook Creek

Jonathan Frodge of Seattle Public Utilities has identified several sites along Little Brook Creek where restoration, daylighting, and stewardship could significantly improve water quality. Most of the improvements would also beautify the neighborhood and allow increased public access. Seattle Parks Foundation hopes to work with the Little Brook community, Seattle Public Utilities, and other agencies to pursue some of these opportunities.

- **Headwaters of Little Brook Creek, where the channel is eroding**
- **Abandoned lot that could be restored**
- **Maintenance and restoration opportunity in a corner of Little Brook Park**
- **Private property whose owner is interested in restoration and adding rain gardens**
- **Private property that could be acquired and restored**
- **Restoration opportunity on steep, eroding banks along a section of the creek**
- **Culverted section of the creek running under an abandoned lot owned by Seattle Parks and Recreation that could be daylighted**
- **Restoration opportunity at a pond where the creek emerges from under NE 125th St.**
New Gateways into Pioneer Square

In April 2016, the Walker Macy landscape architecture firm completed a design framework for parks, plazas, and green connections in Pioneer Square. The Gateways Project, conceived and commissioned by the Alliance for Pioneer Square, gracefully rethinks troubled urban spaces. The plan dignifies and connects neglected places and marginalized user groups to a larger whole, creating a vibrant and welcoming park system for everyone in the neighborhood.

The Problem

“The neighborhood lacks cohesion in its parks and public spaces,” says Carl Leighty of the Alliance for Pioneer Square. “With so many hard edges, entrances to the neighborhood feel uninviting and don’t convey the true vibrancy of the community or its historic assets. Many neighborhood parks suffer a general sense of neglect, all having received different levels of design interventions over the years. We are left with a patchwork of half-fixes, unfinished projects, and singular approaches that have resulted in uninviting spaces all over the community.”

The Solution

Lara Rose of Walker Macy says that historic photographs of Pioneer Square show a more inviting and cohesive system of parks and plazas. “They were less cluttered, less overgrown, and helped welcome people into adjacent buildings,” she says. “We recommend restoring these conditions to allow the essential character of each space to really sing.”

Walker Macy’s strategies include improving pedestrian circulation and building entrances, thinning out tree canopies to expose historic facades and let more light hit the ground, active programming, movable furnishings and spill-out space for restaurants and cafes, integrated interpretive elements, and generally brightening and enlivening each park with high-quality materials and supplemental lighting.

“Pioneer Square’s parks and public spaces are an incredible asset—it is time to acknowledge the ways they contribute to the livelihood of our city’s oldest historic district and invest in them,” says Rose.
Students and Parents to the Rescue at Beacon Hill Elementary

What’s more emblematic of an elementary school than the playground outside—a place for kids to get out the wiggles on school days and a destination for families on weekends and during the summer?

But at Beacon Hill International Elementary School (BHIS), a bilingual public elementary school, the playground was a mess—condemned by the school district in April 2016 for safety reasons and then hastily replaced with a surface of wood chips surrounded by blacktop.

“After some vandalism on the structure, our custodian dealing with the cleanup saw how much the structure was aging and brought it to our attention,” says Kam Yee, a BHIS parent and member of the school’s playground steering committee. Parents attempted to contact the manufacturer of the play structure for repairs, but the company had gone out of business. Then the structure’s platform broke.

In less than a week, the entire play structure was removed and students had no playground for the rest of the school year. Seattle Public Schools had no funds to replace it, but parents and students rallied, raising money online and launching a communications blitz, which brought the project to the attention of Seattle Parks Foundation.

“We had already raised about a third of what we’d need to replace the structure when Shava Lawson of Seattle Parks Foundation contacted us,” says Eunice Lee, another playground steering committee member. Lawson, a public school parent herself, had been involved in a similar project at her daughter’s school, and she suggested that the steering committee consider a partnership with Seattle Parks Foundation.

“We needed a nonprofit sponsor to qualify for the Seattle Neighborhoods grant,” says Lee. “Seattle Parks Foundation had already done projects like this before, so they helped us get our application in really fast.”

By July, the committee had won a $25,000 grant from the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. They also received a KaBOOM! grant to pay for design consultation, materials, and installation help.

“Seattle Parks Foundation took a huge burden off of us and were instrumental in us starting off right,” Yee says. “Their advocacy gave us a really good application, and our partnership helped other funders see that we are really serious. Our group was way ahead of the game.”

The students will have a new playground by the end of October.
Community members weigh in on the future of Georgetown’s open spaces

To some Seattleites, Georgetown is the bars and restaurants on Airport Way South or the colorful enclave of homes bought years ago by artists with more creativity than cash, all under the flight path of planes landing at Boeing Field.

