

A CONVERSATION WITH. CHARLES SPEARS

A CONVERSATION WITH. CHARLES SPEARS -NEW MINNEAPOLIS PARKS
SUPERINTENDENT 7/13/79 Printed in *The Fringed Gentian*™ Vol. 27 No.3; Vol. 27 No.4
and Vol. 28 No.1. Interview with Lynn Deweese.

What do you see as the major strengths of the Minneapolis Park System?

The major strength is the legacy that has been left us by previous park boards and superintendents in providing both open spaces and recreational facilities for now and the future. Minneapolis has done an excellent job; in fact, I think it is the finest park system in the United States -because of the lakes, parkways, bikeways, and natural areas such as the Eloise Butler Wild Flower area at Theodore Wirth Park, the Robert's Bird Sanctuary area at Lake Harriet, and the Diamond Lake area where plans of establishing nature trails around the lake by 1981 are under way.

What do you see as the major weaknesses of the Park System?

Well, I don't see the weaknesses as being in the System as much as I see financial problems in the future. System-wise, we have property and buildings to do many things - but programing and peoples' needs are changing fast. But it will change even more dramatically in the next few years due to the gasoline and energy shortages. It is already happening. People will be staying home more and taking shorter trips. They will be home more weekends, seeking more family recreation, more programming, more classes. They will be here to be served more -both city and suburban people. Regional parks will be used more than the state and national parks.

What moves are now being made to cooperate with suburban and county parks?

We are in process now of having meetings with the Hennepin County Park Reserve system, and are trying to plan together so that our cross country walking and biking trails from the city will tie into county and suburban extensions. For instance, the Shingle Creek system will tie in with one that is being built by Brooklyn Center and the Hennepin County Reserve system. This linking of the city with the suburbs by bicycle paths will be increasingly important as bicycles become a more important mode of transportation for some people in the future. But there must be proper planning and co-ordination of these trails so they do not too often dead end at city boundaries. The regional park system idea is also being studied through the Metropolitan Planning Council which includes Ramsey and other metro counties as well aa Hennepin.

Knowing the special bias of the FRIENDS, what do you see as the place of the Eloise Butler Garden in the park system?

I see it as a very important function, Where else can city youngsters who possibly cannot afford to go to other places find the native plants. I think it is important that they have a place such as your Garden, or the Diamond Lake area, or the refuge at Lake Harriet, or getting back into some other areas that are not mowed so completely. In fact, we are

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looking at the possibility that we may be mowing too much. Maybe there are places we should not mow to encourage more wild life, for habitat and also maybe to save some money.

Do you see some changes that would be desirable at ELOISE?

I would be open to ideas from people such as the FRIENDS, who are active in that area, and would be guided by what they feel because they have been around it for some time. I think I would like to see a somewhat more active program for the inner-city youth, with perhaps a trained person, or persons, to help with guided walks and the development of wild life appreciation. Staffing and transportation costs have perhaps held back this development. We are starting that sort of programing in the Diamond Lake area, using our own staff -our horticulturist, Mary Maguire Lerman, and our new environmentalist, Mike Ryan.

What role do you see the FRIENDS having?

I see it as one of continuing protection of the area. Without it where would the Garden's voice come from. There have been periods when lobbying was the only thing the FRIENDS represented. That is one of their strengths. Also, I would like them to work up special projects that might take certain amounts of money not available from the Park's budget and be active in raising the money. The Garden is a wonderful place, it makes you feel far away from the city.

What sorts of projects do you see the FRIENDS being involved in?

I would see them helping to better interpret what is there - the educational end of the Garden. So people do know what they are seeing and the worth of it. They should come away from there with a better feeling of why it is there in the first place. There are possibilities for good self-guided touring - well signed, etc. I would like to see some evening programs in the Garden. A naturalist might give a night life program one night a week during the season. In some cases that could be on a volunteer basis with members of the group doing that. They've got expertise - but what they need to do is share it. Wouldn't it be nice if some of the FRIENDS could relate experiences and knowledge to youth groups, and others!

For instance, this year we've changed our day camp program considerably. Instead of taking them out to Hennepin County Park Reserve District and putting them through the programs there - we can't afford the busing, we can't afford the cost - so this year we decided to do it in Minneapolis. This year we're taking them to the Diamond Lake Area on nature hikes, taking them down the Minnehaha Creek on canoe trips. We think they need to develop an appreciation of what we have in the city. I would like to see some of our recreation center staff go through some training that would be involved in some of these things. They would go out to places like the Wild Flower Garden (I'm talking about our

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staff people here) and be given some background about what it is and what it does. That is the sort of leadership training we are going into.

We are starting that at Diamond Lake with guided tours -- this has not made use of volunteers there - rather our own staff, our horticulturist - Mary Maguire Lerman and our environmentalist - Mike Ryan. This year we acquired a new environmentalist - Mike Ryan -. He is working on several projects. His main project will be on lake pollution control and the lake level study. Now he's doing the Diamond Lake thing because of the considerable silting caused by the interstate into that area. A number of people want us to just go in there and dredge it out. That may or may not be the answer there. It depends what sort of wild life you want there. And so the people agreed that he should have an opportunity to look at that and explain to them their alternatives before we do anything. You may go in there and destroy more habitat by taking something out than you want to destroy. It depends what sort of habitat you want and what you want a place to do. Those are the sort of things he is going to be doing.

Speaking of new programs, how is the development of the Riverfront Plan coming?

It's coming great. It will probably be a developed park, though there will be areas that will always be protected because they are hard to maintain. Everything from the bluff down will be undeveloped. From the bluff up, it will be more developed. There will be a great river road, bicycle paths, walking paths. These will make the area accessible to more people. I believe the river is considerably cleaner than it was ten years ago. There are plans for boat launching facilities. There will be some zoning to allow for water skiing and other similar activities - crewing. So that people with different interests will have a place that they can do something. The river is the most exciting thing that is going to be happening around here in the next ten years.

Has there been a recent change in deciding where park plantings are to be placed?

We've cut back on the flowers at Lake Harriet, for instance, in order to spread it over the city a little more. We are trying to spread it around more. We feel that all sections of the city have the right to have some. In some places we are putting plantings around a park identification sign in the corner of a park. And people are appreciating this. Now we are going into a program which we will call Foster a Park; wherein we will hope to get some garden clubs and some groups that will adopt a certain area, especially some triangles - we have about 40 triangles in the city that we maintain - and have these neighborhood groups accepting the responsibility for cutting the grass, plant flowers and take care of the watering. These areas could then become oasis in the city. This of course, also gives this group some additional community exposure. And of course these pleasant breaks of green are what makes this city so special.

Has the budget gone down, or is it just that the city has more needs that the same money doesn't go as far?

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Its both. Well, not really; the money itself is not going down as fast as inflation is killing it. Because of inflation our actual spendable money after operating expenses has declined and so we have had to examine our priorities and in some cases make cuts. We don't like to cut services, but we do have to cut something. This will be a continuing problem. Probably the greatest challenge is that we are going to have more demand because of energy and less money to do it with. And I don't know how we will make those two meet. People are going to have to take on part of the burden if they want the level of services they have been used to.

[Note: While much of what Mr. Spears speaks up goes to the heart of Friends mission, it was unfortunate that just one year later he left the job for a non-parks job in Louisville KY.]