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Safety, Growth, and Equity: Parks and Open Space

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Winter 2006

Third of a five-part series on infrastructure equity by PolicyLink.

Introduction

Urban parkland in the United States is estimated to exceed one million acres.[1] Two of the most popular parks, Lincoln Park in Chicago and Griffith Park in Los Angeles, receive more than 12 million users annually, and more than 25 million visits are made to New York's Central Park each year.

Successful parks are markers of healthy communities: children play; families spend time together; people of all ages exercise and relax; and the environment adds to the beauty, security, and economic value of the neighborhood. On the other hand, neglected, dangerous, poorly maintained, or badly designed parks and recreation facilities have the opposite effect: families and young children stay away, illicit activities proliferate, and the property becomes a threatening or discouraging eyesore. To remain community assets, parks and recreation facilities need adequate budgets, good management, and a strong connection with residents.

Nationally, the city park movement reached its pinnacle from about 1890 to 1940; cities planned for parklands and recognized the relationship between parks and surrounding neighborhoods. Many cities created interconnected greenways linking neighborhoods, parks, and natural areas. Following World War II, the nation turned toward the development of suburbs, and the urban park system fell on hard times. Few cities provided adequate maintenance staffing and budgets, and most deferred critically needed capital investments. Parks and recreation are primarily the responsibility of local government, with no mandates to maintain services and relatively minuscule funding from the state or federal government. Often labeled as "nonessential" at budgeting time, parks and recreation departments consistently absorb larger budget cuts than most other local departments.

In the 1970s, fledgling neighborhood groups began forming to save particular parks, either through private fundraising or through political action. The urban community gardening movement began to take off as well. In the mid-1990s many older cities such as Chicago, Boston, Washington, and Cleveland began recovering from years of population loss and fiscal decline and looked to parks as a critical part of their revitalization. Meanwhile, planners in fast-growing, low-density cities such as Charlotte, Dallas, and Phoenix incorporated park elements in their attempts to create vibrant downtowns and walkable neighborhoods.

Publicly managed parks and recreation facilities have long been an important part of California's image of itself: a high quality of life tied to a beautiful natural environment in communities built to encourage active, healthy living. This tradition dates back to the mid-19th century and led to the creation of some of the nation's most notable urban parks, most extensive regional open-space greenbelts, and most extensive state parks systems. From the early decades of the 20th century onward, the recreation departments in many of California's major cities were not mere providers of games and pastimes, but were also sophisticated youth development agencies, able to reach and communicate with low-income young people who were beyond the reach of many other institutions.

* PolicyLink thanks Kristi Kimball for research that contributed to this brief.

As with many aspects of California's public infrastructure, the challenges of rapid growth and fiscal stress have taken their toll on the overall health of the sector and also heightened disparities in the quality and availability of facilities and services. As previously noted, parks and recreation are primarily the responsibility of local government. As the fiscal climate continually became more stressful, local agencies came to rely more on user fees, which heightened the differences in the quality and range of services based on community wealth and family incomes. Concurrently, more private recreation facilities—even more completely based on fees—have displaced municipal agencies as the main parks and recreation providers in many wealthier communities.

To add to this shortfall, school districts have: consistently reduced physical education classes, pared back support for sports programs, used schoolyards to house portable classrooms, and been unable or unwilling to enter into joint-use agreements with parks departments to keep facilities open longer. While all school districts have faced some of these fiscal challenges, the circumstances are generally much worse in lower-income cities and neighborhoods where parents and sponsors are less able to make up the difference with voluntary donations of fees. California remains a state where lower-income families are disproportionately in communities of color. Consequently, these differences in family ability to pay, and public budgets, fuel growing disparities in the services and facilities available to children and families of different races and ethnicities.

