

BY CHRISTOPHER SWOPE

AMERICA'S “GREEN” MAYORS

BUILDING A NEW PARK IN BOSTON these days is no easy task. It's not a matter of finding people to use parks. There are plenty of walkers, joggers, bicyclists and inline skaters itching for new places to go. The problem is finding the land. With almost 400 years of history under its belt, Boston is largely built.

That's not stopping Tom Menino. Now in his ninth year as Boston's mayor, Menino is scraping up land for new parks wherever he can find it. On the city's crowded east side, he helped turn an unused rail corridor into a scenic greenway with a trail that ends at the edge of Boston Harbor. And in West Roxbury, he found a more unlikely place for greenspace: an old city dump. A 100-acre chunk of land that once literally rotted away is now an urban oasis with sculpted gardens, ballfields and a nature reserve. “There's always a need in cities for open space,” Menino said in November of 2000 when the old dump reopened as Millennium Park. “We wanted to make the landfill a community asset instead of a liability.”

Menino is on a quest to make his green city even greener. Boston already has one of the nation's largest urban park systems, anchored by Frederick Law Olmsted's famous “emerald necklace” of parks and greenways. Menino, a details-oriented mayor who has been likened to an “urban mechanic,” is now adding to that legacy. Beyond the recreational value, he sees how parks add to the quality of life and sense of community in crowded urban neighborhoods. “The mayor really gets it,” says Laurie Webster, a project manager with the Boston Natural Areas Fund. “He understands how important open space and greenspace are to all the neighborhoods and how valuable it is for people to have common ground to meet on.”

The same could be said of Denver Mayor Wellington Webb, who is adding more land to Denver's park system than at any time in that city's history. Or Tom Murphy, the mayor of Pittsburgh, who is crusading for miles of trails along the shore of his city's famous

three rivers. Peter Clavelle in Burlington, Vt., is also a good example of the nation's crop of “green mayors.” All of these mayors understand that now, more than ever, trails, parks and greenways are essential to their cities' future. And they are bringing to bear their leadership skills, political capital and raw powers of persuasion to make new parks a reality.

These mayors understand that more is at stake than a breath of fresh air. Urban greenways are key to economic development. In a digital age when people and businesses can locate wherever they wish, quality of life is any city's strongest selling point. Cities with little open space and few recreational opportunities are likely to be left behind in the new economy. Pittsburgh, for example, is using new waterfront parks to help it shake off its gritty reputation and make it a more attractive place to live and work. And it needed an equally gritty mayor like Murphy to not only put greenways on the city's agenda but to keep them there.

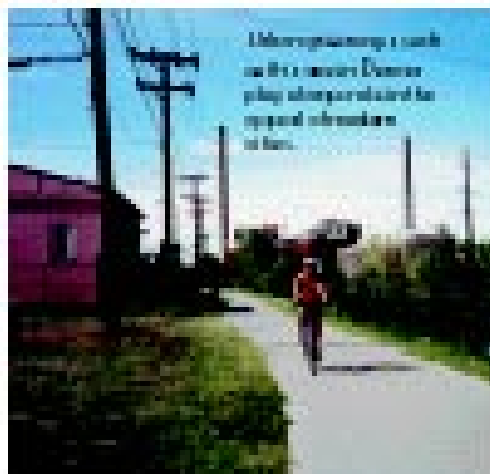


Boston mayor Tom Menino, with WalkBoston president and former RTC board member Ann Hershfang, points the way to a more progressive city.

The mayors' styles are as different as their cities. Denver's Webb is a no-nonsense manager who sees himself as a city C.E.O., while Burlington's Clavelle is a neighborhood guy you'd rub elbows with in a local coffee shop. But one thing they all have in common is a long-term vision for parks in their communities. This focus on the future is important, since the mayors will probably be long out of office by the time their greenway legacies are fully appreciated. Consider that some people in the 1850s thought New York City was crazy to set aside 700 acres of developable land as a centrally located park.

Yet in the modern city, creating new parks is an even dicier game than it was then. As much as urban dwellers want new parks, they are reluctant to pay higher taxes for them. That means mayors must be astute at forming partnerships with local companies, foundations and nonprofits to make their green visions a reality. Menino, for example, convinced Conrail to donate its railbed to the East Boston Greenway project. He injected public money into the project at key points, but most of the financing came from private donations and most of the sweat from local advocates.

And as Menino's efforts in



built-out Boston show, mayors sometimes have to be resourceful just to find land for parks. Boston's most famous greenway-in-progress is to be planted atop the "Big Dig," where a downtown highway is being rerouted through a newly built underground tunnel. Where did dirt from the dig go? To the West Roxbury landfill, where it forms the foundation of the new Millennium Park.

In his quest for new Denver parks, Wellington Webb faced the opposite problem. But even an abundance of land required Webb's shrewd leadership to make new parks a reality. In 1995, Denver opened a new international airport, putting the old Stapleton Airport out of business and opening up the old runways and tarmac for redevelopment. As pressure built to redevelop the site with new homes and offices, Webb made it clear that at least a quarter of the land be turned into parks and open space.

As construction at Stapleton begins, Webb's imprint is all over the blueprints. A giant central park of 175 acres is planned, along with smaller community parks for the new neighborhoods going up. In total, 1,100 acres at Stapleton will become parks and open space. That, along with several other sizable park acquisitions, represent a whopping 2,400 acres added to Denver's park system in Webb's 11 years in office.

