

Grant Park rose garden to get face lift with \$1.25 million grant

Tiffany & Co. Foundation donation latest private donation to rehab public park

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Park District CEO Tim Mitchell, Chicago Park District Board Member Rhoughy Shalabi, Parkway Foundation Executive Director Brenda Palm, Ald. Bob Fioretti, Tiffany & Co. Foundation president Fernanda Kellogg, Maggie Daley, Parkway Foundation Board President Denise Stefan, and Chicago Park District Board President Gery Chico, from left, have a ceremonial groundbreaking after announcing a \$1.25 million Tiffany & Co. Foundation grant to renovate the Grant Park Rose Garden. (Chicago Tribune photo by Michael Tercha / September 25, 2008)

Chicago park officials hope a \$1.25 million grant from Tiffany & Co. Foundation that was announced Thursday will improve a rose garden just south of Buckingham Fountain, transforming it into a breathtaking venue that can be rented out for bar mitzvahs and weddings.

The donation demonstrates how a cash-strapped Chicago Park District is turning more often to private donors to pay for everything from Halloween events, the construction of athletic fields and, now, a formal garden.

While private entities have for decades paid for civic projects across the city or donated land for open space, it was with the creation of Millennium Park—where money from foundations, corporations and private individuals totaled \$220 million—that officials said they truly realized what private funds could do. Private money could take a utilitarian park design and ramp it up into one recognized around the world as the future of urban park design, they said.

But public-private partnerships also can be problematic.

A plan by the Children's Museum to build in Grant Park and pay for a new \$15 million fieldhouse was criticized by activists as a private land grab. A similar outcry erupted from a neighborhood group when the elite Latin School proposed building a nearly \$2 million soccer field in south Lincoln Park in exchange for priority use of the space.

"In the end, the park is not to be doled out to private institutions for their expansion plans," said Tom Tresser, president of the Protect Our Parks coalition, which defeated the proposal to give the Latin School first use of the soccer field. "It's an alarming trend that raises the question, 'What's the government for?'"

But faced with \$2 billion in much-needed construction projects, no federal money and a declining economy, park officials say they have no choice but to continue seeking private money.

"Every time government tries to think outside the box, you're going to have critics criticize you," Parks Supt. Tim Mitchell said. "This is my solution, to reach out and get private entities to support these capital improvement projects."

Today, private donations range from the White Sox's gift of \$1 million for disabled-accessible Miracle Field in the South Side's Mt. Greenwood Park to Nike Corp. building a soccer field at Douglas Park and rubberized basketball courts, made from recycled Nike shoes, in Franklin Park. Walgreens donates \$50,000 plus 50,000 candies every Halloween to park programs.

In exchange for these donations, private companies get logos on programs and naming rights to the field they build.

Developers eyeing downtown locations have also begun pitching funds to create parks, and as a result have won city approval. The Spire will pay \$9 million for the creation of DuSable Park next door, which has been designed by the building's architect, Santiago Calatrava.

But private endeavors in public parks at times can spark a backlash.

In the Children's Museum's case, the museum, which wanted to build an underground structure in northeast Grant Park, also proposed replacing a leaky fieldhouse, something the Park District could not afford to do. The City Council eventually approved the deal despite widespread public objection.

In Latin School's case, a lawsuit by a group of residents put an end to that public-private partnership. The district will now complete the field, but the school will not get priority use of it.

Park experts say one way to avoid private funding for parks from becoming contentious is by talking often with vested interests, including neighborhood groups.

The Parkways Foundation, tasked with raising funds for park initiatives, secured the rose garden grant from New York-based Tiffany & Co. Foundation.

The money will go toward sprucing up the rose garden and planting roses, bulbs, flowering shrubs and evergreens year-round. Officials say the garden, to open by next summer, will hold 200 people and offer views of a refurbished Buckingham Fountain.

The donation is another example of that philanthropy once reserved for indoor cultural institutions moving outdoors, said Bob O'Neill, president of the Grant Park Conservancy. "It's an interesting paradigm shift," he said.