

Landfills Become Landscapes: The American Park Revolution

Dan Treadaway, Associate Editor of *American City & County*

As a great number of landfills are closed, American cities and counties are looking more seriously at converting the space into park and recreation areas.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the Chicago suburb of Evanston, Ill., had a difficult problem: finding badly needed space to locate park and recreation facilities in the densely populated area bordering Lake Michigan. Land values in the city are high, and because of the large population tracts of land big enough to accommodate parks never became available.

To solve this dilemma, Evanston used a resource usually regarded as a liability: the municipal landfills. To date, the city, whose 75,000 residents

reside on nine square miles, has built three parks on top of closed landfills. This practice not only saved the city the cost of acquiring land (which, in Evanston, is not available in any case), but also converted an eyesore into an attractive and functional landscape.

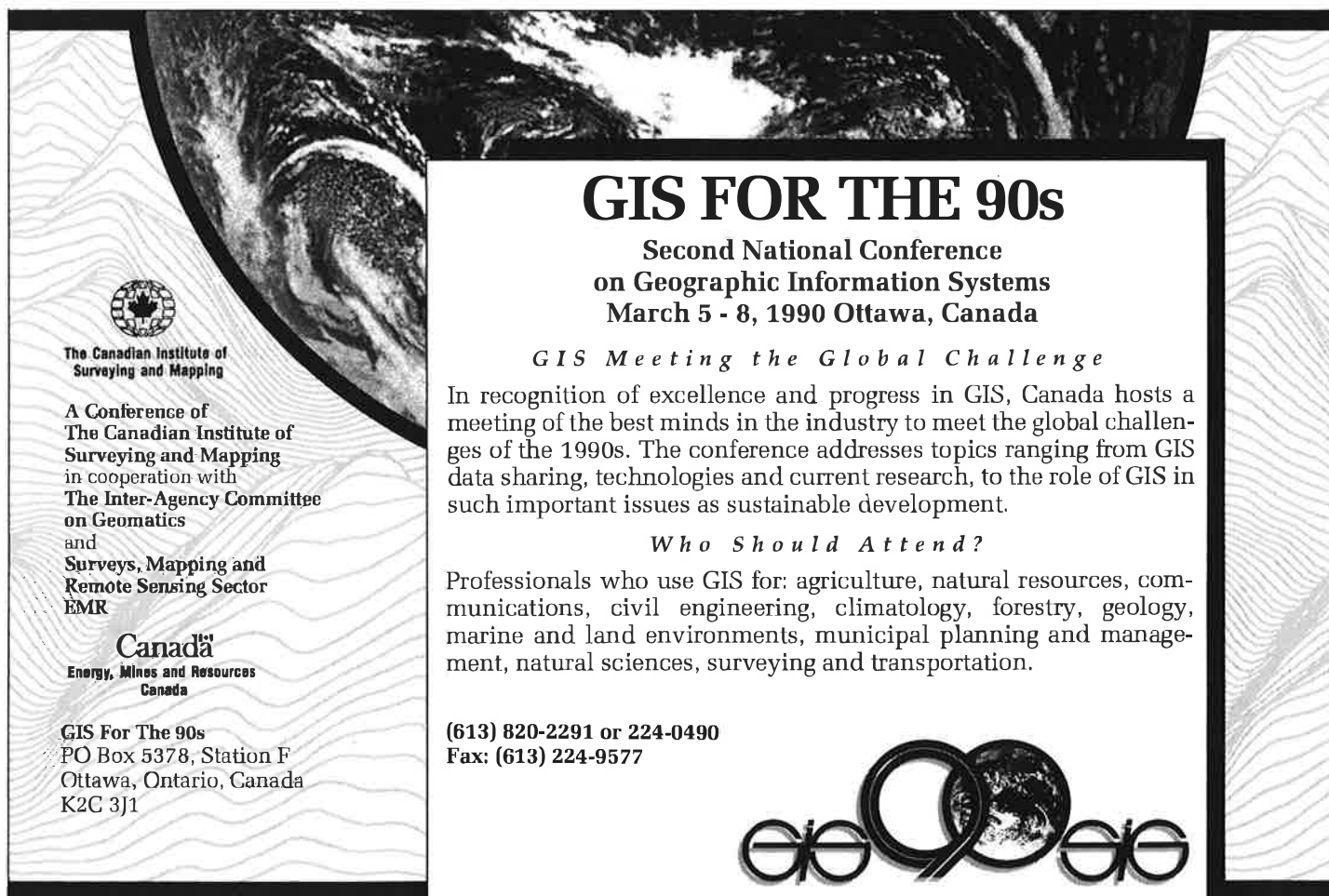
Evanston, however, is not the only municipality that has faced this problem. Cities and counties across the nation are being challenged by a growing demand for parks and recreational facilities, coupled with little or no funding to acquire land for them. Most large wooded areas are located too far from heavily populated areas to be of use to urban residents, yet few urban environments, such as Evanston, have

enough land to build new parks in convenient locations.

