



VIRGINIA NEWS

Across globe, instant parks replace parking spots

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By P.J. DICKERSCHIED / Associated Press

Plush grass, potted plants and park benches will replace asphalt, steel and engines Friday along city streets from Seattle to Munich.

Thousands of artists, conservationists, urban planners and others are preparing to commandeer 10-by-20-foot parking spaces in downtowns across the United States and in at least eight other countries, including Australia. They plan to temporarily transform the spots into urban gardens, outdoor reading rooms, mini golf courses and galleries for recycled art.

National Park(ing) Day "is about reclaiming the streets for people," said John Bela, one of three men who started the craze three years ago in San Francisco, a city where a fourth of its land is dedicated to blacktop and automobiles.

"We created a how-to manual and offered it as a tool to transform urban environments and make people realize, 'Hey, we can do things differently. We can create more people places,'" he said.

Now, with support from the national conservation nonprofit Trust for Public Land, the event has drawn more than 75 registered groups prepared to overtake hundreds of spots typically reserved for cars in an attempt to "promote the need for social spaces not governed by commerce," Bela said.

He along with Blaine Merker and Matthew Passmore started National Park(ing) Day as an experiment in 2005 to challenge the idea that streets are solely for moving goods and services and storing cars, Passmore said. It's about recognizing the need for green spaces amid the concrete, brick and asphalt.

But it's not just about "ecology and science and carbon footprints," either, he said. "It's about broadening the definition to include unmet social needs."

For instance last year, a group of nurses set up a free health clinic in a parking space in a low-income neighborhood in San Francisco, Passmore said.

Some of Friday's participants are planning green spaces where people can read, catch up on e-mail, relax, play games or just talk politics with friends.

New Yorkers will be able to power their laptops by riding stationary bikes on a converted parking space at the corner of 13th Street and 6th Avenue.

In downtown Morgantown, West Virginia University senior Justin Burns, 24, of Manassas, Va., plans to use boxwoods, ferns, japonica, sedum and a couple of benches for his transformation.

In Newark, N.J., organizers will turn an asphalt playground into a temporary green oasis with space to jump rope and play hopscotch.

City Seeds Urban Farm will display edible urban orbs (aka pumpkins) in a parking spot in downtown St. Louis to promote what can be done with green space and vacant lots in cities with issues of food security, organizer Mara Higdon said.

And in Chicago, parking at the corner of North Halsted Street and West Armitage Avenue will be transformed into a mini golf course.

So far, no groups have run into any trouble with police, meter maids or frustrated drivers, Passmore said.

Some cities, like New York where it's illegal to park anything but a vehicle in a parking space, require special permits or permission, he said. Some require that the meters be fed or the instant parks moved every two hours to comply with time limitations.

"In some places, it's just sort of allowed," he said.

As for drivers searching for places to park, "they usually think it's kind of funny," Passmore said.

Once the sod is rolled up and the cars return, Merker said he hopes people will continue to look at public spaces in new ways.

"We want our cities filled with spaces for social interaction," he said.

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