



People for Parks: 1977-2012

People for Parks allows park users to 'give back' to the parks they love. In its three and a half decades, People for Parks has identified and funded over \$2 million in projects to improve Minneapolis Parks.

Created in 1977, People for Parks has funded a variety of projects and programs in Minneapolis Parks. Utilizing a working, volunteer board, PFP has been able to keep overhead low and return more money to the park system. The PFP board works with MPRB staff, neighborhood associations, groups and individuals to identify unfunded needs, and allow park users stewardship of the parks they use and enjoy. Grants are typically \$10,000 and under, although some worthy projects have seen higher funding levels, for example, trees; the Lake Harriet Picnic Shelter (\$60,000); The Falls 4 All playground (\$400,000 so far), etc.

People for Parks has contributed over two million dollars and thousands of volunteer hours toward making Minneapolis parks more beautiful, more useful and more enjoyable. A sampling of projects to which People for Parks has contributed/are planning:

Recreation and Community

- \$400,000 raised so far for the Universal Access Playground at Wabun Picnic Area
- Fiscal agent for the Rev. Dr. MLK Jr. Legacy Group Projects at MLK Park
- Fiscal Agent for the Allan Spear Colonnade project at Mueller Park
- Tennis courts, through Support the Courts (three parks across the city)
- Outdoor chess tables (Logan Park; installation at Linden Hills Park)
- Park benches (citywide)
- Picnic shelter (Lake Harriet)
- Flight NW307 Memorial on Minnehaha Parkway
- The Playmobile, a portable playground (citywide)
- Lighted informational signs at recreation centers (citywide)
- Lighted cross country ski trails (Theodore Wirth Park)

Music and Entertainment

- Principal fundraiser for Minneapolis Pops Orchestra for 20 years.
- Benches, pavers, sound-system, maintenance and landscaping at Lake Harriet
- Showmobile (citywide)

Horticulture

- Over \$40,000 worth of trees (Victory Memorial Drive, Jordan Park, Pearl Park, Thomas Lowry Park, Triangle Park); Dutch Elm Inoculation
- Rock Garden/Peace Garden (Lyndale Park)
- Daffodil plantings (citywide)
- Tamarack Bog (Theodore Wirth Park)
- Minnehaha Prairie and Wildflower Garden (Minnehaha Park)
- Buckthorn removal (citywide)
- Landscaping at Audubon Park



People for Parks: A Grass Roots Story

“There does not seem to be another such place as Minneapolis for its constant demands upon the time of its citizens. Everyday there is something that must be done. I suppose, perhaps, this may be why we are a great city.”

— Charles Loring in a letter to William Windom, September 27, 1890. Minnesota Historical Society. Loring was the first president of the Board of Park Commissioners in 1883 and widely considered the “Father of Minneapolis Parks.”

People For Parks didn’t begin as a grass roots organization, but it evolved into one early in its history and has remained so for more than thirty years. In those three decades, the people of Minneapolis and surrounding communities have contributed close to \$2 million through People for Parks for the care, nurture and maintenance of Minneapolis parks and park programs.

Trees, music, playgrounds, flowers, benches, pavers. People for Parks have given all these things and more. The organization has also given its supporters the great satisfaction that they are making a vital contribution to the parks and programs they love.

People For Parks works closely with the professional staff of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) to identify needs within the park system that cannot be met by the park board’s annual budget. It all began with an assault on the city’s urban forest, its canopy of majestic elm trees.

The Invasion

Park managers had been on the lookout for Dutch Elm beetles since the late 1950s. The dreaded bugs were known to be marching westward across the country leaving devastation in their wake. Minneapolis, once mostly treeless prairie, had become one of the greenest cities in the world thanks largely to the park board’s power to plant and care for trees along all city streets as well as in parks. Those trees, more than 200,000 of them, were mostly elms. The first infected elm trees in the city were found in 1963 and the city began to prepare for the toll that the disease might take. But no one anticipated that 30,000 majestic elm trees would eventually die in a single year—1977.

Despite significant city and state resources allocated to removing dead trees and planting new ones—the city added a property tax levy specifically for a Dutch Elm Disease Control Fund—more money was needed. And there were willing donors. But some corporate

foundations were prohibited from donating money directly to a government entity, such as MPRB. Those donors would face no restrictions if the park board created a private organization to accept their money.

