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ESF report says city should promote parks

Students recommend publishing guidebooks. Syracuse will seek slogan.

April 12, 2004

By **Mark Weiner**
Staff writer

The future of tourism in Syracuse is about to become greener, thanks to a new plan to promote the city's parks and green areas as an attraction for visitors.

A group of 11 tourism-planning students at the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry issued a draft report of its plan in March. City officials say the plan contains some great ideas.

"It's pretty good," said Parks Commissioner Pat Driscoll. "We're always looking to market our parks facilities."

Among other things, the report recommends producing a series of guidebooks for city parks and green spaces. The guides would offer visitors a diverse array including hiking and biking trails and places best suited for viewing birds and plants.

"Each park is unique in its own right," Driscoll said. "For instance, Elmwood Park has a number of trails and a trout stream going through it. And then a place like Sunnycrest Park is probably one of our better recreational facilities."

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Diane Kuehn, an ESF professor who teaches the tourism planning class, said many people are not aware Syracuse has 172 parks covering 896 acres within the city limits. The total does not include the new Syracuse Inner Harbor development or land around city reservoirs and cemeteries.

Kuehn said it made sense to produce a park tourism plan for the college's hometown. Her classes have already developed similar plans for the Black River in Watertown and for a seaway trail along Lake Ontario.

"I thought it would be a great idea to do that throughout the whole city of Syracuse," Kuehn said. "Everyone seemed to be very excited about it."

She said the class began with a single premise.

"We were basically told by many individuals throughout the city that visitation was low in the parks," Kuehn said. "As we looked at the details, we saw visitation wasn't as high as it could be."

As part of their study, the students found that most city parks are connected in large ways to the neighborhoods around them. So students recommended that parks try to host a series of neighborhood festivals each year.

"I think it's an asset for Syracuse as a place to live," Kuehn said. "When you think about it, most of the neighborhoods in Syracuse have a park in close proximity to it. That's a phenomenal resource."

She added, "It's not just a matter of the parks themselves attracting people. It's what's going on there that will attract people. We could have local festivals in those parks."

At least one park and its neighbors are already working with other professors and students at the college to attract visitors. The Onondaga Park Association has collaborated with the city and ESF on plans for a botanical garden and arboretum in Onondaga Park on the city's southwest side.

Kuehn said her students also advised promoting the historic landscapes of Onondaga Park and nearby Elmwood Park.

"These parks have so much potential, it's incredible," she said. "So many things that could be done to increase visitation are fairly simple. Maybe we need to let people who come here for conventions know that we have these beautiful parks."

Kuehn said the tourism plan will be shared with those who promote conventions and tourism in Central New York. The plan suggests including information about the parks in promotional literature placed in local hotel rooms.

Kuehn said the guidebooks could be developed by future classes. The report suggested guidebooks on the best places for scenic views, trails and walkways; nature study focusing on wildlife and plant life; historical resources, such as the old stone bridges in Elmwood Park; and tours of city neighborhoods and historic districts.

The students also suggested establishing a park steward system using student volunteers. The volunteers would be stationed at selected parks to offer free information and educational talks to visitors.

The draft report was sent for review to various groups with an interest in

city parks and green areas. Suggestions will be taken and incorporated into a final plan, due to be turned over to the city in June or July, Kuehn said.

"From there, it's up to the people in Syracuse," she said.

Driscoll, the parks commissioner, said the city has already acted on some suggestions, such as improving park maintenance and replacing old metal railings at Lincoln Park and Westminster Park.

Driscoll said he wants to immediately follow through on one of the report's suggestions.

"One of the neatest things they talked about is holding a marketing slogan contest for our parks," he said. "I think that's one of the things we're going to do right away."

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