

## **Rockford Needs to be Cleaner, Greener**

The research is clear, being clean and green is important to the economic vitality of a region, and to your business. Leading communities pay attention to, and make sure they have appealing streets, pristine landscaping, welcoming gateways and great public areas. Businesses do the same. These areas not only improve the quality of place for local residents and employees, they also make a community more attractive to new businesses, residents and visitors.

## **Great Beginnings**

Rockford has many great natural assets including abundant parks and preserves, wide-open farmlands surrounding our urban core and four beautiful rivers.

In recent years, the City of Rockford has made great strides by intentionally adding green infrastructure – landscaping beds, rain gardens, green space – when making public infrastructure improvements. The city recently completed a two-year improvement project along Main Street, which now boasts nicely paved sidewalks, planting beds, decorative lights and unique signage. A few years ago Harrison Avenue was rebuilt with pedestrian pathways, a landscaped median and attractive lighting. The Miracle Mile along State Street recently added sidewalks and green space.

## **Challenged to Maintain**

The challenge, however, is in maintaining all of this green infrastructure. Grass has to be mowed; beds, planters and pots need seasonal plantings and regular water and weeding; trees need to be cut back and bushes need pruning.

Our public works employees are doing a yeomen's job trying to maintain these spaces, despite significant cutbacks. And, to be clear, this is not just a City of Rockford challenge. The State of Illinois, all of our regional communities, Winnebago County and other public entities (i.e., Airport, RVC) have land and spaces that need to be maintained and fewer resources to do so.

How our community looks is a direct reflection on how much we value ourselves. Think about it as a homeowner; if you value your investment you work to ensure your yard looks good – your grass gets cut and the flowers are tended to.

## **City of Gardens Shows It's Possible**

The City of Gardens, a program of the Rockford Park District Foundation, brought together public and private organizations and volunteers in a citywide beautification program. Thanks to their efforts Rockford won the prestigious America in Bloom competition in 2005 and 2007.

This accomplishment was a huge boost to our city's pride but we need to make sure it continues.

"Beautification efforts are important year-round. Not only is it a matter of first impression, it shows pride of ownership and serves as a welcome for our guests," says Ruth Miller from the City of Gardens.

## **What Others Have Done**

Other communities have found unique and reasonable approaches to ensure they are clean and green. Here are two examples we could learn from.

The City of Chicago's Gateway Green program is a non-profit organization that utilizes public/private partnerships and volunteers. With private organizations and businesses sponsoring projects and providing volunteers, the organization is able to maintain landscaping along roadways, including planting, weeding and cleanup; installing art along the expressways; and encouraging tree planting in vacant lots.

Nashville, Tenn. utilizes a public program called the Metro Beautification and Environment Commission. The commission, appointed by the mayor, coordinates the efforts of volunteers, city departments, business and community groups and government agencies to provide environmental programs and beautification projects, as well as training and educational opportunities. The program is funded by the Public Works budget, state grants and in-kind goods and services.

## **We Need a New Approach**

The green infrastructure improvements already made here in our region are important. Now we have to come up with a comprehensive approach to maintain what we have. Well maintained public areas will bring investments into our community at a time when we need them most. Neglecting them now would send us backward, and we can't afford that.

*John Groh is president/CEO of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. He is interested in well-maintained and visually appealing public spaces, including medians, boulevards and rights-of-way and is attracted to flower boxes and the higher property values they encourage. If you are, too, contact him at [jgroh@gorockford.com](mailto:jgroh@gorockford.com).*