People For Parks was thus born in 1977 as the Minneapolis Parks Foundation at the height of the devastation caused by Dutch Elm Disease. (This was the first foundation by that name; there is now another. More on that in a moment.) The foundation would accept corporate money to replenish the city's urban forest. Its officers would be park commissioners or park board employees and its members would be all former park commissioners who chose to participate.



Corporations and their foundations donated more than \$40,000 in the next two years, mostly to plant trees: General Mills Foundation was the first with a donation to replace trees in Stevens Park, Dayton Hudson Foundation adopted Loring Park, Honeywell replaced trees at Washburn Fair Oaks Park, Pillsbury did the same at Elliot Park, and an individual, William Wemer, donated money to plant new trees on The Mall between Hennepin Avenue and Lagoon. First Banks maintained an Elm Watch hotline at its own expense and paid to advertise the hotline to the public for reporting diseased trees that needed to be taken down.

While the donated dollars were a small portion of the millions spent by the city and state to combat the infestation, the response by individuals and businesses demonstrated a willingness to pitch in to care for their parks.

As the toll of dead trees diminished—and the park board planted more than 100,000 new trees from 1977 to 1982—the new foundation expanded its vision. In 1979, the foundation was reorganized. It opened its membership to everyone, expanded its board beyond former park commissioners and announced it would seek donations, grants and sponsors for a “variety of recreational programs” under a Memorandum of Understanding with the park board. The final steps in adapting the organization to its purpose occurred in 1981 and 1983 when the organization was renamed the People For Minneapolis Parks Fund and then was granted 501(c)(3) status by the IRS, which made contributions to People for Parks tax deductible.

In nearly three decades since then, People For Parks has sponsored park improvements and programs citywide in three broad categories: recreation, music, and horticulture.

Happy Trails: Recreation Programs and Facilities



One development that helped the foundation see its potential as a fundraiser beyond the fight to preserve the urban forest was a proposal by the North Star Ski Touring Club in 1979 to donate \$1,000 to the foundation for the specific purpose of creating lighted cross-country ski trails in Theodore Wirth Park. The foundation accepted the donation and eventually raised about \$3,000 for improving ski trails, firmly establishing the care and maintenance of cross-country trails as a popular winter service of the park board.

This early project in the life of People For Parks also demonstrated the two ways in which the organization would raise funds: accepting money designated for a specific project or activity and raising money from the general public to be used as People For Parks' all-volunteer board saw fit.

Inspired by efforts to adopt parks for tree planting, Honeywell came to People For Parks in 1980 with a different type of offer. The company would donate \$10,000 for recreation programs at Stewart Park, the closest park to Honeywell's corporate offices at the time.

In subsequent years People For Parks worked with many neighborhood service organizations to raise money for lighted informational signs at recreation centers. The first matching fundraising program was between People for Parks and the Kiwanis Club of North Minneapolis. Together they raised money for a sign at Folwell Park in 1985. A similar arrangement with the Lions Club led to a sign for Webber Park and the program took off. Signs were eventually placed at all 40-plus recreation centers.

Another offer of a targeted donation came from the medical staff at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in 1993, which contributed \$12,000 to support youth sports programs at four parks in the surrounding Phillips neighborhood.

An important recreation initiative in the 1990s was raising money for a portable playground, a playmobile that could take playground supplies, programs and staff to children in neighborhoods that did not have convenient or safe access to a recreation center. With the help of \$5,000 raised at a golf tournament organized by Bedroom, Inc. (doing business as

Hom Furniture), a \$2,600 gift from the Leonard Neiman Memorial Fund, and thousands of dollars from individual donors, the playmobile was presented to MPRB in 1995.

Pops Goes the People: Music Programs and Facilities

After ice-skating, music was one of the first entertainments provided by the Minneapolis Board of Park Commissioners. A bandstand was erected in Central (Loring) Park in the 1880s, the first structure ever constructed by the park board. Summer concerts in Minneapolis parks really took off, however, in the early 1890s when the Street Railway Company scheduled musical entertainment at the pavilion it had built in conjunction with the park board on the north shore of Lake Harriet. For the next 90 years there was always some form of free music offered in Minneapolis parks in the summer—from concerts at Lake Harriet and Minnehaha Falls to community sings at Folwell, Logan, Powderhorn and many other parks.



