

A PARK IN NAME ONLY: A STUDY OF DEVELOPED AND UNDEVELOPED PARKS WITHIN THE DOG RIVER WATERSHED

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The purpose of this research paper was to determine how many non-existent parks are in the Dog River Watershed and what actions could be taken to transform non-parks into parks. Criteria for determining what constitutes a developed versus an undeveloped park were set. Using GIS data obtained from the City of Mobile, I created a map of existing parkland (developed and undeveloped) and city owned parcels. This map was used in site selection of undeveloped and city owned parcels to evaluate for possible re-designation. I examined the existing park amenities to determine the concentration of sports focused versus outdoor adventure. Research found that there are far too many non-parks within the Dog River Watershed. The good news is with minimal investment the City of Mobile has the opportunity to turn some of these non-parks into true gems.

Keywords: parks, developed, undeveloped

Introduction

As a youth growing up in Frederick County, Maryland, I had the good fortune of living in an area of the country with a robust park system. Whether visiting a city park like Baker Park running along Carroll Creek in the heart of Frederick City or a county park like Pine Cliff Park with its ball fields and access to the Monocacy River, I found a place of both recreation and leisure. This place, where one has the opportunity to play while the whole time connecting with the natural world, is my definition of a park. Dictionary.com (2015) defines a park as “an area of land, usually in a largely natural state, for the enjoyment of the public, having facilities, forest, and recreation, often owned, set apart, and managed by a city, state, or nation.” My personal experience as an intern with the Frederick County Parks and Recreation Department during the summer of 2013 further informs my impression of what a park should be. One such gem is Fountain Rock Park and Nature Center in Walkersville, Maryland (Frederick County Parks & Recreation, 2015). I can’t say it’s a **hidden** gem for there are a number of informational signs pointing out the way. One will find a large, well-lit parking lot at the entrance. An

informational bulletin board greets you with the latest news and local rules. A wide paved path leads you to a well-maintained playground, a covered pavilion, and assorted buildings, which house the main park office, a classroom and the nature center. Along the nature trail, there is a shed tucked out of the way housing material for a stream study class. The property was once the site of limestone quarrying. Visitors have the opportunity to follow an interpretive trail around the remaining kilns; historical markers describe the significance of the site. The quarry itself now serves as pond. There is wide boardwalk wrapping around a third of the pond's shoreline; it provides a perfect platform for children to feed the fish and turtles pellets from a coin operated fish food dispenser. With the large population of snapping turtles calling the pond home, many children in the area simply know Fountain Rock Park as "Turtle Park". Is there a "Turtle Park" in the Mobile city area?

Parks are important, especially in a city environment or for anybody who lacks a "backyard" (City Parks Alliance, nd). Parks provide access to open space for play. Where else could you go fly a kite or join-in on a game of whiffle ball? Depending on the activity, individuals or groups may use this open space for organized or non-organized play. A park is one of the best places to satisfy the human need for play. One may find a playground, ball fields, nature trails and a dog run all within the confines of a single park. Parks also provide a place for public gathering. Whether at a family reunion or a work picnic, people come together for a shared experience in the out-of-doors. Be it for recreation or reflection, parks offer a place of respite from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Parks provide an educational experience for children; there is perhaps no better place than within a park setting for the young to be awed by the wonder of nature. A park is a place where a child's curiosity may be satisfied, if only for a time. Research

shows that building an affinity towards nature at an early age leads to environmentalist attitudes in adulthood (Novotney, 2008). As Oklahoma City Parks and Recreation Director Douglas R. Kupper explains, “It’s my belief that parks and recreation programs are the No. 1 health and wellness provider to any city, both in physical and mental wellness” (Bratton, 2015).

