

It's been said you can assess the "heart" of a community by its parks. And looking at Garner's parks, this is a community with a great heart.



Crew member preparing the infield for a game. Jim Robinson (inset) by a Garner parks vehicle.

Community Effort Maintains Parks and Fields

By Bob Tracinski

One would expect Garner, NC, a town of 16,000, to lie quietly in the shadow of nearby Raleigh. After all, population growth in the last few decades came mainly as city jobholders sought calm and comfortable dwellings safely removed from the urban crunch. But the energy of the residents, the charm of the setting and lots of hard work jelled into a thriving, vital community with much to offer.

It's been said you can assess the "heart" of a community by its parks. And looking at Garner's parks, this is a community with a great heart.

Jim Robinson joined Garner in 1989 as parks superintendent. As use of facilities — and his responsibilities — expanded, the title also grew to parks, landscape and grounds manager.

Robinson brought an extensive background to his position. His love of plants

was instilled early. His mother and grandmother were dedicated gardeners, with extensive planting of annuals, perennials and bulbs. Tobacco farming was the prime occupation of many family members. Although he entered college as a sociology major, by his early 20s, he was drawn by the lure of plant-related jobs. He put formal studies on hold to work for various landscaping and nursery operations, then moved to Raleigh to enter North Carolina State University, where he concentrated on landscape horticulture.

After graduation, he stayed in the Raleigh area, first working for other landscaping firms, then operating his own landscape contracting business. Intrigued by the possibilities, he moved into the position with the town of Garner. And those possibilities keep growing.

"The opportunities for me as a professional have been amazing in this

actively growing community. The town's interest and use of facilities have grown hand in hand with community and park improvements," he says. "We're constantly seeing more commercial development — and business involvement in community activities. As one segment moves forward, the others follow suit. I thrive on that challenge.

"We converted a 66-acre tract from an old strawberry field to Lake Benson Park, which opened officially in late 1993. We term it a 'passive' recreation site since no organized sports take place there, but it's full of activity. A large picnic center is now in place and a community center is scheduled for construction in the next two years. There are 44 acres of grassy meadow, which we mow. The rest of the site is filled with trees and trails. A popular feature is the walks organized by our part-time naturalist — bird-watching and wildflower

walks and even a nighttime owl-watching walk. The town's 1994 Independence Day celebration, featuring the North Carolina Symphony, was held in the park's meadow."

The extensive recreational facilities gave Robinson an additional challenge. Sports-field management and maintenance hadn't been included in his formal studies or hands-on experience. He quickly keyed into major sources of assistance: the staff at North Carolina State University, the extension service, the NC Turfgrass Association and the Sports Turf Managers Association. "The interaction with other professionals has helped tremendously — and is something I really look forward to," he says. Trade publications and the STMA compendium became additional resources.

Recreational activities are booming in Garner. "We have approximately 122 softball teams, ranging from youth T-ball to adult leagues and mixed leagues. A girls' fast-pitch softball league started last year. We have 42 soccer teams, two youth football leagues and 11 cheerleading squads that use our facilities. There are tennis courts, recreational facilities at the senior center and playgrounds in the parks."

Garner has two main complexes for organized sports competition. The largest site holds a multipurpose soccer/football fields, three baseball/softball fields and the tennis courts. The second site has two baseball/softball fields.

The town's school system also has facilities for all these sports, which handle the school-related practices and competitions. Care of the school's fields is contracted to a private maintenance company. There also are some private sports facilities within the town.

Garner's third complex will open in March. Robinson says, "Credit goes to the town management for their progressive attitude. Because of the open communication within our management system, and the shared spirit of community improvement, they were not only aware that the fields couldn't continue to handle the high level of use and remain in good condition, but were determined to find a solution. That led to the development of the new complex.

"The town acquired the land in late March 1994, and we originally hoped to be up and running by May 1994. But the area was an old tobacco farm that hadn't been worked for 10 years. We had to clear away seedling trees, broom sedge, blackberries and lots of other underbrush just to determine what we had," Robinson explains.

"We formed a long, rectangular area that will serve as three multipurpose practice fields. We developed a slight crown, from end to end, rather than by field, and slit-seeded that section with common Bermudagrass. Coverage was good. We've fertilized, aerated, topdressed with sand and overseeded in the fall with annual ryegrass.

"At the end of the grassed fields we developed a baseball/softball field with a skinned infield and 185-foot fences. The outfield also is common Bermudagrass overseeded with annual ryegrass. We've landscaped the complex to provide screening. So, when the weather breaks, we'll be ready for play.