The mayor's most gleaming green jewels are downtown, along the once-neglected South Platte River. Webb put riverside parks on the city's agenda by declaring 1996 the "Year of the River." He put up \$40 million for parks and trails near the South Platte, adding to \$25 million raised by local advocates. "Mayor Webb has been a phenomenal leader in the history of this city, in terms of parks being one of his highest priorities," says Jeff Shoemaker, executive director of the Denver-based Greenway Foundation.

Thanks to the mayor's resolve, a 10-mile riverfront once known for its trash-strewn banks is now a haven for joggers and bicyclists. They flock to a trail that meanders along the river, leading to the brand-new Commons Park downtown. That 30-acre park has its own trails, gardens and stunning skyline views. In just a year, the park has become so popular that a nearby slum of warehouses and garbage dumps is now some of the hottest real estate

in town. Developers are planning to invest billions of dollars in housing, office and retail projects in the adjacent neighborhood.

Waterfront greenways rejuvenating a city is a familiar



Denver's parks and trails—including a planned 175-acre central park—rank high on the agenda of mayor Wellington Webb (left).

story to Pittsburgh's Tom Murphy. In eight years as mayor, Murphy has led the charge to transform the Iron City's waterfront from an industrial eyesore into a recreational oasis with miles of trails. "Mayor Murphy appreciates how quality of life is important to urban living," says John Stephen, executive director of Pittsburgh's Friends of the Riverfront. "When he came into office there were two miles of riverfront trail here. Now there is closer to 15 miles, with plans for an additional 15."

As Pittsburgh residents rediscover the pleasure of a riverfront stroll, developers are following close behind. The city's most expensive housing is going up near the waterfront, along with offices, museums and two publicly funded sports stadiums. "There's several billion dollars in new development directly connected to those trails," Murphy says. "It's not only because of the trails, but the trails add additional value."

To support his vision for greenspace along the city's three rivers, Murphy took a big risk his first year in office. He put up \$9 million in city money to buy more than 130 acres of former steel mill land. That and other land purchases ensured that the city, not private developers, would control the new waterfront's destiny. "I always thought that Pittsburgh's greatest resource was its waterways," Murphy says. "And our ability to connect to them was essential to make Pittsburgh a city with vitality again."

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As the city began to develop the land, Murphy vigorously fought to preserve access for public trails along the riverfront. This sometimes put the mayor in awkward situations, such as the time two years ago when the Pittsburgh Steelers sought to build a new football practice facility along the Monongahela River. Team plans put the 100-yard field right up against the river, but Murphy convinced the Steelers to build an 80-yard field instead and leave room for a waterfront trail. It was a victory for public access, but it opened Murphy to criticism from die-hard football fans who blame the mayor each time the Steelers fall short of the end zone by 20 yards or less.

Murphy, an avid jogger and bicyclist, sees the riverfront trails as more than a recreational facility and a catalyst for development. They are also a vital part of the city's transportation infrastructure. Hundreds of bicyclists commute to work every day on the new trail network.

That's a vision that Peter Clavelle is taking to an extreme in Burlington, on the banks of Lake Champlain. In 20 years of public service, first as the city's economic development director and now as mayor, Clavelle played a key role in turning a lakefront railway into a bustling bike trail. Now, with thousands of people using the eight-mile Burlington Bike Path every day, Clavelle thinks the trail can play a larger role in the city's transportation future.

Under Clavelle's assured stewardship, Burlington is breaking ground this fall on an \$8 million intermodal transit facility. The transit center will sit right next to the bike trail, and provide connections to bus, rail and ferry service. In January, Clavelle described the project to a U.S. Senate committee interested in how other communities might follow Burlington's lead. "This facility and all of its interconnected modes will make our waterfront accessible to a greater number of visitors—



A 200-foot ribbon of land through Lake Champlain forms the Island Line Rail Trail, an extension of a lakefront park drawing Burlington residents—and downtown developers—back to the water. (Photo: Paul Boisvert)

without overwhelming it with automobiles," he said.

The bike path and transit center are also good for downtown. Historically, Burlington's downtown sat several blocks from the old industrial waterfront. Now the lakefront park is drawing residents—and downtown development—back to the water. "The path was the catalyst," says Chapin Spencer, a city councilman and bicycle activist with a group called Local Motion. "The bike path came first, and now the waterfront is becoming a 'new urbanist' centerpiece with all sorts of pedestrian-oriented and bike-friendly design."

Clavelle hopes to build on Burlington's waterfront success and is pushing a wider agenda to make Burlington what he calls "one of America's most sustainable cities." Clavelle began a long-term planning process aimed at getting Burlington residents to think about what the city should look like in the year 2030. As that vision evolves, it includes more growth downtown. And it also includes protection of the city's remaining natural areas

and open spaces. Clavelle is pushing to fund a new Open Space Protection Plan, under which the city will purchase open spaces and find other ways to keep natural areas undeveloped.

As Clavelle points Burlington toward the future, he can't help but look back at how far the city has come. Like Menino in Boston, Webb in Denver and Murphy in Pittsburgh, Clavelle has turned his city's biggest eyesore into its proudest joy. Where lumber yards decayed, Burlington residents from all backgrounds meet at the waterfront on common ground. "Burlington is a more urban place than it was 20 years ago, more dynamic and more exciting," Clavelle says. "And there are plenty more bicycles."

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