While doing reconnaissance for a fieldwork class last spring, I came across Schwartz Park on a City of Mobile street map. The area filled in with a light color of green marked the boundaries of the park exactly as shown in the example on the map key. It looked like the perfect access point to Halls Mill Creek, one of the creeks in the sub-basin my group was to study. Yet, as I drove up and down Riviere du Chien Road there was no sign of Schwartz Park, only a steel cable across a single lane road with warning signs indicating “Private Property and No Trespassing”. Certainly not the welcoming I was accustomed to when looking for the entrance to a park. On still another outing a similar scenario came up, indicated on the map was Hollingers Island Park, though no such park existed. The question arises are the green places marked on the City of Mobile street maps really parks?

A quick search of the web produces a brochure released by the Mobile County Commission describing the various leisure opportunities found within Mobile County (Mobile County Commission, 2015). The booklet touts activities such as fishing, hiking, biking, canoeing, kayaking, disc golf, picnicking and playing ball all while enjoying the beauty of the “Great Outdoors”. Along with this guide to the county, there is a town-by-town, city-by-city listing of parks and recreational facilities. Figure 1 shows only the first of seven pages of listing for the City of Mobile together with the front cover and an

inside page introducing towns and cities. Surly, with this brochure in hand, I can discover Mobile’s own veiled jewels.

