

Published: 09.20.2008

Mini-parks in parking spaces draw friendly viewers downtown

TEYA VITU

Tucson Citizen

Parking spaces downtown filled with campsites, a skateboard park, an urban trail and sundry other interpretations Friday for National PARK(ing) Day, where the goal in 70 cities was to convert parking spaces into car-length parks.

Tucson, with its 88 accounted-for parks downtown and on Fourth Avenue and University Boulevard, by far had the largest number of "parks" among any of the cities taking part in the Trust for Public Land-sponsored event, spokesman Matt Shaffer said.

Drivers and pedestrians were overwhelmingly supportive of, or at worst indifferent to, PARK(ing) Day, which generated minimal animosity throughout the day, several participants said.

"I think it's fantastic," said Gina Inman, who lives and works downtown and wandered by several "parks." "Cities are supposed to be a forum where people get together but cars inundate everything."

A similar sentiment struck wildlife biologist Larry Jones as he, wife Janet Jones and fellow wildlife biologist Glenn Frederick explored the urban trail set up by architecture and landscaping firm Norris Design on Stone Avenue.

"I think I like (PARKing Day) because I was angry they put all the parking spaces in in the first place," Jones said.

Jody Blaylock, an architectural designer at BWS Architect, coordinated the event in Tucson, and months ago she reckoned no more than 15 parking spaces would be filled. "Having so many people here shows that people take this seriously," Blaylock said. "A lot of our 'parks' are educational. Other cities are more recreational."

Students from downtown City High School set up an urban heat island experiment. At noon, sophomore Jessie Birdman and senior Jennifer Kachur measured the air temperature at 88 degrees, the Stone Avenue asphalt at 122.4, a car hood at 138, a car interior at 128.6 and the library wall at 122 degrees.

PARK(ing) Day had more city government support than anywhere else, too, with the city's ParkWise Division organizing it, Mayor Bob Walkup's staff and Councilwoman Regina Romero setting up "parks," and the Parks & Recreation Department establishing nine parks - more than any other participant.

Tucson has less than half the median park space of 75 cities studied by the Trust for Public Land, which uses National PARK(ing) Day to promote the importance of urban parks and open space.

"We're supportive of anything that brings attention to the fact that we have a shortage of park space," City Parks Director Fred Gray said. "Growth has outpaced acquisition of park facilities in urban areas. It's hard to recapture that space."

Pima County Public Library employees pitched a tent and camped out on Congress Street in front of Caffe Milano. Nicole Koch played with her 2-year-old son, Emerson, and Neil Diamante kept an eye on his 3-year-old son, Luca.

"The idea is to recognize that public space can be used for other things than cars," said library employee Karen Greene, who added the library was promoting its Get Fit Festival on Wednesday and Sept. 27 at Jácome Plaza, 101 N. Stone Ave.

