

Voices

On parks in Little Rock

DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE ONLINE

Boy, those were some doozies of dollar signs in that front-page article Monday about a swell park called “30 Crossing” that might be built under the new Interstate 30 through downtown Little Rock.

It would unfold for \$100 million or more where the old freeway ramps were. It would link the River Market and the Clinton Library. There would be an amphitheater, a floating deck and water activities, gardens, a playground, an “urban lawn,” and other fine amenities to serve citizens and impress visitors, perhaps in that order.

It reminded me of being in a vibrant newsroom led by a saucy assistant city editor in the late 1990s. She came up to me after editing a piece on the grand vision of Little Rock city leaders and asked, rhetorically, “When are your pals Kumpuris and Moses [City Director Dean Kumpuris and River Market visionary Jimmy Moses] going to give it a rest



OPINION

**John
Brummett**

on turning Little Rock into Manhattan?”

There I sat in the vortex between newsroom skepticism, albeit expressed hyperbolically, and downtown Little Rock dreamers. Now it's more than three decades later. I'm reading about a glorious park design. I'm wondering where the hundred million, give or take, would possibly come from in a town that can't keep up its myriad parks for which someone had their own grand and admirable vision.

I plainly see the need and role for both visionary and skeptic. You can't get anywhere without visions to fall short of. Most good things rise in the vague shadow of vision, mostly or-

ganically from small-scale doers at ground level.

The visionary says he sees the future. The ground-level doer says give me a shovel and some lumber, and I can build a little part of it right here by the end of the month.

Here I wish to quote Nate Coulter, head of the Central Arkansas Library System, on Monday: “Could we just focus a little on the possible right now while we otherwise imagine what might be?”

Here is what he said we could do right now park-wise downtown: He could raise a quick \$150,000 to spend on the 18-acre strip of green space across from the Main Library, lining East Second Street. It has already been hydrated by the initiative of Rogers Yarnell, a resident in a high-rise condominium across the street who, with others, persuaded the city to allow at the petitioners' expense a water meter and the installation of piping.

The idea is to bring in and plant trees for instant shading for walking

paths, benches, a pollinator garden installed and kept by master gardeners and local garden clubs, and a raised platform for readings, storytelling and the ballads of acoustic guitarists. Coulter calls it CALS Park (for the Central Arkansas Library System).

He needs simple permission from the City Board with a resolution allowing the small project to proceed at no city expense. He has not yet received that permission, despite his pestering. He says he is not sure why, though he has heard that it is believed in some circles that, by abutting the envisioned 30 Crossing grander park, the little library amenity might distract from the master plan.

Initially, CALS Park would be part of a multipurpose campus of a multipurpose modern regional library. It would join the newly renovated library itself, a history institute, and a performance/lecture auditorium. The full array would befit the library's pioneering role as the original resident of the River Market and its

status as a community destination.

Further enhancements might be grown from this seed. The best things tend to be those rising naturally and incrementally, not from dictates.

Someday somebody might behold one of the nation's premier downtown park systems and ask, “Do you remember that sweet little CALS Park over there on East Second that started all this?”

A city can, at the same time, walk (develop a little strip of green space right now) and chew gum (pursue a grander vision longer-term). You could read on a shaded bench relatively soon. You might paddleboat down by the river near an amphitheater ... eventually.

—♦—

John Brummett, whose column appears regularly in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, is a member of the Arkansas Writers' Hall of Fame. Email him at jbrummett@arkasonline.com. Read his [@johnbrummett](https://twitter.com/johnbrummett) feed on X, formerly Twitter.