Creating and acquiring land for parks and open space has been, in its own way, as difficult as maintaining operating budgets. With the almost continual rapid growth of California's metropolitan areas, land for parks and open space adjacent to where people live has become extremely expensive. Cities and counties with residential districts that were built without adequate park space have found it very difficult to assemble or purchase parcels after the fact. Greenbelts and regional parks acquired in earlier times predominantly abutted higher-income residential areas. Abandoned industrial lands, often along waterfronts or railroad tracks, have had tremendous potential but have also faced myriad obstacles—contamination being one of them—in possible conversion to park space. And open lands on the edge of metropolitan areas have often skyrocketed in price before they could be acquired by the government or held in trust by philanthropic buyers. In contrast to these difficulties, neighborhood parks and trails in new suburban developments have been created on a routine basis, either because cities require them or developers voluntarily include them as marketing assets.

Parks, recreation, and open space have become the objects of some of the most extensive fundraising, creative land acquisition strategies, and effective advocacy seen for any aspect of the public sector. Promising practices by governments, nonprofit agencies, attorneys, and community organizing groups follow.

Successful parks are markers of healthy communities.

Promising Practices

I. Community Participation in Policy and Programming: Local Activism, Coalitions, and Litigation

Local activists have sometimes been able to save parkland for low-income communities and win funding battles. In several cities, community actors have a harder time impacting government decisions, suggesting that more opportunities and accommodations for community input are needed in decision making around the development of open space. Some examples of effective community participation to promote urban parks follow.

Practice: Support litigation and local activism.

In **Los Angeles** a powerful coalition of community members and environmental and civil rights activists created urban parks in the most underserved communities in the city. Through ongoing advocacy and persistence, these community groups saved three parcels of land for open space that were originally slated for industrial development. Their victories include:

- the preservation of the Chinatown Cornfield, the last vast open space in downtown LA, which was slated for development as a 32-acre warehouse;
- the preservation of Baldwin Hills Park, which was the proposed site for a power plant, but instead will become a new state park of almost two square miles; and
- the development of Taylor Yard as a 51-mile greenway along the Los Angeles River Parkway, which was originally slated for a 40-acre industrial project.[2]

Practice: Involve citizen advisory boards and community involvement in decision making.

After undertaking a year-long community outreach and planning process for parks and greenways in the **City of Nashville, Tennessee**, citizens solidified their support for the park systems and, in 2002, the city council funded the largest park appropriation in the city's history—a $35 million capital spending plan. Nashville also has a Citizen Advisory Board in place to help guide the implementation of this plan. However, citizen participation in overseeing the activities of the local parks agency is important even in the absence of large spending measures. These boards exist in many cities and play an important role in providing government agencies with constructive criticism, user feedback, and advocacy for community priorities.[3]

Environmental Defense launched the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust in the **City of Los Angeles** in 2002. The trust raises public and private funds to invest in small open spaces, parks, and community gardens throughout Los Angeles, focusing on low-income and disadvantaged communities. This unique model not only seeks to increase funding for urban parks, but also to increase the capacity of local community groups to build and maintain their parks and open spaces. The trust partners with community groups in designing and maintaining local parks and, after helping local groups identify funding sources for land acquisition, it provides technical assistance to the groups in applying for the funds and helps ensure that they comply with all regulations.[4] Examples of success include:

- negotiating with the Los Angeles Unified School District and the city to create a joint-use soccer field in "park-starved" Koreatown;
- reviewing Panorama City's surplus property, identifying a site for a new park, and using a sizable bequest to purchase the site; community residents are now engaged in planning the park and in cleaning an adjacent area to serve as a walking trail/bike path.

Practice: Develop a community vision and plan for green urban development.

The **City of Vancouver** created a public vision process for urban development in its "West End" around Stanley Park that has been held up as a model for other cities. With public support, the planning, public works, and community development agencies coordinated in creating new parks and focusing dense development around them. This is a version of "green printing" in which a comprehensive vision for local redevelopment is developed, based on a joint agreement at the community level about which public open spaces should be protected for ecological or lifestyle reasons.[5]

II. Standards, Measurement, and Assessment

Inequity in access to parks is a major problem in many urban areas. Rather than looking only at the overall acreage of open space per 1,000 residents—a commonly used metric that masks inequalities in access to open space across a city or community—some cities are developing alternate measures that focus on the distribution of open space throughout the city.

Practice: Measure open spaces differently to shed light on inequities in the distribution of these amenities.

