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Parks key to attracting young tech workers, study says

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By Tom Barnes, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

After staring into computer screens at the office all day, many of the 20-somethings who work in high-tech fields don't want to go home and stare at the television.

They want to engage in active pursuits such as rock climbing, inline skating, bike riding or Ultimate Frisbee. Or maybe hike a trail or just sit in a park and relax.

To lure such young "knowledge workers" to the New Economy -- and increase Pittsburgh's status as a high-tech haven -- the city needs to restore and improve its parks, Carnegie Mellon University professor Richard Florida and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy say in a new report.

"Restoration of the parks must be made a key element in the region's efforts to attract talent and develop the economy," said Florida, an economic development professor at Carnegie Mellon's Heinz School of Public Policy and Management.

The city should focus on improving Schenley Park, which provides the easiest access for students at Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh, the report states.

"Parks are an important factor when young people who are forming the New Economy decide where they want to live," conservancy President Meg Cheever said. "Schenley Park is considered the most important park to young people, which makes sense since it is closest to the universities that are the hotbed of the New Economy."

Other cities that have had success in attracting high-tech workers in their 20s and 30s, such as New York City, Seattle, Boston, San Francisco and Austin, Texas, have been successful in reviving their park systems, the report says.

Mayor Tom Murphy and the city Parks and Recreation Department have known for the past 10 years that restoration is needed in all of the four large regional parks within the city -- Highland and Frick in the East End and Riverview on the North Side, in addition to Schenley. Together they contain more than 1,700 acres of green space.

City budget constraints and the sheer amount of land at issue have

delayed improvement efforts. The Allegheny Regional Asset District provides some funding each year for the four parks as well as nine large parks in the county, but additional spending is still needed.

A master plan for upgrading the four parks was released in July. It said the parks "have suffered from years of neglect [and] deferred maintenance."

The new report by Florida and the parks conservancy gives additional support for improving the 13 large city and county parks as well as other parks in the Pittsburgh area.

The findings came from three focus groups of young people that were conducted in the spring by Campos Market Research.

One group consisted of college seniors from Pennsylvania; another was college seniors from outside the state; and the third was workers in their 20s who are now employed in local high-tech companies.

The report said parks should offer high-tech workers a diversity, "from quiet, grassy areas for relaxation and benches [to] park cafes, water features and active sports," including running, cycling, tennis, basketball and golf.

Because of the "long hours, fast pace and tight deadlines associated with work in high-technology industries," such workers often don't have "the time, means or inclination to travel long distances," Florida said.

Schenley Park was most frequently noted as their park of choice, according to the report.

One recommendation from the focus groups was a redesign and restoration of the original entrance plaza to Schenley Park, which is now a parking lot on Forbes Avenue between the Carnegie Library and Pitt's Hillman Library. Because the site is between the Carnegie Mellon and Pitt campuses, turning it into a place for relaxation, musical concerts, art displays and outdoor recreation "could link the two universities in a more seamless way and help to revitalize Oakland," the report says.

The recommendation to restore that entrance is similar to one made last year in a design competition for improving Oakland that was sponsored by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

However, the removal of the parking lot, which is heavily used by Pitt students, Carnegie Museum patrons and other visitors to Oakland, caused an outcry, given the shortage of parking that already exists in Oakland.

Other recommendations of the Florida report include:

- Adapt the parks, as much as possible, to outdoor recreation such as mountain biking, rock climbing and inline skating.

- Improve the lake in Panther Hollow. People in the focus groups were shown photographs of the original pond, boating and boathouse in

Schenley Park. "They were extremely enthusiastic about this kind of activity. They wanted the boathouse back," the report said.

- Connect Schenley and Frick parks with bike paths or greenery.
- Improve lighting in the parks so they can be safely used at night.
- Add more music and art in the parks.
- Use additional marketing of what the parks offer, through Web sites, information kiosks, advertising and more and better signs.

Group participants "remarked that the few park events that are organized, such as Schenley's summer outdoor films, are not publicized very well," the report says.



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