

UGA Students Meet, Discuss Fate of Mims Park

May 20, 2016 | Jennifer Parrilli

Earlier this week, ecology students from the University of Georgia met with Curt Soper, Director of the Georgia chapter of the Trust for Public Land (TPL), in Mims Park. The group discussed plans and potential impacts of the city's proposed \$10-15 million renovation of the land. Mims Park is located in the Vine City neighborhood of Atlanta, GA which was the site of a devastating flood in 2002 ([Creative Loafing](#), 2015). While several homes previously existed within the park's 16-mile area, they were left uninhabitable by the flood and were torn down by the city. A few of the houses bordering the park area still have not recovered.



An abandoned home bordering Mims Park, Atlanta, GA

Mims Park represents the first Atlanta project for TPL, but the non-profit has a good track record, having completed over 5,000 projects across the United States ([TPL](#), 2016).

Although the City of Atlanta will own the park, funds for its design and construction will come primarily from private donation. A lead donation of \$2.5 million has already been secured, and the organization is awaiting matching gifts. Current plans include a water retention feature to help alleviate Proctor Creek flooding, pavilions, walking trails, and monuments to important historical figures. The neighborhood has a history of crime and local investment in the park could help create a safer place for residents to gather. Sunset Avenue is only a few blocks away, and while that street is the location of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's former

home, much of the planning of the civil rights movement took place right where the group from UGA stood. This was one factor involved in the identification of the area for revitalization.

A crucial requirement of the proposed plan is that it include a mechanism for public input. When asked, Mr. Soper indicated that several tents had been set up in the area to gather opinions from the local residents. However, the group had the unexpected chance to hear directly from one of Vine City's locals, when he joined the students who were raising their hands to ask questions. Mr. JR Murphy - self-described urban farmer and beekeeper - took the opportunity to voice some of his concerns and learn more about the Mims Park project.

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Mr. Murphy asked what the probability of including an agricultural community food source in Mims Park might be. He recounted the story of his request that nearby churches allow planting of fruit trees on their property. The response he received was reportedly unfavorable, owing to the churches' high preference for satisfying parking demands. Could fruit trees be included in Mims Park plans? It is uncertain. When one student inquired earlier in the discussion about incorporating community gardens, Mr. Soper had responded that because of soil contamination, it was likely unsafe to eat any foods grown in the park (which later led to some speculation among the students as to whether one of the park tree's blackberries were safe to eat). However, Mr. Soper's response to Mr. Murphy's question was somewhat different, indicating that some incorporation of local agriculture could be considered.

Soil contamination is indeed a big concern for TPL and the city. Before any of the proposed renovations to the park can be done, lead contamination must be cleaned up ([Saporta Report, 2015](#)). Another question that came from the group of UGA students was what was to be done with the contaminated soil once it was removed from the park. Mr. Soper responded that the contaminant would be secured in a landfill equipped to contain toxic materials. The level of current danger lead contamination posed to the neighborhood was not addressed during the UGA-TPL meeting.

While Soper spoke enthusiastically about the potential for flood relief and neighborhood revitalization, the bad soil in Mims Park isn't the only serious concern facing the project. When another neighborhood in Atlanta was renovated – Fourth Ward Park – the new development attracted millennials and drove up property values. Some who lived in the park previously could no longer afford to keep their homes. When students asked about the probability of similar gentrification affecting Mims Park, Mr. Soper responded by saying that the plan would, “need to have a mechanism so people aren't bought out of their homes.” Indeed, the city of Atlanta does plan to put in place methods of keeping a situation like Fourth Ward Park from happening, such as offering mortgage loan forgiveness and implementing affordable housing quotas ([WABE 90.1, 2016](#)).

Another issue that will affect the park is the Proctor Creek watershed. Upstream from Vine City sits the new Atlanta Falcons stadium. The stadium itself, as well as the related parking areas, represent a significantly large amount of impervious ground cover. This means that rainwater falling on the asphalt and concrete at the stadium will run off into the watershed instead of soaking into the ground and being filtered naturally. Not only will water be shunted downstream, but a host of pollutants will be washed down with it. Tied in with this is the issue of CSOs – or combined sewer overflow systems – which can mean that untreated sewage water mixes with storm drainage.

While the planned renovation of Mims Park garners a lot of enthusiasm among politicians, non-profits, and some residents, it is certainly not without its share of problems. And construction hasn't even begun yet. Perhaps more important than funding, cleanup, and retention ponds is public buy-in. If residents are forced out, don't make use of the park, or don't otherwise see the value of the park as a resource, much money and effort could be wasted. However, the participation of JR Murphy does indicate that Vine City's residents are taking an active role in deciding what the fate of the park will be.