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COMMENTARY



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How do we expand the urban parks people love?

The more than century-old live oak in a little park called Constitution Green flings some of its monster branches skyward from its thick trunk.

Other limbs swoop down to touch the ground and then back up again as if the big tree is resting on its elbows.

The tree at the corner of South Street and Summerlin Avenue is so close to State Road 408 that a strong wind could kick up some of its leaves into the path of cars on the expressway.

Last year, the threat that this glorious specimen of natural Florida could fall to the bulldozer to make way for more development rallied protests, petitions and, eventually, a deal by the city of Orlando to buy it.

Now the block-long park will remain as a patch of green surrounded by pavement.

The tree helped show how strongly people feel about park land, particularly as nearby blocks see more and more development.

Now that success story is one people across the region want to help repeat over and over again — only with a lot more planning and, possibly, without government dollars.

What if a group of people took the time to either buy or accept donations of property that could be preserved as urban green space or, in the case of developed land, returned to its natural state?

Now, what if enough urban land was reclaimed for parks so that lakes from south of downtown Orlando north to Winter Springs would, from an aerial view, look to be all strung together with green thread? What if a large enough piece of land was acquired so that Orlando had something equivalent to a version of New York's Central Park?

Steve Goldman, a successful computer technology developer-turned-supporter of the arts and

sciences, is asking those questions.

He's looking to start an endowment for park land that could become transformative as the region's population and new construction increase in density.

Goldman, who served on Winter Park's Visioning Steering Committee, said he heard people say that park land and the city's small-town feel were important to them.

"These things were very clearly fundamental values for people living in Winter Park," he said. "There was also a lot of expression of fear that we're losing our village-like atmosphere because of increasing development."

Last week Goldman helped organize a panel at the Global Peace Film Festival at Rollins College after the screening of "Rebels with a Cause," a film about how a motley crew of politicians, environmentalists and regular people without fancy titles saved big swaths of land along the California coast from development.

I moderated the panel discussion and was struck by the level of enthusiasm for the idea.

Goldman noted that Central Florida has come through for big causes before, including a \$500 million effort for the new performing arts center and \$45 million for the Orlando Science Center.

"What we don't know, is whether

or not there are enough people willing to devote financial resources needed to accomplish this goal," he said. "However, we do know that if we don't create an urban parkland acquisition trust, we will never find out."

Such a trust would run on private donations of dollars and land, not government.

Chris Castro, sustainability director for the city of Orlando, said he liked the idea of longer-term planning for open space throughout Central Florida.

"Personally, I think there's a need for a more regional approach," he said. "One of the things world-class cities are really determined by are their world-class park systems."

As for a park more along the scale of New York's Central Park — something even bigger than the city's current flagship Lake Eola — Goldman and others have tossed around an idea: Orlando Executive Airport.

"One day I was staring a Google Earth and there's this big piece of land," he said. "We don't want it to stop being an airport as long as it's useful. But one day, let's plan to make that our Central Park."

Goldman acknowledges that could be far, far into the future.

But he has a track record of seizing on big ideas and making them happen. In 1999, he sold a computer company he founded and since has turned his attention to the arts and sciences as a supporter of a number of local efforts.

He is the founder of the National Young Composers Challenge, which will hold its ninth annual event Nov. 13 with participants' work played by a professional orchestra. He is also the creator of Why U, a nonprofit Web resource for math students.

"My goal in life is to make things better than I found them," Goldman said.

A plan to prevent more close calls like Constitution Green would certainly help do just that.

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