

Interview with Perrin Carpenter,
Manager of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Properties at the Rockefeller park
Greenhouse
October 14, 2002, 3:30 PM

CR: With the respect to the maintenance and enhancement to the Cultural Garden, what are the principal challenges confronting your department—the duties and obligations?

PC: I think where the Cultural Gardens are concerned, it is really a unique situation because there is a partnership between the city's parks and maintenance staff, between several divisions within the city that do maintenance in the park and for the Cultural Gardens Federation . The challenge that arises has to do with fostering the partnership relationship. There are certain things that city park staff are responsible for and other things that Cultural Gardens delegates that work in the Gardens are responsible for. And working out what those are, as well as keeping an open line of communication between what each group is doing, can be a challenge at times.

For instance, where a property management situation is concerned, maybe there's a fountain that is clogged, and here it would be the city's responsibility to work on the fountain and clear the drain. And depending on what time of year that happens, the city's plumbers are working on opening the pools for the year and it may be awhile before we can actually get into the Garden and make the repair. So the challenge comes with working with the Cultural Garden Federation and letting them know that it's not that we're not gonna do it, we'll get to it as soon as we're able to. It kinda works both ways: Sometimes the Cultural Gardens groups may have an event going on in the Garden—they might have a planting that's scheduled, and from the city's point of view we would like to see maybe a planting plan ahead of time. [That is], we'd like some time to look over what they're planning to do and here's a group that's planning an event in a week and they want to get this done and it's a matter of us understanding from their point of view that they have some constraints . . . that they're working with too.

CR: It sounds almost as if it has to be a little ad hoc, for example, that whereas there's a certain standard procedure that the city would have to follow, the Garden would have to sometimes accept whatever volunteer would have to show up on a specific Saturday.

PC: I think in that regard it comes down to outlining the responsibilities. So in that situation, if a volunteer shows up and happens to be available on that certain day, there should be certain duties that are the Gardens' responsibility and if they go ahead and do them they're not stepping on any toes, they're not going outside the bounds . . . they're just simply doing what is their responsibility to do anyway. So the challenge more comes about when one group is asking another group to do something or live up to their end of the bargain in some way. We have to communicate.

CR: Is there some kind of broad master plan or an overall guiding document or aspiration with respect to maintenance, upkeep, or enhancements?

PC: There's not one document specific to the Cultural Gardens, but there are a few documents that kinda relate to it that have come from different groups. Holden Parks Trust put together a master plan for Rockefeller Park, which of course includes the Cultural Gardens. That's more of a plan for capital improvement projects—renovation projects that could be done as funding becomes available: prioritized and done in phases. It doesn't refer only to the Cultural Gardens but is more the area in general in the entire park.

CR: And that is money that would come out of the Holden trust?

PC: Right.

CR: Which is still obviously in force, or is it in perpetuity?

PC: The specifics behind it I am not very familiar with. I know that there have been a few phased projects that have gone on. I don't know that there are any that are planned for immediately, so I'm not sure how the funding works for that.

CR: Other plans?

PC: The Cultural Gardens Federation has their own. The Federation has the "Renovation Proposal" from their point of view that outlines kind of the mission for the Federation and points at certain projects that they would like to see be done. So projects that encompass the entire Cultural Garden area, rather than those that are focused on one particular Cultural Garden. So they have put that together in relation to their own renovation proposal that talked about for instance, a lighting project. In the past couple of years they have received funding to put together a design for lighting in the park, which was done, and now they are at the point of trying to receive funding for actually implicating it. They have their own document for improvements in the park that they've worked from.

CR: What organizations or groups would they get those funds from? Is that something they would go to the city for, or is that a private donation thing?

PC: I don't know. I don't think that they would limit themselves as far as seeking funds from anywhere, so they might approach the city, I don't know if it's something that the city is working with; for instance, Holden Parks Trust would be able to assist with it. I've heard them talk about asking University Circle Incorporated—working on some sort of partnership with them or other groups that are just in the area and then possibly partnering with other groups and then from there seeking a grant, and doing that sort of fundraising. So I don't think they would limit themselves in any way, but I don't know which ways would work out better for them.

