Greenways Internship

**BACKGROUND ON GREENWAYS**

Greenways can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the white middle-class sought an escape from the increasingly industrialized and crowded city. During that time, the natural beauty of parks came to be associated with the improvement of cities and their citizens. Today, urban parks and greenways serve an important role in promoting the health of the city system and its inhabitants. They provide a realm of tranquility and calm amidst the busy city landscape. They provide valuable space for recreation and exercise. As the climate heats up, greenspaces and greenways also help mitigate the Urban Heat Island effect. As the urban landscape becomes again denser with the revival of city living, greenways have become more popular, in part because they are relatively easy to build on undeveloped or abandoned lots. They can be easily made by retrofitting abandoned roads, railroads, and other large urban system structures. In the case of Columbia’s greenways, this has been done by retrofitting our canals. This has the added advantage of usually being intrinsically connected to existing transportation systems, making them easily accessible to the city and its population.

**BACKGROUND ON THE GREENWAYS OFFICE**

The Columbia Greenways office is within the jurisdiction of the City of Columbia and serves six parks: Riverfront, Saluda Riverwalk, Granby, Page Ellington, Southeast, and the Vista Greenway. The most popular of these are Saluda and Three Rivers, which were built on the old Columbia Canals. These canals were the original waterworks for the city. The Greenways office maintains the parks and works towards their continual improvement. Employees of the Greenways Office do everything within the parks, from cleaning the parks to representing them at city hall meetings. The Greenways Parks follow several park plans from throughout Columbia’s history, including the 1905 Greenbelt Proposal from the Improvement of Columbia Report by the Landscape Architecture Firm, Kelsey & Guild and the in-development Palmetto Trail.

**RESPONSIBILITIES**

My goal for this internship was to gain insights into how the park is used, by whom it is used, and how it can be improved. Essentially, I wanted to discover what capacities for improvement lay in Columbia’s Greenways Parks system. I began by reading about greenways, their historical importance, and how they’re used. I was also able to find specific information on Columbia’s greenways with the help of my supervisor through a copy of a 1909 comprehensive report of suggestions for improving the landscape design of Columbia. I then developed a survey to explore who uses the greenways, and how they use them. Using a report on comprehensive greenways survey created by the state of New York for guidance, I designed a survey specific to the considerations of Columbia’s Greenways. I then created a flyer with a QR code linked to the survey. We printed these, and then I passed the flyers out at the parks. Using the survey, I provided a report to my supervisor on my findings and suggestions.

**SURVEY DATA**

I created a survey short enough to be completed in five minutes. The survey required people to use a QR code printed on a flyer. I came up with ten questions in three key categories, including demographics, park use, and opportunities for park improvements. My first priority was to identify populations being underserved by the parks, so I focused demographic questions on race, ethnicity, age, and zip code. In terms of park use, I asked, “How long did you or do you intend to visit the park today?” and, “Which of the following activities do you rate the most important?” Lastly, to gauge opinions on potential improvements, I asked if a café and food trucks might enhance the visitor experience. I also asked if visitors would accept a small park entry fee to fund improvements.

Response rates were unfortunately very low. Of the original 100 flyers printed, I was able to hand out 45. Of these 45, the survey only received 8 responses in total, giving it a response rate of 18%. One problem might have been the method of using a QR code. While it was intended to make the survey more accessible, it also meant that respondents could take the flyer home and ignore it. The sample size is far too small to get an accurate look at the parks’ visitors, but it does provide some preliminary information on people’s opinions and thoughts that can be explored further using a different survey method.

For the 8 respondents, the average amount of time spent at the parks is 1.5 hours. They reported that the most important aspect of the parks is the ability to be away from cars in a scenic & clean environment. Six out of the eight felt that a food truck would improve their visit, and three out of eight felt that a café and more entry points would be beneficial. Most, however, indicated that they would not be willing to pay an entry fee.

**References**