

Esther Short Park: A Town Square Makeover

For years, Vancouver's Esther Short Park spiraled into decay. It was the oldest Town Square in the state, but it had become a place very few wanted to go. Once the hub where the community gathered for Fourth of July picnics and first home of the county fair, the park had eroded into a hangout for transients. The overgrown, neglected park had a gloomy almost threatening feel. It was not a haven for families and children.

So what happened between then and now?

Today, 5.2-acre Esther Short Park is sparkling from a \$5 million makeover. But it's more than looks. It's once again become the community gathering place for Vancouver, Washington, the center for summer concerts, community events, home of the popular Vancouver Farmers Market and the most sought after outdoor rental site in the area. Hallmarks include an 18,000-square-foot programmable brick plaza with a 75-foot brick Bell Tower complete with 32 bells forged in the Netherlands and four, 60-inch clocks. There's a glockenspiel with Native American salmon theme, a 3,000-square-foot stream with cascading water fall, and year-round flowers are highlighted with 20,000-plus tulips each spring.

Put simply, the park is a stunner.

No one action triggered this metamorphosis. Here's the story of Vancouver's town square makeover and the multiple partnerships that made it all happen.

First step: bricks and mortar and community vision

Back in 1997, a community planning group created the Esther Short Redevelopment Plan. The plan had these three guiding principles: Esther Short Park should be reinvigorated; The Esther Short Redevelopment Area should complete the Downtown Area; and the Esther Short Redevelopment Plan should act as a catalyst for development in the Vancouver region.

Taking the lead, Vancouver Mayor Royce E. Pollard, promised the community it would take back its park and the park would become the heart for downtown revitalization. The goal was to create a strong sense of place while developing a facility to support large civic events of up to 10,000. The design would focus on the park's rich history and assist the city realize its desire to harness the new park as an economic development catalyst. Planners sought to bring back the turn-of-the-century ambience that citizens remembered and loved through the preservation of trees and historical architecture.

A Community Resource Team of citizens with technical support from a consultant, Economic Development, Parks and other city staff came together to redesign the park. Beginning in 1999, the group met to guide the master planning process for the new park that would eventually boast a new performance Pavilion Stage, renovated Pioneer Mother Statue, interactive water feature and children's playground complete with a Victorian design theme. Expanses of lawn, redesigned landscaping, a rose garden and new public restrooms also helped set the stage for the park's new life. All design elements were linked. For example, the rose garden and public space east of the Slocum House (an historic on-site performance venue), were created to draw visitors to the theater. The Pavilion Stage compliments the architecture of the Slocum House with the ornate trim and copula. Other linking elements include an 18-foot-wide promenade in the heart

of the park, renovated historic drinking fountains and a brick civic plaza on the southeast corner. With designs in place, construction commenced and the park began its new life.

What happened next was a success story no one could have predicted.

Few operating dollars sparks creativity and cross-departmental teams

While grants and community sponsorships paid for much of the capital costs, as the park got ready for its maiden events voyage, there was little in the way of operating dollars. Events, a division of the city Parks and Recreation Department responsible for programming the new park and events citywide, determined that it made sense to move the city's popular summer noon and evening concert series to the park as a way to build audiences and showcase the new park. The mayor endorsed the move.

Events was also able to convince Riverview Community Bank, new to the downtown area, to come on board as the concerts' corporate sponsor. But before the concerts even began, Economic Development was working hard to relocate the popular Vancouver Farmers Market to the street adjacent to the park. This was important for two reasons: to draw the community to the downtown redevelopment area and to make way for new development in the area east of the park and the former home of the open air Market.

An inter-departmental city planning group involving Transportation, Parks, and the Market set up the Market's move. What happened was amazing. Opening in the spring of 2000, the Market drew 5,000 its first weekend of operation. And when people got their first look at the new park that same spring they fell in love with both the park and the Market.

Park visitors were equally impressed at the dedication of the first phase of facelift to the new park. Held on April 12, 2000, the dedication had the extra hook of welcoming numerous relatives of the Esther and Amos Short Family. Esther died in 1862 leaving the park property to the city. She started a long history of community sponsorship that later saw more than \$3 million donated by longtime civic boosters Carolyn and George Propstra that helped pay for the new park and later, in 2002, the community square.

Community buy-in and making events pencil

In addition to moving the concerts and Market, the financially strapped Events budget would need creativity if programming was to be successful and cover costs. Expectations were high for the park, from the sponsors who had so lovingly supported paying for it, to the city leaders who, too, had high hopes. In an effort to help fund and manage the park, Events assembled a group of community members and park users to develop a rental policy for the park that, up until now, no one was interested in renting.

This resulted in rates and policies everyone could live with. It was agreed rental costs would ramp up over the next five years as the downtown area revamped. The area was expected to grow with the development of three new high rises and a proposed convention center. It was agreed that Events, which was now part of the city's Community Services Department, would schedule, program and manage these urban facilities as a system.

Events went about the process of managing the sites working closely with other city departments. Sites included the flagship, Esther Short Park, a waterfront park called Vancouver Landing, a nearby grassy amphitheater called Water Works Park and a pocket park called the

Sculpture Garden. All were close to Esther Short and each afforded different options for users seeking places for weddings, concerts, company picnics and the like.

Working on a shoestring budget depending primarily on the time of the city events coordinator, temporary events staffing paid by slim rental fees and the support of local sponsors, this new system of urban events sites management launched into its first season in 2000.

To help get the word out, the effort got assistance from a new events facility brochure designed and written in house and the creation of an information kiosk in the park whose colorful information posters were also designed and created in house. With the increase in events interest but no way to accommodate the many requests for city services or to coordinate them, the Events Team was created. This interdepartmental team was made up of all city services impacted by major events. The team would become absolutely critical to reviewing the major events requests that were now flooding the city. It also served and continues to serve as a clearing house to ensure all departments are working from the same page and customers get a clear message of what can be provided and how much it will cost.

In just a few short years Vancouver has a new park that is part of a system of outdoor event rental sites. A management system is in place to schedule sites, too, all without additional drain on general fund dollars. The rental rates for the park are slowly ramping up and forming the base for operational, maintenance and capital dollars. Numerous partners continue to help. For example, the expansive flower beds are financed and maintained through the support of the Community Foundation for Southwest Washington.

The impact of Esther Short Park on the downtown has been phenomenal. In the first year, attendance at summer concerts jumped from 1,000 to 5,000+, new events flourished including the popular Wine and Jazz Festival and Taste of Vancouver. Esther Short Park has become the place to hold an event, outdoor wedding or festival.

New partners

The park continues to be the centerpiece and the epicenter for change. In 2001, the city invited the Vancouver Symphony to perform its first outdoor free public concert. The annual affair is now just that and sponsored by local business.

Recently the city took yet another step in revitalizing the park by entering into a partnership with the Old Slocum House Theater Company. The company has been housed in the historic Slocum House (owned by the city) in a corner of the park for a number of years. The small, 64-seat theater, has a loyal community following and a passion for keeping theater alive. This new partnership includes the local tourism office -- the Southwest Washington Convention and Visitors Bureau. As part of this continuing revitalization, the bureau expects to open a tourism office on the site, the company will continue to focus on theater and partner with the city on outdoor theater in the park. All three partners will work on raising funds to rehabilitate the house.

The park is an innovative example of what can happen when city departments team up and bridge resources, community partners step up to help with funding and civic groups and local businesses get creative. Esther and Amos would be proud. In fact, this summer, the whole Short clan will be coming to the park for the first annual family picnic.

