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Putting out the welcome mat

College students study how to draw out-of-towners to city's 170 parks

September 25, 2003

By Luis Perez
Staff writer

A group of State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry students is taking a look at Syracuse's parks and studying their potential as tourist attractions.

Diane Kuehn, an ESF professor who teaches a class on tourism, has 11 graduate and undergraduates students studying how to attract more out-of-town visitors to city parks.

Many people don't realize Syracuse has more than 150 parks, Kuehn said. Some of them have "phenomenal views," she said.

The city's parks department operates more than 170 parks and green spaces that span almost 1,000 acres. Kuehn is working with officials from the department as well as park associations linked to specific parks.

"I think it's a really fantastic idea," said Glenn Lewis of the city parks department.

Parks Commissioner Pat Driscoll had made it a priority to provide park users with better service and let people know about the many programs offered in city parks, Lewis said.

Kuehn's class also comes at a time when the city, college officials and

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the Onondaga Park Association are putting together a plan to build a botanical garden and arboretum in Onondaga Park, on the southwest side.

Marketing will be a key piece for that project to be successful, Lewis said.

In past years, Kuehn's classes developed tourism plans for the Black River in Watertown and a scenic seaway trail along Lake Ontario.

The students look at the potential to attract visitors by studying the facilities, marketing and promotions, education efforts and programs, she said.

Students have visited many of the city parks both as a class and individually so far. On Sunday, city officials plan to lead the class on a tour of Burnet, Wadsworth, Elmwood, Onondaga, Kirk and other parks.

Aside from the tour, the parks department is providing Kuehn's class with programming information and data about the facilities and infrastructure, Lewis said.

Park association officials are also excited about Kuehn's project.

"I've always advocated that our city parks needed more publicity," said Lee Gechas, who leads Canopy, a coalition of park organizations. "It just makes sense. Good parks attracts people to cities."

And in that sense, Kuehn's work can be seen as economic development, Gechas said.

From nature areas to historic parks to athletic fields, "we have just a wonderful variety of different kinds of parks," he said.

Gechas hopes the Kuehn's class can come up with a plan to prod more money toward city parks.

"I hope that the process will lead to the realization that we have wonderful parks, but they can do better," Gechas said about the city's parks department. "With more money, they can do better."

So far, Kuehn has observed the many city residents use the parks, she said. So she sees an opportunity to let others know more about city parks by promoting them, Kuehn said.

City and park association officials will provide input into the student's plan. And at the end of the semester, the class may do a community presentation to unveil its plan.

"We feel this a project you have to start at the community level and work your way up from there," Kuehn said.

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