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Commentary: Turn parking lots into parks, and turn heat into healing

By **Bill Barker**, *For the Express-News*

San Antonio Express-News: June 16, 2024

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For decades, a large one-acre parking lot belonging to Sunset Ridge Church in Terrell Heights sat unused. A need for green space for the neighborhood was identified, which has led to Charis Park's creation.

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It's been said, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." It turns out a group in San Antonio is doing something like that when it comes to our extreme heat and environmental issues.

San Antonio is one of the hottest large cities in the U.S., and last summer was the second year in a row for record summer temperatures. By the end of this century, San Antonio may experience an additional 80 days per year with temperatures higher than 100 degrees. Economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas have estimated that "for

every 1-degree increase in average summer temperature, Texas annual nominal GDP growth slows 0.4 percentage points.” They note that the leisure and hospitality industry is hit the hardest.

While Luke Howard, the “father of meteorology,” documented more than 200 years ago that cities are hotter than their surrounding countryside — known as the “urban heat island” — more recent research, assisted by satellite data, has gotten a better grasp of what makes a city hotter. Research in Japan found, for example, that an asphalt parking lot was about 34 degrees hotter at noon than an adjacent grassy park.

On a July afternoon last year, when the official temperature was 103 degrees in San Antonio, I measured the surface temperature of the asphalt at Third Street and Broadway at 162.7 degrees. Human skin tissue is instantly destroyed at 162 degrees, so if one were to trip and fall on the street, they would be seriously injured.

Asphalt parking lots not only add to the increasing heat in San Antonio but also contribute to flooding and water pollution. Our region has geological features that provide a water supply that is vulnerable, as well as a nationally recognized flash flood alley. The Parking Reform Network, a nonprofit formed about five years ago, gave San Antonio a Parking Score of 89, the fourth highest of the cities with a population larger than 500,000 studied, meaning it had an unusual amount of land dedicated to parking compared to the median for a city in an urbanized area of that size.

San Antonio is ranked 53 (improved from 57) out of the 100 largest U.S. cities for its Park Score, a combination of park acreage, access, investment, amenities and equity. Parks cool a city, improve water quality and quantity, clean the air, and improve the physical and mental health of residents.

So, what if a group converted a hot, underused parking lot into a cool, serene public park?

“A place of healing” is one of the phrases used by Taylor Bates, deputy director of the Sunset Ridge Collective, to describe Charis Park, a privately owned neighborhood public park being created from a 1-acre former parking lot belonging to Sunset Ridge Church in Terrell Heights.

The park, which is not open yet, has many unique features that will be connected by a circular walkway.

Hopefully, the Charis Park example will inspire the conversion of other hot, underused parking areas in San Antonio.

Bill Barker has degrees in physics and urban affairs, and has taught urban and regional sustainability in the graduate program at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He is an adviser to the Great Springs Project.

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Efforts are underway to convert an underused parking lot into Charis Park in Terrell Hills. This is how we turn hot asphalt into cool green space.

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