



True Requirements in the Maintenance of a Sustainable Park

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As we begin 2011 and the next decade, we reflect back on an article we wrote about Sustainable Park Design a few years ago. At that time, we looked at issues in park design and development; focusing primarily on material selection choices, limiting toxic maintenance practices, and promoting better water management. We have now had the opportunity to explore these values and program them into several Parks and Recreation projects. As the design profession continues to advance and sell “Sustainable Design”, we need to re-evaluate the realities of the *green or sustainable movement*.

Parks and Park Districts are focused on providing better environments for their patrons. With all this focus on “*green, sustainable, eco-friendly*”, what is really achievable, what is believable? We have looked for cost effective alternatives for the over used polyvinyl chloride (PVC) in play equipment. However, the viable alternatives that are either competitive in cost or located near the Midwest are simply not available or being considered by all parties. At the recent 2010 ASLA Annual meeting, many playground displays continued to promote their plastic based new products. The market will not actually change until rules are made or the parks and recreation community demands it. If they can now make a tubeless roll of toilet paper surely we can make better, safer play equipment materials that are competitive in the market.

We have also looked at park design trying to provide better open space and energy efficient use of mechanical systems. Technology is continuing to change and new products are becoming available at cost competitive scales. LED lighting is making tremendous strides each year, but we have not yet solved the cost issues associated with solar battery packs for site lighting. While there are great expectations for what could be, solar packs are good demonstrational projects, but not financially viable on a large scale. We are looking forward to this technology in the very near future and the way we light our parks.

Another hurdle we continue to battle is the anticipation of maintenance. What is really required when it comes to maintaining a sustainable park and the understanding or commitment to be made? It is true-there can be real dollar savings when committing to sustainability. Making that commitment has been challenging for some groups, the root of it basically boils down to the statement we often hear, “That is not how we have done it.” There needs to be a vested change from the bottom to the top. Staff needs the support, education and the means to perform sustainable maintenance.

One area that has been relatively effective and easily implemented is the area of water management and improved water quality. Most county requirements stipulate best

management practices in stormwater programs. Providing this in parks is relatively simple. One trend we need to surpass is simply putting these best management practices in designs to garner a few points in a grant or for an easy educational piece. While these are good reasons to use them, we need to fully implement these practices as a means of supporting a healthy ecosystem. These green practices need to be part of the whole system.

While the design of sustainable parks continues to be a hot trend, we need to focus our efforts on what elements of sustainability are truly making an impact. Designs need to be focused on promoting the following:

- Preparing designs that maintain or repair the health and structure of the sites soils,
- Selecting long lasting durable equipment that is manufactured with responsible processes,
- Selecting equipment and materials that do not require long distance shipping, thus minimizing the embedded energy impacts.

When we develop parks and open space we need to ensure the use of the right plant in the right place. This means selecting plants suited for the actual conditions that will be found on site. Whether these conditions are limited growing soils or sites subject to high traffic and compaction. Selecting plants just because they are native and then forcing them into non-native environments will not always result in long-lasting sustainable landscapes.

After evaluating the implementation of sustainability, it is important to note that we have progressed in a positive direction. However, much is still to be learned in the areas of: educational awareness and maintenance, product availability, cost analysis and standard rules and regulations for the future of our environments. With the additional research and experience gained each year, as well as the forward march of technology, we look back at the recent decade as a great time of progress. The next decade should be no different as our knowledge base can only increase while our park designs strive to meet the demands of sustainably and our client's needs desires and budgets.