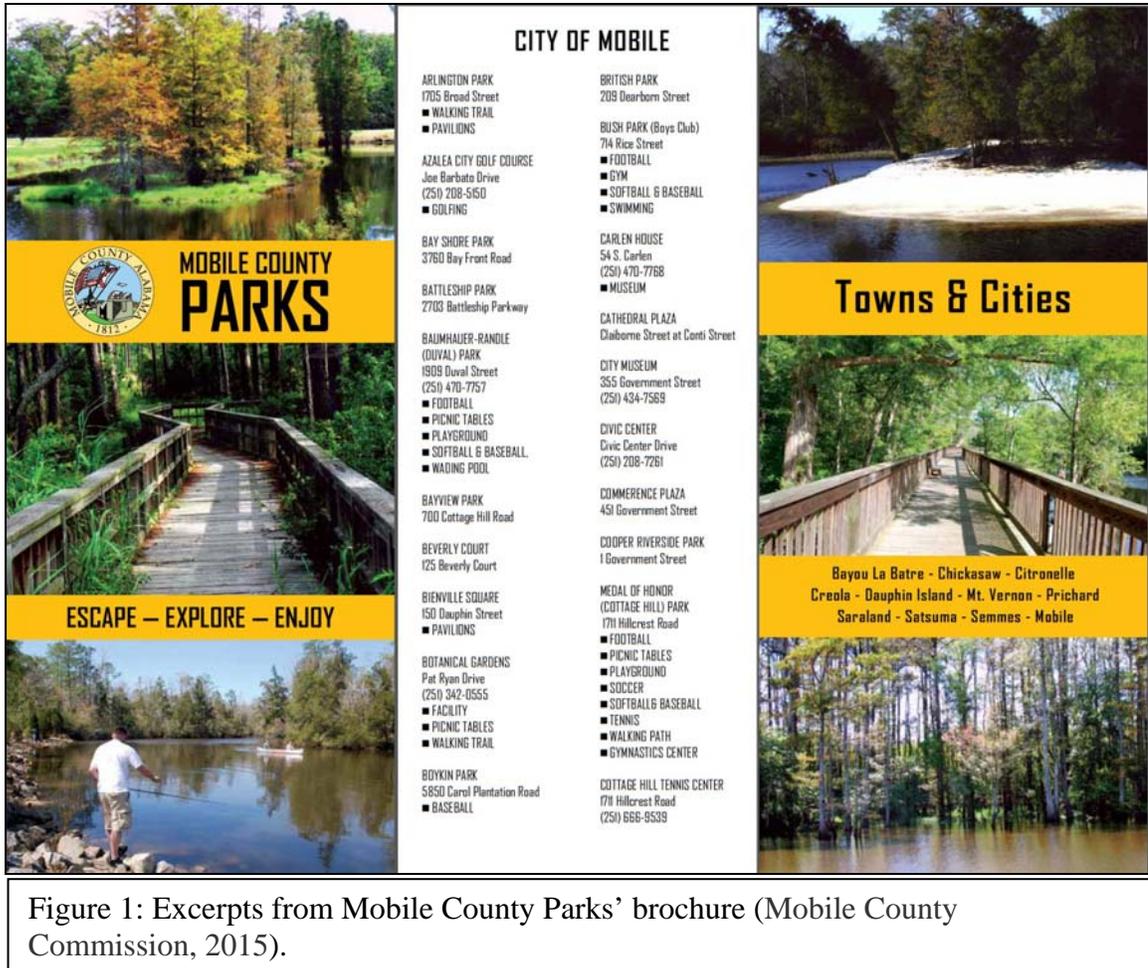


Figure 1: Excerpts from Mobile County Parks’ brochure (Mobile County Commission, 2015).

Research Question

Within the Dog River Watershed, how many non-parks exist? What actions can be taken to turn a non-park into a park? Take for instance, Schwartz Park. What are the criteria for a developed park versus an undeveloped park?

What can the City of Mobile do to get the biggest “recreational bang for the buck” from existing undeveloped parkland or other city owned property?

Methods

I consulted with Mr. Sam Stutsman, Senior Instructor of GIS Applications at the University of South Alabama, to determine the necessary data layers needed to create a study area map. I also contacted the City of Mobile's GIS Manager Mr. Scott Kearney, who provided the shapefiles of city owned land parcels within the Dog River Watershed and extending 0.25 miles beyond the watershed's boundaries. Using ArcMap10.2.2 along with data from the City of Mobile's Geographic Information Systems website, I created a map depicting the corporate limits of Mobile, the Dog River Watershed boundaries, major roads, roads, railroads, streams, waterbodies, parkland, and city owned parcels. I further categorized the parkland into two subtypes presented as either developed or undeveloped. A similar map can be found on the City of Mobile's website under *Living in Mobile, Parks and Community Activities, Parks Map and Guide* (City of Mobile, 2013).

Once mapped, visible differences in and among the parcels were striking so that site selection followed a natural hierarchy of (1) size, then (2) proximity to a stream, and finally (3) closeness to an existing park. Evaluation concentrated on parcels for possible re-designation, i.e. undeveloped to developed park or city owned parcels to park designation. For ease of use, I exported the attribute tables from ArcMap into Microsoft Excel for developed, undeveloped parkland and city owned parcels. I examined identified parcels using the City Map application from City of Mobile's website (City of Mobile, 2015) to gather preliminary information. I printed both Street and Aerial views of the identified parcels for reference during actual site visits. Site visits took place over several days. I planned routes to maximize observations while in the field, taking weather conditions into account. I created a rubric (Appendix A) to score "upgrade potential" of

parcels bearing in mind the compatibility with the surrounding area. Upgrades as simple as identifying parkland, i.e. putting a name to a stretch of land, can be the most impactful to people from the local community or out of town visitors to the region (Wolf, et al., 2014). I investigated potential issues concerning access, entry and parking at the identified sites. I pinpointed likely hazards to sensitive areas, especially floodplain lands. I also took a brief look at the existing activities available within the developed parks, in terms of categories, sport focused vs outdoor adventure.

Results and Discussion

When most Mobilians think of a park, they think of playgrounds and picnic tables because 46 of the 78 (or 59% of) City of Mobile parks have a playground and 37 (47%) have picnic tables as part of the amenities. Similarly, 73 (94%) of the parks in the city have team-sport fields, i.e. basketball, football, softball, baseball, or soccer as available activities. Only 19 parks (24%) within the city included a fitness trail as part of the outdoor amenities (City of Mobile, 2013). Clearly, we need more natural parks with walking trails in Mobile, and we have the land to do it.

