

## Panel's aim: 'Bring life back' to Lincoln Park

A committee wants to change public perceptions about Portland's oldest park.

By TOM BELL, Staff Writer

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Tim Greenway/Staff Photographer  
The decline of Lincoln Park began when the city started razing buildings to make way for the Franklin Arterial.

PORTLAND — Nan Cumming walks through Lincoln Park every day to reach her downtown office from her Munjoy Hill home. She said the park can be so desolate that some people avoid it, even in daylight.

"There is a sort of feeling of danger in the park as it is now," she said.

Drawing on urban design concepts, a city committee wants to change people's perception about the park.

The Franklin Arterial Study Group believes it can make the park feel more welcoming by encouraging development around it and possibly redrawing its boundaries. The group is finalizing its plans and hopes to submit its recommendations for public comment in September.

Lincoln is the city's oldest park, established as a firebreak in 1868 in the wake of the Great Fire of 1866. Opponents denounced the \$83,000 price tag as a "wicked extravagance," but proponents successfully argued that a 2-acre green space could stop a fire from spreading to East End neighborhoods.



1954 Press Herald file  
Children play on the fountain in Portland's Franklin Park in June 1954.

For a century, the park was a popular destination for people who lived in the densely populated neighborhoods nearby. On hot summer days, children flocked to the park to cool off in the tumbling water of its large fountain.

The park was so busy that in 1949, the city manager banned children from playing baseball there, although he permitted softball. The city that year also installed swings and picnic tables.

Lincoln Park's decline began in the late 1960s, when the city began demolishing homes and apartment buildings to remove "urban blight" and make room for the new "crosstown expressway" called Franklin Arterial.

The arterial roughly follows the path of a former two-lane road called Franklin Street. City planners, however, made one exception: They curved the road around the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and adjacent Guild Hall. Saving those buildings forced the city to remove part of Lincoln Park.



About 100 feet of the eastern end of the park was carved off to create the right-of-way. Newspapers in 1968 ran photographs of city workers cutting down towering elm trees. Children played on the felled trees

before workers removed them.

Today, the park is bordered by the Cumberland County court complex, the Central Station firehouse, Franklin Arterial and the Top of the Port parking lot.

The park has lost its connection with the urban fabric, said Markos Miller, co-chair of the Franklin Arterial Study Group.

"Franklin Arterial is a no man's land, and Lincoln Park is on the edge of the no man's land," he said.

The study group, made up of representatives from neighborhoods, businesses and the Maine Department of Transportation, wants to redesign Franklin Arterial to create a more walkable and appealing urban landscape.

The committee is considering a number of ideas, including placing the road's lanes closer together to open up land for development. It's also looking at ways to reconnect streets that the arterial had divided and create more places for people to cross.

Although the group is focused on Franklin Arterial, it can use urban design principles to foster improvements in nearby neighborhoods, said Mitchell Razor, a planning consultant working with the committee.

"When they put in the arterial and chopped off the park and knocked down all those buildings, it completely

changed the fabric of that neighborhood," Rasor said. "And now we are looking at doing that in reverse."

One option is to restore the park to its original size by squeezing the road's lanes closer together and moving the street farther to the east. The other is to keep the park at its current size and fill the newly created space from the road changes with mixed-used development.

The new buildings would front both Lincoln Park and Franklin Arterial.

On the Lincoln Park side, there could be restaurants and coffeehouses with outdoor tables, Miller said. The advantage of this alternative is that the buildings would buffer the park from the four-lane road and draw people to the area.

"It helps enclose the park and create a sense of space," he said.

Cumming, who is the executive director of Portland Trails, said she's a preservationist at heart and thus sees the value of restoring the park to its original dimensions. Still, she'd rather see new development around its edge.

"I think that is what it's going to take to bring life back to the park," she said.

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