

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa unveils new downtown L.A. park

Spring Street Park sits on the site of a former parking lot between 4th and 5th streets. It's the 16th public space to open under the mayor's 50 Parks Initiative.

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Matteo Walters, 4, left, keeps his balance while playing in the newly opened... (Mel Melcon, Los Angeles...)

Before a throng of office workers and scruffy-faced hipsters, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on Monday opened Spring Street Park in the heart of the city's rapidly evolving downtown, telling the crowd that there were more parks to come, including the conversion of a coveted 2-acre parcel across from City Hall.

"Not since the late 1940s have you seen the resurgence of downtown, the activity downtown that you see today," Villaraigosa said. "More and more people are living here, working here, shopping here, and they want open space just like everyone else."

A compact oasis of lawn, walking paths and a tinkling fountain, Spring Street Park is the 16th public space to open since Villaraigosa's 50 Parks Initiative launched last year. The

park, which is roughly 2/3 of an acre, sits atop a former parking lot between 4th and 5th streets.

The mayor also announced that the city is planning to remake a 2-acre eyesore between Temple and 1st streets, adjacent to the recently completed Grand Park. The city this month closed escrow on a \$7.5-million purchase of the state-owned land at the northwest corner of 1st and Spring streets, he told the crowd.

"That piece of property, that used to have a building on it and a parking lot, is gonna be green space here downtown," Villaraigosa said at the morning news conference. "How 'bout that?"

Downtown residents, although excited that construction is complete, were already buzzing about the potential problems that could befall Spring Street Park — including crime, litter and pet waste.

Spring Street is not designated as a dog park, and pet owners shouldn't use it "as a toilet" for their dogs, said Blair Besten, executive director of the Historic Downtown Los Angeles Business Improvement District. Many in the crowd came with pit bulls and high-stepping Chihuahuas on leashes.

Besten, who lives downtown and has a 3-month-old son, said she doesn't relish the idea of dogs relieving themselves on the grassy area where her child will play. The park also has a small children's playground.

"We're going to put signs up right away telling them they can't do that here," Besten said, adding that she trained her dogs to go on the base of trees or in street gutters. "It would destroy the park very quickly, especially with the heat."

The mayor's push for more parks, launched in August, relies on a mix of development fees and Recreation and Parks capital funds to turn blighted properties into neighborhood gathering spots. Planners used mapping technology to find available parcels in high-density neighborhoods with a lack of green space, said Barry A. Sanders, who heads the city's Parks and Recreation Commission.

To reduce costs, the new parks are designed with water-sipping native plants, solar-operated trash compactors and long-lasting LED lighting, Sanders said. Spring Street Park is fenced with gates that automatically unlock in the morning, he said.

The city also partners with neighborhood groups to take over some functions, such as picking up trash and keeping an eye out for troublemakers. A nonprofit group, Friends of Spring Street Park, will take on that role.

"I always say don't wait for the city to do something for you," Patti Berman, the group's spokeswoman, said at Monday's opening. "Get out there and do something for yourself. Look at what we can do together."

Over the last seven years, the city has added 670 acres of park space, more than twice the amount of the previous two administrations combined, city officials say. Villaraigosa, who will be succeeded by Mayor-elect Eric Garcetti on July 1, reminded the crowd of his legacy.

"This program is all paid for," he said. "It will get finished in the next administration. But it was paid for in this administration."

The 2-acre parcel at 1st and Spring streets held a state office building until 1976, when it was demolished because of earthquake damage. Since it's been vacant, its underground garage has become home to a colony of feral cats that will be relocated with the help of the group CATS USA.

"This property has sat idle for far too long, needlessly costing taxpayers for maintenance and security," said California Department of General Services Director Fred Klass. "This sale raises revenue needed to eliminate state debt and provides the city of Los Angeles park space to be enjoyed for generations."

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