

SUNDAY TELEGRAM

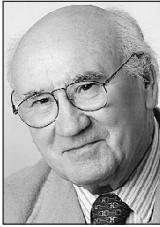
WORCESTER, MASS.

COMMENTARY

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Polishing a city jewel

When Dennis Berkey, president of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, announced that WPI is giving a long-term gift to the city that amounts to about \$9 million in 25 years, he also handed a check for \$50,000 to Paul J. Levenson, an activist extraordinaire, who made a lasting contribution to Worcester by restoring Tuckerman Hall. The donation will be used to improve and enhance another great community asset: Institute Park. The project has all the elements of a worthy community cause - historic connections, natural beauty and practical applications.



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In 1887, Stephen Salisbury III donated 18 acres of his farmland to serve as a public park, as well as an adjunct to the campus of the Worcester Free Institute of Industrial Science, known today as WPI, and provided for its upkeep until his death in 1905.

With once-pristine Salisbury Pond as its centerpiece, the park was an urban oasis, providing respite and recreation. In 1912, the park grew in size to 25 acres when the Worcester Art Museum donated a piece of land along Grove Street, most of which was given away in 1964 to be the site of the Fire Department headquarters.

Decades of neglect have taken their toll. Industrial pollution and sediment from street surface runoff has ruined the pond, choking it with weeds. Old structures and walks fell into disrepair.

"This park could be much better than it is," Mr. Levenson told me during a recent interview. "It could be a jewel, a signature park and a destination for residents and visitors alike."

He assembled a group of dedicated individuals, several of them from neighboring organizations, and the Friends of Institute Park was incorporated in 2005. A master plan by the Boston architectural firm Shepley Bulfinch was developed over the course of four years and approved by the City Council. A series of seven public hearings was held to solicit input. The result is a blueprint remarkable both for its scope and clarity.

The area is to be developed into three program zones - urban park, wetland sanctuary and recreational park - to feature spectacular nature views, well-lit walking paths, picnic and concession pavilions, a water garden, boat launch, relocated tennis courts, and a new gazebo resembling a small Greek amphitheater.

One of the highlights will be a new \$2 million covered concert shell, relocated close to Humboldt Street, with backstage facilities and state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems. A new front entrance on Salisbury Street will be marked by the two Tremont columns Mr. Salisbury rescued from a demolished Boston hotel.

"A key component of the plan is dredging Salisbury

Pond, which is the dominant feature of the park," Mr. Levenson said. The work is expected to be done by the Army Corps of Engineers at the cost of another \$2 million. Industrial pollution has ceased, but the pond has large amounts of sediment built up. To control this, the city has installed two of the five particle separators necessary to protect water quality. Earlier this spring, inmates from the county jail cleared overgrown trees and shrubs from the perimeter of the pond.

There have been earlier attempts to rehabilitate the pond. In the early 1970s, WPI students started the process by finding the sources of pollution, and the Salisbury Pond Task Force was created. The Telegram & Gazette waged an extensive editorial campaign to restore the park. A group of WPI students joined the effort again in 1973, providing a detailed analysis of the problems and making recommendations for improvement.

The following year, the city enlisted the help of the Navy to dredge the pond. The Seabees removed 5,000 cubic yards of sediment, but about 15,000 cubic yards of the stuff remained. Soon the pond reverted back to its polluted condition.

Mr. Levenson pledges it will be different this time. To him, restoring Institute Park is like nursing an ailing relative back to health. His parents, Harry and Madelyn Levenson, founded a free summer concert series in 1951, performed in the park by the Central Massachusetts Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Harry Levenson. Mrs. Levenson, 85, is still active in organizing the popular series that has run through 59 consecutive seasons. "I grew up in this park," Paul told me. "It feels like a second home to me."

As executive director of the Friends of Institute Park, he is engaged in raising private and public funds to implement the master plan he says should cost about \$10 million, far below earlier estimates. Of the nearly \$300,000 WPI is expected to give the city each year, between \$70,000 and \$100,000 is earmarked over the course of 15 years to repay the \$1 million the city is borrowing to improve the park. U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern is seeking a \$500,000 federal grant. Other contributions should come from naming rights, corporate and individual gifts.

Meanwhile, to attract people to the park, the Friends, in collaboration with Mass Audubon, have organized winter snowshoeing and tracking, bird watching and nature walks in the spring, and, more recently, canoeing. "I'm passionate about this project and will stay with it until it is done. I'm going to make it succeed," Mr. Levenson insisted.

Coming from anybody else, such a statement would sound a bit presumptuous. But Paul Levenson's record of accomplishment makes it believable.

Robert Z. Nemeth's column appears regularly in the Sunday Telegram.