I compiled data from the rubrics for each site visited into two graphs Figures 2 and 3 to allow for easy comparison, one parcel to another. The data in Fig. 2 shows the existing amenities found while surveying each site. These factors have the greatest effect on the cost to upgrade any one particular park/parcel. Fig 3 shows that Schwartz Park, Vista Ridge Park and the West Mobile Region Library have the highest upgrade potential while parks/parcels that scored 3 or below would offer little additional community value if upgraded. A park that already has good amenities would cost little to develop more

fully. Since West Mobile Region Library, Schwartz Park, and Vista Ridge Park have high potential; this discussion focuses on those three sites.

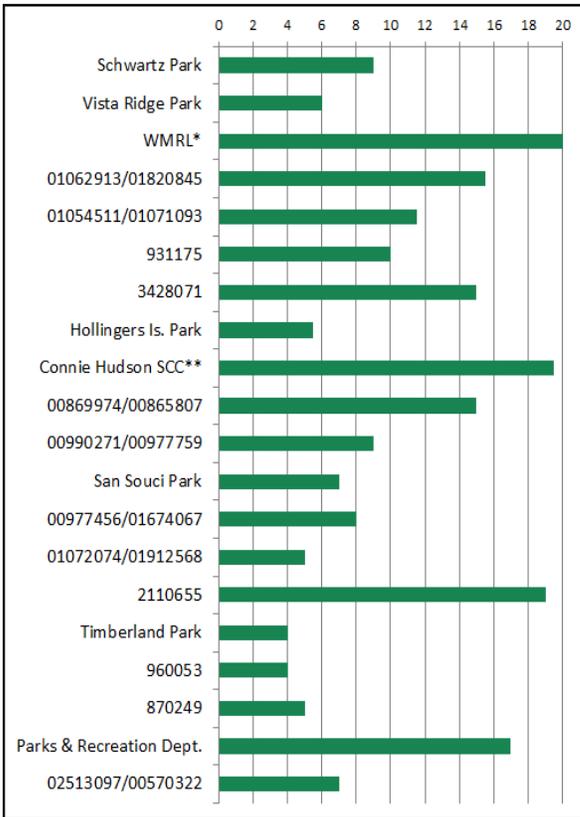


Figure 2: Existing park amenities. Bar graph shows the composite score (signage, access, entrance condition and parking) from the rubric for each site visited.

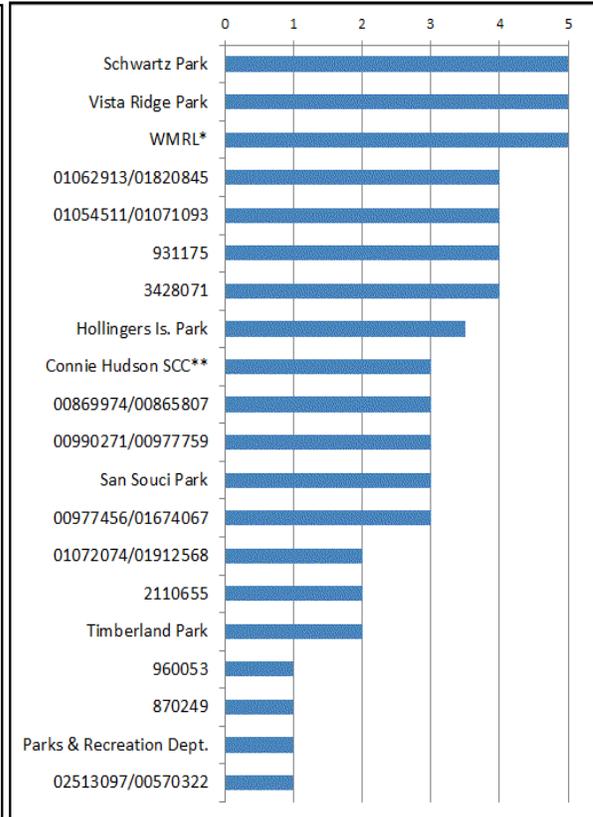


Figure 3: Upgrade potential. Bar graph shows the score obtained from the rubric for potential as a park for each site visited (ranked from highest to lowest potential).