The revered tradition of free concerts by professional musicians was in danger of ending in the summer of 1981, however, when the park board announced that with dramatic cuts in state aid, it could no longer afford to underwrite the full cost of concerts by the Minneapolis Pops Orchestra.

Led by foundation director Dick McChesney, People for Parks began a fundraising drive that kept the Minneapolis Pops playing outdoor summer concerts then and for many years after. For twenty-one years, People for Parks raised money to fund Pops concerts not only at Lake Harriet, but in other parks too. People for Parks raised upwards of \$800,000 to keep the Pops playing over those years until the Pops established its own fundraising organization in 2002. Without the involvement of People for Parks it is hard to imagine that Pops concerts would have continued uninterrupted for that time. And it is hard for many residents of the city and its suburbs to imagine summers in Minneapolis without those concerts.

The central role that People for Parks played raising money for summer concerts led to the organization's most visible fundraising effort ever in the mid-1980s. For decades, people had been pressing for a new band shell at Lake Harriet. They had good reason. The little band shell beside the lake had been built as a temporary shelter in 1926 after a larger pavilion was destroyed by a tornado.

People for Parks didn't build the new band shell, but it did add immeasurably to the usefulness and beauty of the striking new band shell after it was completed in 1986. Consider this: People for Parks raised money for the benches that seat 900 people, the permeable pavers on which the benches now sit, the sound system wiring that transmits



music to the people sitting on the benches. To top off its contributions, People for Parks has provided funds for the continued maintenance of the facility. The band shell is a favorite of photographers and visitors, and beloved by residents. The iconic structure's utility and beauty owe a great deal to People for Parks.

The pivotal role of People for Parks in keeping the music playing at Lake Harriet to huge and happy crowds has led some people to the mistaken conclusion that People for Parks is primarily a Lake Harriet organization. Not true. Another one of People for Parks' important contributions to the city is a performing space on wheels. Attend almost any neighborhood park festival and there will be a stage from which speakers speak, musicians play, dancers dance and local celebrities do what they do. It is a portable stage called the Showmobile and it was purchased for the parks at a cost of \$50,000 by People for Parks. Major donors—including General Mills, Lund's and Riverplace—joined with hundreds of individual contributors to purchase the Showmobile.



An Ill Wind Blows Some Good: Horticulture

Another tornado, following a similar path to the one that destroyed the pavilion in 1925, provided an opportunity for People for Parks to make an important contribution to the park system beyond music and recreation—and opened new vistas in civic contribution and participation.

During the summer of 1981 a storm blew down many trees in Lyndale Park north of the Rose Garden. In the process of cleaning up the debris, workers uncovered the remnants of a rock garden that was built there in 1929. The garden had been abandoned sometime in the 1940s after the retirement of park horticulturist Louis Boeglin who had created the garden. The park horticulturist at the



time of the discovery, Mary Lerman, began to investigate the remnants and she was joined by several residents who lived nearby. One of them, Frances Reid, donated \$5,000 through People for Parks to begin the restoration of the Rock Garden. Over many years the Rock Garden was revitalized with donations of money and time from People for Parks. In the process the garden was also renamed: it is now the Peace Garden and has become one of the treasured gardens in the Minneapolis park system.

Another People for Parks project, also led by Lerman, was the planting of daffodils in dozens of park locations throughout the city. Lerman took the suggestion of a donation of white flowers as a memorial and converted it into a program that planted more than 100,000 daffodils in ten years. The planting program began on Minnehaha Parkway and spread to parkways and parks in every part of the city. The planting was done by People for Parks volunteers under park board supervision. People for Parks even created a Daffodil Dash, a 5K fundraising run that coincided with daffodil planting each year.



These were only the beginning of horticulture programs sponsored by People for Parks under the direction of Mary Lerman. She created and directed many of the programs funded by People for Parks over more than 20 years.

- Decorative trees, including crabapple trees, were planted throughout the city, many as memorials.