CR: So it seems that aspirations for both maintenance and enhancement seem to come from a variety of sources, but would it be fair to say that it tends to be more driven by the Federation than by the city, that is, the city is more or less looking to just maintain things, whereas the Federation is going to have their eyes on consistently larger, higher prizes?

PC: I think where general park maintenance is concerned, that is probably the case, the city would be looking more toward maintaining what's there. But I don't think that's necessarily the only thing that the city's looking at. For instance, the division of Research, Planning and Development works on projects that are enhancements to city parks and works on developments of new amenities and parks and various projects along those lines. So they might be involved in looking at the bigger picture of what can be done with the park. As far as individual Gardens go, that I would say is definitely the vision of the Federation or the actual Garden delegates. Enhancements in a particular Cultural Garden, or even development of a particular Cultural Garden, definitely I think would fall toward the Federation .

CR: Is it fair to say that there is some sort of mandate on the part of the city to treat the Gardens as one of a larger group of maintenance or upkeep objectives. In other words, would it approach the upkeep of the Gardens the same as it would other aspects of Rockefeller park or community pools or Gordon Park, or any one of a number of things?

PC: Definitely I would say that that is the case. The staff that works in the park is not assigned exclusively to the park. So where park maintenance stuff is concerned, there's a region that this staff is assigned to, and Rockefeller Park and the Cultural Gardens happen to fall within that region, or within the realm that they take care of. From their perspective, they would be taking care of Rockefeller Park the same way they would take care of the ball park at another park, or the pool at another park—always with the goal of making the park a good place to visit, and looking toward recreation and safety and keeping it neat and clean: having the same emphasis at Rockefeller park that they would at all of the other parks that they take care of.

CR: Do you perceive that there are special needs attached to the Gardens that are perhaps not reflective of other areas, such as Gordon or Edgewater? Is this a “special needs park” from the city's point of view?” In other words, special requirements that are innate to the Gardens that are perhaps not found in other places. For example in Gordon Park its unlikely that a maintenance worker would have to spend three hours trying to scrub paint off of a defaced statue.

PC: Right, but I think that the problem of graffiti in other parks still shows up, just involving maybe a line to a hose, or graffiti on the side of a building.

CR: Okay, so upkeep issues are generic to some degree, in other words the Cultural Gardens wouldn't stand out as a totally unique entity with respect as to how it needs to be approached?

PC: For the most part that's true.

CR: Tell me about budgets and expense-related constraints. I mean, I imagine organizations—public or private—always has this sense “oh, boy, if only we had more money.”

PC: Yeah.

CR: How strong is the “boy if we had more money” feeling in a situation such as this?

PC: Well, it's always there; it's always kind of in the back of your mind that "boy if we had more money we could keep up with just about anything . . . if we had more money we could do more capital improvement, more restoration projects, we could afford those, rather than concentrating on the basics that we concentrate on." So that's always there.

CR: Have the maintenance needs of the Gardens increased in recent years, or prior to your involvement?.

PC: Yeah, my involvement is actually fairly limited, I've been here about two and a half years. I have noticed though since I started working with the city, I have attended the monthly meetings of the Cultural Gardens Federation and I know that I have noticed a definite change in the past couple of years in the level of involvement of the Federations members in that group. And that's kind of shown itself in that there have been many Gardens that have done new plantings and major plantings, and in that regard I would say the need for maintenance has definitely gone up. But it has not necessarily resulted in an increased need for the city to do maintenance. So overall, I think that the needs have gone up, but that's where this partnership between city staff and the Cultural Gardens Federation has come in to play: As they plant more in the Gardens, they're taking on more of a role of upkeep in the Gardens.

CR: Does the fact that visitation levels tends to be low affect how you approach things, or can you simply not let that be a factor? I mean if you were to compare visitation in Edgewater relative to visitation in the Gardens, you can't. But are you simply in a position where you have to ignore relative visitation levels with respect to maintenance?