This dilemma is being accompanied by another difficult problem for local governments: the closing of a large number of landfills. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that 6,000 landfills will reach their capacity and close by 1992.

While both these situations are causing plenty of headaches for local leaders, they also present an opportunity to devise creative solutions. Converting closed landfills into park and recreational areas is one solution cities and counties have been using at an increasing rate during the past several years.

While local governments have



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been turning landfills into parks for the 15 to 20 years, only in the past few years have a significant number turned to this option. Because the individual states are responsible for issuing landfill permits, federal agencies such as the EPA have no precise data on how many local parks in the United States originally were landfills. However, many parks and recreation and solid waste disposal experts agree that the number has been large enough in recent years to make landfill-to-park conversion a significant trend.

Converting landfills to parks "has become a very common practice," says Lanny Hickman, executive director of the Government Refuse Collection and Disposal Association. "It's one of the features that will help sell a landfill" to nearby residents who might oppose it.

"As a nation, we are producing an ever increasing amount of solid waste, while at the same time, there is a decreasing number of sites available for creation of new parks," says Barry Tindall, director of public policy for the National Recreation and Park Association. "Inasmuch as these are trends, secondary uses, such as conversion to parks, follow as parallel trends. I keep hearing enough references made to landfills being converted to parks that, if it is not a trend, it is certainly a highly popular, technically feasible land use."

Don Wirth, Evanston's director of Parks, Recreation and Forestry, says a 35 acre park in the city is the result of a decision made in the 1960s when the landfill under it was opened. The \$1 million park, built in the late 1970s and the third in Evanston to be converted from a landfill, features small hills for sledding and tobogganing, a soccer field, basketball and tennis courts, a playground, a small shelter with restrooms, and a 28-

space parking lot.

Wirth says a two-foot clay barrier was placed on top of the landfill's garbage to create an impenetrable surface. The park's only shelter also is well ventilated to prevent concentrations of methane gas from forming, a situation that can lead to an explosion.

Cities and counties across the nation are being challenged by a growing demand for parks and recreational facilities.

"It would have been impossible for us to site new parks and acquire the land," says Wirth. "Converting the landfills into parks was the only way we had to create park and recreation areas."

Florida is another area where landfills are becoming parks at a healthy pace. One solid waste management and engineering company alone currently is working on six landfill-to-park projects in four Florida counties. Miami-based Post, Buckley, Schuh & Jernigan also has recently responded to a request for qualifications for providing the same services for six closed landfills in Jacksonville, Fla.

Additionally, the firm is closing a 130-acre landfill in Broward County, Fla. Sam Levin, assistant manager of the company's Solid and

Hazardous Waste Division, says the first phase of the Broward County project includes closing a sanitary landfill, trash landfill and sludge lagoon, which is a Superfund clean-up site.

The second phase of the project includes building a park on the closed site. Landfill closure includes selection of a capping technique designed to minimize infiltration of rainfall, while also being compatible with a park. The design includes a landfill gas collection system with special emphasis on recovery and

sale of methane in the landfill gas. The methane also will be used to generate electricity for the park.

Levin says when the park is completed, it will feature equestrian activities, and nature appreciation and educational activities. Included are areas for picnicking and open recreation; trails for horseback riding,

walking, bicycling, jogging and fitness training; areas for fishing and boating; and scenic overlooks from one of the highest points in South Florida.

While converting landfills to parks is revered for eliminating unsightly landfills and making wise use of space, it also can spur economic growth in a floundering community.

This was the case in Southwest Charlotte, N.C., where the city, along with a local engineering firm, Woolpert Consultants, transformed a municipal landfill into the York Road Renaissance Community Park. The park includes an 18-hole golf course with driving range, putting greens and clubhouse, a 17-court tennis center and clubhouse, five illuminated softball fields and four lighted soccer fields.

Charlotte Parks Superintendent Thomas McDermott says the new park and a new adjacent coliseum are encouraging economic growth in the once stagnant area. McDermott says the new facilities have attracted a number of businesses and caused land values to increase.

Woolpert also is working on a massive landfill-to-park project in Prince George's County, Md. just outside Washington, D.C. The county's former 220-acre sanitary landfill has been closed and trans-

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