- The Tamarack Bog in Theodore Wirth Park was preserved with the removal of buckthorn and invasive species and the installation of a floating walkway. That effort was funded partly through a legislative appropriation secured for People for Parks, and much of the volunteer work was done by members of People for Parks. The result is one of the most charming locations in all of the Minneapolis park system.
- Minnehaha Prairie and Minnehaha Wildflower Garden, which were created in the 1990s, were also made possible by funds and volunteers from People for Parks.

The work of keeping our parks beautiful, even as definitions of urban park beauty have changed, has been aided greatly by the contributions of time and money through People for Parks. Among the largest gifts have been donations of \$50,000 from the Edward Bazinet Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation for landscaping around Lake of the Isles and \$75,000 from the estate of Carl Remick for planting trees. These gifts are in the proud tradition established by one of the early benefactors of Minneapolis parks, Charles Loring, who donated the shelter in Loring Park and the original trees planted along Victory Memorial Drive, as well as a \$50,000 fund to maintain them.

These are a sampling of the horticulture programs supported by People for Parks. In each case a need was identified, dollars were raised and volunteers went to work. People for Parks has supported with volunteer time and money many Arbor Day tree plantings, as well as Earth Day watershed cleanups that began in 1995. In some years those cleanups have resulted in more than 7 tons of garbage being removed from parks. Through these programs, People for Parks has demonstrated an ability to connect not only people's dollars, but their time and energy, with efforts to improve parks.



Back to Work: Renewed Commitment

For a brief time in the early 2000s, People for Parks was less active in the park system. During that time, the park board created a new Minneapolis Parks Foundation to solicit large-scale support from major donors. Beginning in 2005, however, a new group of people dedicated to improving our parks resuscitated People for Parks and put people back into action for the benefit of our park system. While the new Minneapolis Parks Foundation focuses on legacy fundraising for major development projects, People for Parks remains a grass roots organization of park users that meets needs within the park system identified by park board staff and concerned citizens.

Since a revitalized People for Parks became an active force in Minneapolis parks again five years ago, it has contributed nearly \$150,000 to park projects. In the tradition of People for Parks, those contributions have supported many recreation, horticulture and music programs.

- More than \$20,000 has gone for new trees along Victory Memorial Parkway and in Jordan Park. In addition, the forestry department of the park board has a new air spade, and new “weed wrenches” for pulling buckthorn and other invasive plants were purchased for the Audubon Society.
- A grant of \$7,500 was made to Support the Courts, a non-profit, which has rebuilt tennis courts at Kenwood, Pershing, Webber, Powderhorn and Lake Hiawatha parks. People for Parks also donated \$2,900 to install outdoor chess tables at Logan Park in conjunction with the Logan Neighborhood Council.
- People for Parks has continued to make major contributions to the facilities at the Lake Harriet band shell, providing new permeable pavers for the seating area, new wiring for the band shell and contributing toward the construction of a picnic shelter beside the refectory. In 2010 People for Parks even contributed once again to its old friend and collaborator, the Minnesota Pops Orchestra, to keep those wonderful free concerts on the parks’ summer schedule.

We have cited some of the donations made to People for Parks in this brief summary of our work only to illustrate the type of support our parks have known from individuals, businesses and foundations. This list is by no means comprehensive; we have mentioned only a tiny fraction of our supporters to suggest the depth of support for our parks—which People for Parks has made possible.

Many gifts to Minneapolis parks through People for Parks have come without solicitation—from John Morgan offering a check of \$9,000 at a Pops concert in 1999 when he heard that concerts might have to be cancelled, to many people sending a check for \$30 or \$50 to us when they can afford it.



In Conclusion:

People for Parks will not build the next great park in Minneapolis. But we will make some of the great parks we already have a little more useful, a little more attractive, a little more of what makes them so important to our lives.

People for Parks is run by a group of people who love their parks and is open to anyone who has time and energy to contribute. It is funded by people who love their parks enough to donate what money they can when they can. And it's advised by people who love parks so much they've made parks their career and work for the park board.

People. For Parks. Meeting needs as they arise. Helping where they can. For more than three decades. Nearly \$2 million. Allowing citizens the opportunity to provide stewardship for their parks.

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