To Rosario Medina, Georgetown is home and family history. It’s where her extended family got a toehold in Seattle when they moved up here from Texas. The house on Carleton Avenue that her great-uncle bought in 1956 sheltered three generations of the family.

Medina is only 26, but she’s already seen a lot of change in Georgetown, not all of it good. Georgetown was a hard-working and sometimes gritty place from its beginnings in the 1850s, but the neighborhood was increasingly hemmed in as Seattle grew. Boeing Field spread across Georgetown to the south. In the 1960s, the construction of I-5 cut off the neighborhood from Beacon Hill to the east. Arterials, heavy traffic, railway tracks, and industry sliced across the north and west sides of the neighborhood, choking off pedestrian access.

Despite some successful community efforts to establish green spaces, such as the Hat ’n’ Boots playground at Oxbow Park, Georgetown still has few parks and continues to lose informal green spaces. “There weren’t fences between the houses when I was growing up, and we kids would just run from yard to yard like it was all one big yard,” Medina says. Now, many deteriorating properties are being demolished to make way for townhouses and condos. The original Medina family house was recently sold, with cousins and grandparents moving to Renton or Auburn. Medina and her husband live with her mother Maria on Flora Avenue; they are the last of the extended family in Georgetown.

Like Medina, Kelly Welker feels that her neighborhood has been neglected. “At some point, somebody basically told industry it could just do whatever it wanted in Georgetown,” she says. “Residents have said for a long time that things need to change.” Welker moved to Georgetown 11 years ago because it was more affordable than other parts of Seattle. Now she is the parent of an eight-year-old, and she worries that the neighborhood doesn’t have enough sidewalks, green spaces, and public transportation to keep her son and other Georgetown kids active but safe.

Welker chairs the steering committee for the Georgetown Open Space Vision Framework, which will determine community priorities for a greener, more open, and more connected

Rosario Medina and her husband, Victor Facundo, at Gateway Park in Georgetown.

“There weren’t fences between the houses when I was growing up, and we kids would just run from yard to yard like it was all one big yard.”
Kyle McCoy Goes the Distance for Parks

Imagine a morning run across snowfields and boulders, the spikes of your shoes kicking up ice as you race past penguins. Wait, penguins?!

“I’ll be running about six marathons—250 kilometers (155 miles)—over six days in Antarctica,” says Seattle Parks Foundation board member Kyle McCoy. McCoy is an ultramarathoner whose next race will take him to the frosty reaches of Antarctica. That’s where the penguins come in. And that’s the final leg of McCoy’s final 4 Deserts Ultramarathon. His previous races have taken him to Chile, China, and Namibia.

McCoy hopes to finish in the top three, but his number-one goal is to raise $100,000 for Seattle Parks Foundation. We asked McCoy about what motivates him.

**Why do you run?**

I love to see the world, especially these extreme environments. I’m a systematic, daily regimen kind of person, and when I have these goals on the horizon, I feel better. I’m at my best when I’m running.

**What’s your favorite training route in Seattle?**

I love running a route that connects parks and green space in the city. One route I take is from Queen Anne Hill through Myrtle Edwards Park to the Magnolia waterfront, then through Discovery Park to Ballard.

**Why are you running for parks?**

A person’s quality of life improves with access to parks. Most cities are urbanizing at a rapid clip, and it’s important to look at parks in a disciplined way, to preserve and connect them.

Follow Kyle’s adventure on Facebook: www.facebook.com/seattleparksfoundation
Put a Lid on It

The Lid I-5 campaign, an effort to cover segments of the I-5 freeway as a way to address connectivity, open space, and affordable housing issues, is gaining momentum. Representing a coalition of neighborhood groups, business leaders, and nonprofit interests, Lid I-5 has the ultimate goal of covering as much of I-5 as possible to create more livable and productive space and help meet Seattle's social and environmental needs.

We asked Liz Dunn, a Seattle developer and steering committee member of Lid I-5, why she supports this idea.

Why should we lid I-5?

Creating new parks and public land over the Interstate 5 right-of-way within Seattle is an idea whose time has come. The neighborhoods that suffer most from the negative impacts of noise, pollution, and mobility disconnection created by I-5, including downtown, are also those which have the greatest deficit of public open space. This open space deficit will worsen as more people continue to move into Seattle to live and work, and as higher and higher land prices make purchasing and developing public land more and more difficult. Building open spaces and other public uses over Interstate 5 presents a compelling opportunity to help solve these problems. I-5’s path crosses, and divides, many of our most populous neighborhoods, including downtown, the International District, Capitol Hill, Yesler Terrace, and the University District.

