

# At city corner, a chance to build the perfect park

For years, planners in Syracuse have talked about the critical importance of the intersection of South Salina and Fayette streets, the place they call the city's "100 percent corner." One thing lacking, for more than 40 years, is a 100 percent park.

"It's never really been successful," said George Curry, distinguished teaching professor emeritus at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry and a founder of Armory Square.

Curry has watched as a multitude of ideas for Perseverance Park — a public space at the heart of the city — were attempted and in some way petered out.

This time, Curry dreams of seeing it turned into "a world-class urban space." He's the design adviser for a jury of planners, artists, developers and educators who'll gather at 5:30 p.m. Monday at the Pike Block, the newly renovated complex at 320 S. Salina St. They'll listen as four competing design teams, selected from dozens of national applicants, offer presentations about their skills and philosophical approach.

The goal is choosing one team to create a distinctive gathering place — a civic "signature," as described by Andrew Maxwell, director of the Syracuse-Onondaga Planning Agency — that would become a statement of pride for residents and a compelling attraction for visitors.

While a design team will formalize the plan, Mayor Stephanie Miner said the core ideas will come from those

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with the most at stake downtown:

Us. Area residents, she said, will be encouraged to submit visions for the park. "We're looking at a variety of ways of getting people's suggestions," said Kate Auwaerter, the city's preservation planner and public art coordinator.

Curry said bringing people to the park as a gathering point is pivotal to restoring the heart of downtown to its traditional vitality — while linking pockets of the district, such as Armory Square and Hanover Square, that are ascending with a wave of residential and commercial growth.

As an example, Miner — who chairs the jury — often mentions "Cloud Gate" in Chicago, a reflective sculpture known informally as "The Bean." It has turned into a well-loved meeting place for those who work downtown and a draw for many visitors to Chicago.

The idea, Miner said, isn't to replicate the concept here. The goal is identifying a vision that she describes as "unique to Syracuse, and of Syracuse, (that) would speak to who we are as a community."

In quieter ways, it's been tried before. The space that holds today's Perseverance Park was created more than 40

years ago, amid preparations for building the Chase Tower. This was during the raze-and-pray downtown cycle of urban renewal, and opening up room for the tower meant leveling the old E.W. Edwards department store.

While the city understood the importance of the open space along South Salina Street, no one was exactly sure what to do with it. According to the Onondaga Historical Association, one answer, in the early 1970s, was a makeshift community ice rink that opened temporarily between mounds of excavated dirt.

A civic group campaigned to build a "Robert F. Kennedy Park" on the spot, with an elaborate fountain. It didn't happen. While the place was often called "Pigeon Park," the old downtown farmers market was there for a while, before it moved to Clinton Square.

Vito Sciscioli, a retired city administrator, said the official name — "Perseverance Park" — was inspired by civic officials who never gave up on the space. In the early 1990s, donors kicked in money to have personalized bricks put in the ground, and designers Paul Friedberg and Jody Pinto mapped out brick pillars and patterns, intended to represent important dates in history in Syracuse.

That meaning was quickly forgotten. The park hosted occasional musical performances, and the graded stoop served primarily as a spot where riders could rest while awaiting a bus, until the main transfer station moved a few blocks to the south. In 2011, the park gained another burst of attention as home base for



George Curry, a landscape architect and adviser; Merike Treier, with the Downtown Committee; Kate Auwaerter, with the Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency; and Mayor Stephanie Miner at Perseverance Park in downtown Syracuse. (Dick Blume / dblume@syracuse.com)

Occupy Syracuse protesters. Miner, Auwaerter and Merike Treier, director of the Downtown Committee, all say one thing was obvious once the bus station moved: The emptied park had what the mayor calls a "desolate" feel, even though it was across the street from millions in new investment at the Pike Block.

Last summer, the Downtown Committee sponsored the "Flowscape" project at the space, putting blue paint on old concrete and brick, simply as a way of saying, something could happen here.

Monday's finalists, chosen from more than two dozen applicants, include the Los Angeles-based Ball-Nogues Studio; the Halvorson Design

Partnership of Boston; and !melk landscape architecture and SCAPE landscape architecture, both of New York.

While one of those teams will be asked to shape a vision for the Salina-Fayette corner, there's one looming question: How to pay for it?

The city is short on resources. Auwaerter said private foundations helped in the search for a designer. It was financed by a \$30,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Central New York, and a \$5,000 grant from the Gifford Foundation.

As for the ultimate project, Miner said the money would probably come from some form of a "a public-private partnership."

In other words, the hope is the whole cost wouldn't fall upon the city.

Curry, who's watched decades worth of ideas come and go, said it's hard to underestimate the importance of the little park. Created almost as an accident amid urban renewal, it is a civic centerpiece whose energy — or lack of it — makes a larger statement on downtown.

"We want a wonderfully exciting place," Curry said, "where people want to be."

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