Organization is key to Robinson's management scheme. "I've divided the parks maintenance and development division into five segments. Horticulture handles the landscaping and outside maintenance of the high-visibility city buildings, the 8.5 miles of street medians, the signage areas, and the park

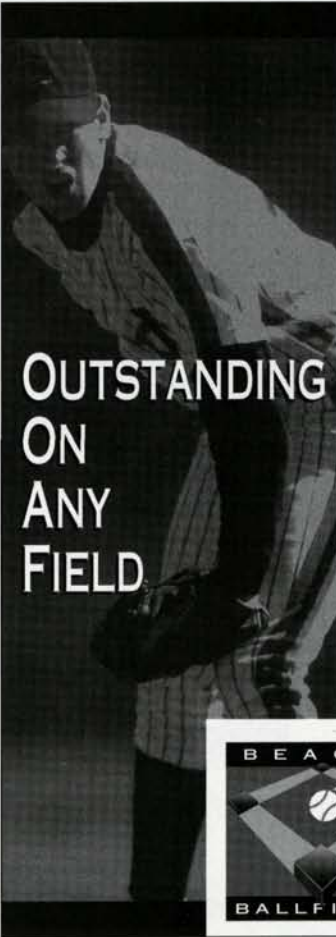
landscaping, including seasonal color change-outs. The Lake Benson Park crew handles everything at that site. The parks maintenance crew tackles the large-scale mowing, using rotary mowers. The ballfield crew handles the prep work on the fields, including striping and the infield-skinned area maintenance. They also draw the trash and restroom-cleanup detail. Our last segment is termed the 'rover.' This crew performs the reel mowing, tractor work, aeration and fertilization.

"Staff levels fluctuate a bit overall and within each of the division's segments. During the busiest season we have 10 full-time and five part-time employees. I try to identify each employee's strong points and specific areas of interest and match them with the most suitable positions. Each department has a working supervisor who keeps a daily log of activities, including personnel assignments, materials used, work performed and anything needing special attention." Robinson meets with the supervisors at least daily. They radio in anything that needs immediate action.

Robinson divides the workload seasonally and then by priorities. He develops an overall schedule — usually with Plan A for expected conditions and a "very flexible" Plan B for whatever changes occur.

During his five years on the job, Robinson has become increasingly adept at identifying problem areas and working toward

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"real" solutions and ongoing maintenance practices to produce optimum results. All sports fields have a light topsoil over a base of heavy clay. Three of the fields had existing hydraulic irrigation systems in place when Robinson came on board. Electronic irrigation systems have been installed on three more fields in the last two years. This is an item included in the town's budget by the aware and committed management team. There's no capability for a large-scale watering on the rest of the fields, so crews must work with the water nature provides.

Annual soil testing forms the basis for the fertilization program. Aeration is scheduled at least monthly during the Bermudagrass active growth period. The multipurpose field underwent deep-tine aeration for the second year to help cope with the compaction caused by heavy use. USGA-grade sand — or as close to it as the budget allows — is used to topdress fields following aeration.

Although Robinson would prefer to overseed with perennial ryegrass, long, cool spring weather can make for a difficult transition back to Bermudagrass, so annual ryegrass is used on all but the multipurpose competition field. "We've had the Bermudagrass greenup occur as early as April — and as late as June. And we've overseeded in December and had the seed do well. Despite the temperatures, spring practices start in March and play of some type continues on the fields through November," he explains. "Once school is out in the summer, we have softball or baseball games six days a week and four to five games on each field everyday. With such 'windows of opportunity,' flexibility is a necessity."

Robinson works with the parks and recreation director and, through him, with the programming staff. The programming staff assigns time slots to user groups (who make their own team assignments) and actually sets the field-use schedules for town-sponsored groups. Field-use decisions are Robinson's call. "Safety is the first priority, then field conditions. We weigh the importance of the game with what play under existing conditions will do to field quality. We've hammered out policies through trial and error, but a system workable for all has emerged.

He makes sure all division personnel are aware of the total program, not just their own responsibilities. "We work for the whole town. Besides letting people know that our phone works and our doors are always open, we want all crew members to be accessible and knowledgeable. If a facility user has a question about when a maintenance procedure will take place, why it's needed or anything else about pertaining to city property, we want the crew member that person approaches to be able to tell them. And if an answer can't be given, the staff member will say, 'I'm sorry, I don't know. But I'll contact (whoever the key person is for that area) right away and find out.' And they get the necessary information to make sure the person can be contacted right away.

"I also make a practice of attending some of the nighttime events to talk to participants and group leaders for feedback. Working with the facilities everyday gives us a good handle on conditions, but users may have a different perspective, especially on specific areas and things we can do to make their enjoyment of the site even better."

Despite the rigorous schedule, Robinson squeezes in time for his growing family. He and his wife, Nancy, have a son, Sam, who will be a year old on March 10. Stepdaughter Jessica is a teenager. Robinson and stepson, Greg, celebrated Greg's 11th birthday last New Year's Eve by attending the Peach Bowl. "When things get especially hectic, they basically see me go and see me come back. But they understand that the job has demands and they're very supportive of me and my efforts," he says.

"There's so much personal satisfaction in this field. With so much changing in the industry and in this position, it's a continual learning process. There are so many people willing to share their knowledge and personal expertise. The results of what can be accomplished have such an impact on the growth and development of each community, and of our future generations. It's great to be a part of it." □

Bob Tracinski is the manager of public relations for the John Deere Co. in Raleigh, NC, and public relations chair for the Sports Turf Managers Association.