Why now?

Other cities around the country are proving that the benefits of freeway lid projects vastly outweigh their costs. In Seattle, the freeway's central location creates an incredibly attractive opportunity, allowing it to extend and knit together our network of other emerging open spaces, such as the Central Waterfront and the Lake to Bay Trail, as well as the center city neighborhoods currently bifurcated by I-5. The I-5 right-of-way is publicly owned, and its redevelopment would not be subject to volatile market conditions or reluctant sellers. Most compellingly, the cost of building parks, affordable housing, amphitheaters, schools, and playfields over the interstate could cost less than half of purchasing the equivalent land in many locations. Parks over the interstate can become the important spaces that heal the gash and blight caused by Interstate 5 and be the anchor for rejoining communities that have suffered for decades from I-5's pollution, decay, and noise. Covering Interstate 5's concrete, asphalt, and exhaust with healthy landscapes can be an immeasurably significant symbol in furthering our community's vision of a greener and more livable future.

Sketches from a community design planning session: imagining the possibilities.
May We Help You?

“100 Partners” initiative boosts support for community park projects

Community-led public space projects are emerging in virtually every Seattle neighborhood—a reflection of our city’s history of civic entrepreneurship as well as a shared sense of urgency about responding to accelerating growth. This local engagement has proved essential to the development of thoughtfully designed and welcoming public spaces that improve the health and well-being of all Seattle residents.

Seattle Parks Foundation currently serves as a fiscal sponsor or agent for 57 such groups. Our goal is to be serving at 100 community groups by 2019 and to be responsive to needs and new thinking that will arise from a strong network of community leaders and volunteers.

We provide liability insurance, financial management and reporting services, donor stewardship, communications and fundraising support, technical assistance, capital campaign leadership, and special fund management.

In 2017, Seattle Parks Foundation is launching a Community Fund that will help provide support for organizational capacity to partner groups in underserved parts of the city.

Are you part of a group that is trying to get something done in your neighborhood? Whether it’s public art, playgrounds, open spaces, innovative transportation or housing solutions, restoration, or any big vision for our public spaces, we want to hear from you.

Contact us today at 206.332.9900 or info@seattleparksfoundation.org, and let’s work together to create an interconnected system of parks and public spaces for all.

“100% engaged in the project from start to finish. You have fostered partnerships and promoted exchanges and dialogues within and between communities.”
—Virginia Korycki (Yesler Swamp)

“Seattle Parks Foundation is a great resource for small grassroots organizations to navigate the public processes and access potential funding for improving open spaces.”
—Ching Chan (Hing Hay Park)

“You have come with a suite of services that includes communications, best practices, and fundraising opportunities that would have been extremely difficult to pull together for our low-profile grassroots project.”
—Maia Segura (Detective Cookie Chess Park)

“Roseann Barnhill and Hassan Djama Allelah of DIRT Corps assess tree and soil health before a tree giveaway event at Carlton Avenue Grocery in Georgetown.”
Photo by Fedora el Morro at tinyboxmedia.com
Thank you!

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Sally Bagshaw, Seattle City Councilmember

“I believe we need great public spaces that meet the needs of a growing city and are welcoming to all. I joined the Parks Legacy Circle because great parks equals great cities.”

Join Sally Bagshaw and name Seattle Parks Foundation in your will today.

The Parks Legacy Circle honors those who have included Seattle Parks Foundation in their will, life insurance policy, IRA, or other estate plans.

For more information, call Betsey Curran at 206.332.9900 x15 or go to: seattleparksfoundation.org/givethroughyourwill

Falling in Love with Parks

Newlyweds Tiffany Vu and Matt Nguyen recently made a gift to Seattle Parks Foundation in honor of their June 2016 nuptials. Rather than ask family and friends to donate in their names, they made the gift themselves. “Parks are part of who we feel we are as a couple,” says Vu. “We want parks to be around for the rest of our lives together.”

Now living in California, Vu, 27, is completing her medical residency at Loma Linda University, and Nguyen, 31, is a programmer at Group Health Cooperative. Both grew up in the Puget sound region and enjoyed parks as children. When they met as adults, their love of parks was a shared joy that has produced many happy memories. In particular, Green Lake Park holds a special place in their hearts.

“Many of our first dates were there, just walking around the lake, and we continue to go there to this day,” says Nguyen.

Vu and Nguyen return to Seattle as often as possible to see family, and they still feel a strong connection to the community despite their distance. And parks continue to be a part of their lives as a couple. “We love to hang out, walk, grab food for a picnic,” says Nguyen. “Most of the time it is just the two of us.”

Photo by Jordan Voth
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