



Anderson: Benderson Park misses the mark

Tuesday

Posted at 3:28 PM

Updated at 5:05 PM

There are too many annoying distractions for you to enjoy, appreciate or even concentrate on the beauty of what you are there to see.

By _____
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I felt a sudden urge to watch some rowing on Monday afternoon and as luck would have it there is a world-class rowing facility right here in the Sarasota-Bradenton area.

It's called Nathan Benderson Park and it's next to the glorious University Town Center Mall and the new diverging diamond interchange, which remains under construction, though not for much longer I'm sure. Perhaps you've seen the park while stuck in traffic on Interstate 75. It's the square excavation pit surrounded by a walking path and a bunch of power lines.

The University of Oklahoma rowing team was training there on Monday and I mean this in all sincerity: It was impressive, if not poetic, to watch them. The boats really do glide across the water. There really is a synergy among teammates that is striking. There really should be an appreciation everyone has for the beauty of the sport ... if it's at the right venue.

Benderson Park is not the right venue. It might be in six months, when the World Rowing Championships take place, but it's not now. Watching rowers there now is like watching a performance of Swan Lake on the tarmac of LaGuardia Airport. There are just too many annoying distractions for you to enjoy, appreciate or even concentrate on the beauty of what you are there to see.

I tried watching the rowers from the west side of the lake looking east. It lasted about 10 seconds because my eyes were immediately drawn to all of the traffic constantly rushing past on I-75. C'mon, who doesn't love watching big semis at a public park? Extending a buffer wall between the interstate and the park does not make it any better, either.

I watched from the south side looking north and it was the same thing: About 10 seconds and then my eyes were drawn to the unavoidable backdrop of the UTC mall and the skeleton of the unfinished finishing tower that was supposed to be completed in September at a cost of \$5 million.

I moved to the east side looking west, and again, ick, more distractions. All I could notice were the concrete power line towers, though on this side at least there was the added bonus of the whooshing car noise coming from I-75 and North Cattlemen Road.

Now this is not a rant about rowing. When the World Championships arrive in six months I hope it is a wild success, the great financial boon to the area that has been promised. This is really about the aesthetics of a park on the days when there isn't a World Rowing Championship and what we are left with, which is a pretty unremarkable place for recreation, especially considering what else is available in the area.

It's a place where power lines, interstate traffic and views of the mall — the last things anyone wants to see at a park and precisely what everyone wants to escape — dominate the landscape.

To be fair, people do use the park to walk, run and rollerblade and any avenue that encourages people to exercise is a great thing. However, on Monday there were just as many kids in the tiny playground as there were people walking on a

pleasant March afternoon. And it never seems like many people take advantage of the water. But then again why would anyone want to paddle a kayak and look at traffic congestion at the same time?

I'm an avid runner and if I don't run on the trails of Emerson Point near my house in Palmetto, I run on Siesta Key. It usually takes an hour to get to Siesta and I always drive past Benderson Park. Not once has it ever occurred to me to stop there and run.

Why? Because when I go to a park I don't want to see power lines, a mall and I-75.

I can get all of that just by driving there.

— *Chris Anderson can be reached at*

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