PC: I think in general, it may not be that we would ignore visitation levels, but that I don't think that they necessarily affect the maintenance in the Gardens. General day-to-day visitation, I think is going up. Definitely what I've heard from my colleagues is that the park is used much more now than it was in previous decades.

CR: So what do you attribute that to?

PC: I think that part of it is definitely the push to clean up the park, or to kind of raise the image of the park, which has been both park's city staff as well as the Cultural Gardens groups. As people see that more work is being done in the park to keep it looking nice, as more is done, for instance, at the south end of Rockefeller Park, there was a project where a playground was built, and a gazebo has been installed. As people see that there are more amenities, and there's a bike path, there's more to do, they'll come and use it. And as more people use it, the impression of its safety—that it's a draw for people—tends to increase.

CR: Just driving through it, I have the sense that it is both used more and that there is a general feeling that it's safer than it was . . . there's just this kind of ambient sense that it's better than it was. Would you concur with that?

PC: That's the sense I get too. I can't verify it . . . I don't know, for instance, if crime levels have changed significantly in the park, I've never tried to look into that, but the sense I get and what I

here from people is that that's the case. That people view it as being a safe place to go, whereas in the past they didn't necessarily think it was.

CR: I'm jumping around a little bit, but is the relationship that the city has with, say, Cultural Gardens Federation as well as say Holden Trust and other bodies that are involved in the Gardens, a good one? Are you happy with how that relationship works both with respect to getting along, and allocations of duties for example?

PC: I would say in general, yes, we're happy with the way that partnership works. The city's definitely happy that we're able to have a park like Rockefeller park that contains these Cultural Gardens, and I think from the city's point of view, we realize that without the Cultural Gardens Federation's involvement, the park wouldn't have all of the plantings, all of the really specific high maintenance areas that it has. So we, from the city's point of view really respect that, that the Cultural Gardens Federation has made those inputs has put that effort into it. I wouldn't say that it's completely without problems or completely without misunderstandings. Like I said it's kind of that balance that needs to be established between what is our responsibility and what is our responsibility as far as maintenance goes. And that's something that, in the past, I think has been done kind of piecemeal: Certain Gardens seem to take a more active role as far as upkeep, and others maybe not as active role. And in those cases, city park staff might come in and do something in one Garden that they weren't doing in another Garden. And now, as I said in the past couple of years, so many Gardens have done major renovations and done quite a bit of planting that we're trying now to come to an agreement between where the responsibilities lie, and we're kind of at a point where we're formalizing that and I think that the need for coming up with a formal agreement between the city and the Cultural Gardens Federation is really a result of all of the work and effort that they've put into it in the last few years.

CR: Does the Federation tend to come to you with specific requests for upkeep or maintenance or enhancement?

PC: Yeah, quite frequently, I get calls usually about if there's a problem, if there's something that needs to be fixed, so they'll call when there's a property management concern, if a fountain is not working properly. The Cultural Gardens Federation, the members are pretty good about making their needs known. So if there's a broken tree branch, a problem with a fountain, if there's graffiti, they'll usually let me know, and whenever we can we'll make the repair that's needed.

CR: To an extent it sounds like a good embodiment of the squeaky wheel theory—that because of the involvement of all of these bodies, there must be a lot of squeaking . . . more than might come from a lot of other entities that you guys oversee. Does that create problems, the need for you guys to treat all the projects that you have somewhat equitably?

PC: I don't necessarily think that it creates a problem. It exists. Definitely the squeaky wheel theory does come in to play and in instances where we are maybe not able to fix something, or not able to fix it all the way. I often hear over and over again that something needs to be repaired, and it's not necessarily that we're not going to do it, that maybe there's another, something else that we're working on that's a higher priority at the time. The other thing I think that happens is

we're trying to formalize the agreement between the city and the Federation so that Federation members will know what the procedure is to get something done. So they'll know what they can expect from the city and the proper channels to go through to bring that about. And since that doesn't really exist, that's in its development that doesn't always happen right now, so at the moment when a need arises, maybe they'll call me, and they'll call my boss, and they'll call urban forestry section, and they'll call property management, and it's a mish-mosh, you know. Maybe they'll hit on the right person that can do it, they're just hoping that if they tell everybody, someone will come and fix the problem. And so in that regard they are being a squeaky wheel and it's just because it's not laid out . . . they don't know who they're supposed to talk to. And so that's one of the things that we are trying to lay out for them.