In terms of **the biggest bang for the buck**, West Mobile Regional Library is the clear choice. Obtaining a score of excellent (5) across the board, this site offers the most potential for upgrade without the expenses associated with other sites on the list. The library is easily found by way of directional signage off of adjacent road arteries. The entry is clearly marked along with the hours of operation posted on the front doors. Access is also clearly marked with multiple turning lanes and good visibility. The entrance is especially inviting with a lighted sign and welcoming landscaping. Parking is

exceptional. With handicap spaces available and spaces clearly marked, this parking lot is in the best condition of any site visited. Earning an excellent ranking in “Potential as a Park” category, the West Mobile Regional Library site offers the potential for a small community garden park in the rear portion of the property, as viewed in Figure 4. It needs very little infrastructure improvement. Under the guidance, of a local Master Gardener’s group, a butterfly garden could be constructed and then used as an experiential learning opportunity for young children. In this example, the youngsters would have the experience of exploring the garden in the out-of-doors and then venture inside the library to learn more about

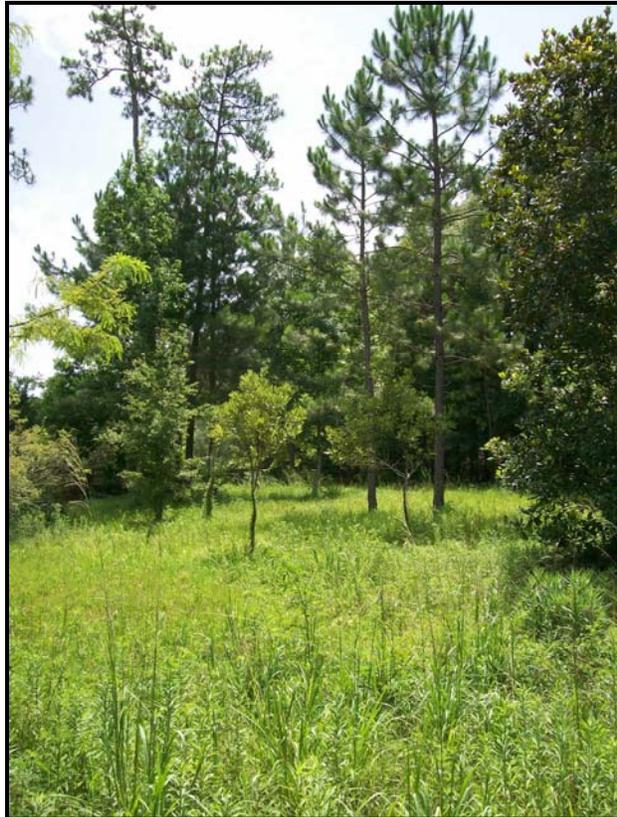


Figure 4: West Mobile Regional Library Site. Photograph shows the wooded area in the rear portion of the library property.

various butterflies, insects, flowers and trees they had seen in the garden. Sparking a child’s curiosity about the natural world around them and then satisfying that thirst for knowledge can have a profound effect in a young person’s life.

Schwartz Park with its location on Halls Mill Creek likewise offers excellent potential as a park. With an improvement in only a few areas, this park could give the community a valuable resource in terms of both recreation and education. The virtually non-existent signage is a major area of concern for Schwartz Park. Access is another problem; there is only a one-lane, gravel road leading into the park. This lane is

overgrown and laden with potholes. As evidenced in Figure 5, the entrance was one of the most uninviting of all the sites visited, with a sign reading “PRIVATE DRIVE... MEMBERS ONLY... NO TRESPASSING”. Parking is available; however, it is not marked and on an uneven, unpaved surface. Of particular concern to this site are the safety issues associated with an abandoned pool and playground found in disrepair. The risk of injury linked to these two hazards generates major liability questions. In addition to these hazards, there is a



Figure 5: Schwartz Park. Photograph shows the warning signs at the entrance to Schwartz Park.

dilapidated residence on site which poses yet another risk of injury. Notwithstanding the above mentioned issues, Schwartz Park, with its launch site on the Dog River Scenic Blueway, offers the paddling enthusiast instant access to one of Mobile’s urban river tributaries. Unique to this site is the presence of a large pond within sight of the roadway. With the addition of a boardwalk around the perimeter of this pond Mobile could have its own version of “Turtle Park”. Utilizing guided tours, Schwartz Park could become an educational resource for the greater community.

