

Lincoln Park's little patch of green deserves attention

Open space means a lot in urban environments, and this area's no different.

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Perhaps because much of their surroundings are encased in man-made structures made of brick, wood, stone, steel or other materials, while the avenues that connect them are paved over, city dwellers love their parks.

Portlanders are certainly included in that group, and Payson Park, Eastern Prom, Deering Oaks and much of Evergreen Cemetery rank high on the tree-and-greensward scale with local residents.

And then there's Lincoln Park.

The city's oldest park, Lincoln was established as a 2-acre firebreak in 1868 after the Great Fire of 1866 destroyed most of the peninsula.

In its early days, Lincoln was a neighborhood park for Munjoy Hill and the rest of the East End, where closely packed housing units drew immigrants by the thousands. The park's cooling fountain and open space attracted children and adults alike, and the park hosted picnics, kids in bathing suits and pickup sports contests all summer long.

But in the wake of the anti-blight campaign of the 1960s, the park had a 100-foot-wide strip trimmed off its eastern edge to accommodate Franklin Arterial, a four-lane slash that today might never be built.

While it does speed traffic from the waterfront to I-295 and Marginal Way, it separated the East End from the park and downtown almost as efficiently as a wall would have done.

Today, the truncated park hosts office workers on their lunch hours and the occasional picnicker, sunbather or Frisbee thrower. So the city's Franklin Arterial Study Group is seeking to improve access and either expand the park or bring more people to its edges, or both. Those ideas deserve City Hall's backing.

Grass and trees are rare enough in cities that restoring them when they are sacrificed to "progress" is a vital form of real progress all by itself.

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