CR: You just rattled off a nice list of governmental entities or bodies that tend to be involved. Is the list even longer than what you mentioned: Could you just rattle off all the different organizations or departments that tend to have their fingers in this pie?

There's, the Division of Park Maintenance, within that Park Maintenance Staff, the greenhouse staff, the urban forestry staff, all do work in the park. The Division of Property Management, the Division of Water, Cleveland Public Power, somewhat the Division of Research Planning and Development, as far as larger projects and that sort of things. They don't do daily maintenance, but they're involved in the park.

CR: And then outside of the city itself, I've heard you mention the Cultural Gardens Federation, University Circle Inc, the Holden Trust, are there others on top of that?

PC: Boy I'm sure that there are. There's the Glenville Community Development Corporation . . . the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District did a watershed study of Doan Creek, and you know that of course runs right through Rockefeller Park and by many of the Cultural Gardens. So some of their future improvements in sewer district would affect the park. There's a project underway, there's a spring mitigation project that the FAA is implementing in the park, or currently designing in the park that affects Doan Brook that goes right through the Cultural Gardens. So I guess as different projects arise, different organizations are involved, and then as different groups, the Cultural Gardens Federation for instance is there looking for funding for different projects from various groups they would go seek anybody really in the neighborhood that they could partner with. And then beyond that, each of the members of the Federation, each of those groups, they have their own ethnic organizations or different organizations that are behind them, and they reach out from there to, to their own groups.

CR: Do they ever try to work with you directly as opposed to trying to go through the Federation? Do you ever get a call from the Yugoslavs or the Italians, saying, well, we need something done?

PC: Yeah, definitely. Where day to day maintenance goes I get calls from the different groups, but generally it's that each of those groups has a delegate or delegates that represent them in the Cultural Gardens Federation. I can't think of too many instances where I've heard from a member of a Cultural Garden group that's not part of the Cultural Garden Federation. Generally I think they work through them, but I'll get a call from, you know, the delegate from the Italian

Garden, from the Greek Garden, or from, any other of the Gardens, asking about their particular, location.

CR: So the ideal qualification for you job would be able to speak 26 languages?

PC: It would be nice. Luckily for me they all speak English.

CR: So generally speaking, are budgets the biggest issue with respect to upkeep and maintenance, as opposed to say, simple coordination?

PC: I would say they're both involved. And I don't have a very good sense of how the budget affects the park year to year, because like I said, it's the staff that works in the park, works in a lot of parks, so they work in a region. And we try to still do all of the things that need to be done. So I don't have a very good sense of how the budget affects year to year or even decade to decade, how its been implicated in the park, it's just not broken down that way. Coordination is something that's easier for me to put my finger on because I deal with it. So when I'm sure that they both play a role, definitely, you can always, like you, think that if we only had more money we could do, you know, anything, so there's always that thought; but I don't necessarily see where the park is suffering because of the budget. It's just an issue that comes up.

CR: I do recall reading articles and researching this where they talked about in previous decades interviewing the commissioner of parks and recreation who was lamenting staff cuts and budget cuts here and there. The one I recall was probably about thirty odd years ago. But it wasn't clear from that article exactly how much of an impact that actually was making. So would your sense be that you are able to more or less meet the demand as you perceive it?

PC: I would think, yeah, that we are able to make the demand, but I think that it's important to note that we're able to meet the demand as it exists. And that's part of the reason why we're interested in coming up with this formalized agreement with the Federation so that we can continue to give the same amount of attention to the park that we are giving it now. In other words so that we're not spending our time in the individual Gardens doing something that we would hope that the Garden Federation volunteers would be doing. And we're not taking away from some other responsibility, mowing somewhere, or something like that, to put our efforts into a particular Garden we're able to take care of the areas that we're responsible for with the same degree of vigilance that we're giving it now.