Vista Ridge Park has excellent potential as a park though its composite score was in the lower third. This very large parcel is adjacent to Halls Mill Creek and offers unique qualities other sites did not possess. Unfortunately, there are no signs indicating the

location of the park and no entrance to speak of. The access to the parcel is by foot and there is only street parking available. All that being said, Vista Ridge Park offers a true nature experience not easily matched within the city limits of Mobile. Figure 6 shows a photograph of a stream teeming with aquatic life near a neighborhood street. A “light” footprint should be the approach taken with this particular site with its proximity to Halls Mill Creek. A heavier step could prove hazardous to this sensitive area and economically unfeasible especially in this flood prone land. The recommended use for this park is wilderness trails which could connect to the adjacent Environmental Studies Center property overseen by the Mobile County Public School System.



Figure 6: Vista Ridge Park. Photograph shows a stream less than 10 yards from Vista Ridge Drive near Candia Court. Notice the clarity of the water and presence of fish.

Conclusion

Regrettably, the Dog River Watershed has far too many non-parks. Of the 20 parcels evaluated, 5 are named “park” (Vista Ridge Park, Timberland Park, Schwartz Park, Hollingers Island Park, and San Souci Park). All of these essentially fall into the category of ‘Park in Name Only’. Schwartz Park is in limbo status between city owned property and parkland. A developed park should include appropriate signage, safe access, a welcoming entrance, and suitable parking. Mobile could reap tremendous benefits by incorporating such improvements into its undeveloped parkland or other city owned parcels. The first recommended improvement would be to the signage in and around prospective parks. With no visible signs present in the majority of sites visited, the public is unaware of the existence of these valuable recreational opportunities. Community pride and stewardship will follow once the gates to these **secret gardens** are thrown open. Secondly, the access to these sites should be improved, for example a natural walking trail in Vista Ridge Park would open it to public exploration. To get the biggest “recreational bang for the buck”, the City of Mobile ought to develop the wooded area at the West Mobile Regional Library.

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APPENDIX A
RUBRIC FOR PARK/ PARCEL EVALUATION

NAME OF PARK OR PARCEL #	EXCELLENT 5	GOOD 4	AVERAGE 3	POOR 2	VERY POOR 1	SCORE
SIGNAGE	Directional signage present, entry marked, rules and/or hours posted, information about park, condition of signs	Have some of these but some information is lacking	Minimal signage and condition readable	Maybe one (1) sign present but unreadable	No signage	
ACCESS	Clearly marked and paved entries multiple lanes, safe, visibility good	One and half (1 ½) lanes, paved	Entrance visible but only one (1) lane	Pedestrian access only	No access at all... How do you get into this park?	
ENTRANCE CONDITION	Inviting and welcoming; it is obviously a park or place frequented by the community	Clear signage present but not pretty	You can tell where the entrance is and name of park	Uninviting	Where is park entrance? Missing completely	
PARKING	Handicap accessible parking, clearly marked, with smooth surface	Parking lot marked	Can park but not marked, not smooth	Street parking only	No parking	
POTENTIAL AS A PARK SPECIFY:	Size, proximity to stream or other park: Very large parcel, close to stream or another park or unique amenity	Large parcel, close to stream or another park or good amenity	Medium parcel, somewhat close to stream or another park or amenity	Small parcel, far from stream or another park or amenity	Nothing to recommend this parcel as a park	