CR: Could you give me a rough sense of how the upkeep requirements or responsibilities translate to either staff or say man hours. Is there like a rough amount of hours that are typically devoted to upkeep in an average week or an average month?

PC: I think it varies pretty substantially throughout the year. So there are, I'm not even sure exactly how many but there may be 5 or 6 full-time year-round park staff that work in this region that would be just the park maintenance. And seasonally, this would be the summer months, they would receive extra help. And then in the fall when it's time to do leaf cleanup they might receive some extra help. And I think it varies from season to season, and I think it also varies from year to year. Because like I was saying about the Property Management's work in the

Gardens, they do cleanup of graffiti, for instance. One year you might get one monument that's painted and one year you might get 12. So I think in that respect, its not that the staff is scheduled a certain amount of hours to spend in the park, but as they're needed they'll be sent to the park to do what's needed to be done.

CR: So in other words, if the need were more acute during a particular period you would be able to [produce the] resources.

PC: Yeah, this happens quite frequently. People get permits to use the Gardens for various things, often weddings are the big things during the summer. So when someone gets a permit to use a particular Garden prior to that event, the park staff makes a point to go to that one Garden and make sure that it is cleaned up and looking its best. And if one weekend there is an event in one Garden, they'll put their attention there, and if the next weekend, six Gardens have events, then they'll add more people to the staff to be able to clean up all of the Gardens.

CR: You must have read my mind, I was just getting ready to segue into weddings. I just came from a class wedding and one of the people was saying that the Gardens are an extremely popular spot for actual weddings, or wedding receptions, or just photo shoots. To what extent is your organization involved in that? You mentioned permits for example. Somebody can't just show up . . . what if they're just doing a photo shoot for example?

PC: They're supposed to get a permit. I think in the instance of photo shoots, I don't know, but I would say that groups just stop by and take photos periodically. But procedurally they're supposed to get a permit, so there's another city division that does work in the Gardens in some way, and that's the Special Events office. So, yeah, for any event that's held, they would get a permit and outline what day, what time, what Garden they're planning to use.

CR: So actually somewhere in your job description is wedding planner?

PC: Somewhat, because we do a lot of that at the Greenhouse too, but in the Cultural Gardens it affects the staff as far as making sure that the Garden is prepared and ready. I don't have a very good sense for the numbers of events. I don't know whether that has increased significantly, decreased, or stayed the same over the past few years. The special events records may be able to look at those records and give you an idea of how many permits they're issuing for the Gardens. That might be interesting to get an idea of use, public use.

CR: Does it seem to be frequent, and most likely more frequent than it has been in previous years?

PC: That would be my guess, but I don't know.

CR: It also helps that we've had a nice dry summer.

PC: Yeah.

CR: Do you have a sense of when the next ceremony, wedding ceremony is coming up? I was asked to review this question incase we want to just casually drop by and record some “I Do’s.”

PC: I receive copies of the permits but I forward them to the **Green House Horticulturist** who schedules the Greenhouse weddings . . . we keep them all together over in that office. So off the top of my head I don’t know, but I might be able to look at, permits, copies of permits I’ve received, and see if there’s something coming up.

CR: If you wouldn’t mind, maybe just drop me an e-mail, just say, “Chris, next weekend, something on Saturday afternoon,” or whatever, that would be nice.

PC: Yeah, I need to remind myself.

CR: Okay I guess that the only other thing that I should ask you is that if I were a better or more seasoned interviewer, what would I have asked you that I have neglected to? For example, you have prepared some notes here: Is there anything that you have jotted down or essentially rehearsed that I haven’t prodded you to discuss? I just don’t want to go home not having asked the \$64,000 question.

PC: Nothing really sticks out in my mind. Nothing came up as I was reading through the list that you gave me that I thought was being left out, or that we didn’t hit on in some point in the conversation.

CR: Well good. In that case I can kind of characterize this session as a walk in the park.

PC: Right.