By measuring open spaces differently, cities can identify geographic inequities in access to open space that are not detected with the standard gross acreage per population measure. This new information can be used to direct future investments in parks and open space in a more systematic way to reduce inequities in access to open space at the neighborhood level.

The **City of Seattle** uses an innovative measure of open space that focuses on accessibility. The city's Comprehensive Plan defines "useable open space" as relatively level and open, easily accessible, primarily green open space available for drop-in use, and no smaller than 10,000 square feet or approximately ¼ acre. Additionally, the city's goals for open space (2000 Parks and Recreation Plan) include a measure of the proximity of usable open space to people's homes. For primarily single-family residential areas, the goal is: "1/2 acre of useable open space within 1/2 mile of Seattle households." The city conducted a Gap Analysis Report in 2000, based on the distributional measure of "useable open space" and a measure of overall acreage per resident "breathing room open space." This analysis identified areas of greatest need to guide the city's future land acquisition and park development efforts.[6]

In **Denver, Colorado**, nine out of every 10 residents live within six blocks of a park, and the city overall has 11 acres of open space per 1,000 residents.[7] This high level of accessibility was achieved in part by a careful analysis of the distribution of parkland throughout the city, using GIS mapping technology and the six-block criterion. The city used its capital appropriations funding to address the gaps or inequities it identified. Now, it plans to raise the standard for accessibility from six to only four blocks (or approximately 1/3 mile) from people's residences.[8]

In 2003 the **San Francisco** Neighborhood Parks Council conducted an inventory of the city's "usable open space"—defined as open space within 10 minutes walking distance of people's homes. This analysis highlighted the great need for accessible parks in a number of low-income neighborhoods. The report also raised questions about the process that the city uses to allocate park funding, which the city characterizes as largely reactive to the complaints of highly organized citizen groups (typically from wealthier neighborhoods with better park facilities than others). The Neighborhood Parks Council is calling for allocation of park funding and resources according to clearly defined and legitimate measures of need, such as those outlined in its report.[9] As a result of the report, the Council is working on waterfront trail initiatives in low-income neighborhoods.[10]

Practice: Regularly report to the public on local spending for parks and open space.

Public reporting helps hold government agencies accountable for serving residents fairly and efficiently. Ideally, an annual report would summarize the system and programs, including geographic distribution of resources, and comment on how well agencies fulfilled their mandates. Less than half of big-city park agencies nationwide publish an annual report. The **Minneapolis** Park and Recreation Board has won praise for its annual report that includes detailed and complete financial numbers on the park system, describes successes in park development and administration, honors community partners, and openly discusses failures and problems in the system.[11]

III. Targeting Resources to High-Need Areas

Shifting more funding to projects that benefit dense urban areas and low-income communities is an important step in reducing the inequities in access to open space.

Practice: Make funding for open space more accessible to disadvantaged communities.

When public funding is made available for parks and open space, low-income and disadvantaged communities often have difficulty accessing these funds. For example, in **Los Angeles**, an analysis of 1996 Prop K expenditures (a special real estate tax for parks and recreation facilities) concluded that Prop K funding actually exacerbated existing inequalities in access to parks and open space rather than mitigating them. Neighborhoods with high rates of park accessibility received as much or more bond funding than high-poverty neighborhoods with low park accessibility.[12]

Practice: Protect community gardens in urban areas.

Supporting community gardens is an important way to address inadequate access to parks in inner-city neighborhoods where green space is in short supply. In **New York City**, the city Department of Parks and Recreation uses federal community development block grant funds to support "Green Thumb," the largest municipally-run gardening program in the nation.[13] Green Thumb leases city-owned land to neighborhood garden groups for $1 a year. Since its inception in 1978, Green Thumb has helped create more than 1,000 gardens on more than 125 acres of derelict lands. Many local residents credit their community gardens with helping to revitalize their neighborhoods and to bring the community together in a positive way.

Boston, Seattle, and **Chicago** also have policies that prioritize use of vacant city-owned lots for community gardens and green space in park-poor urban areas. Since the 1980s Boston has been conveying city-owned land to public-private partnerships for $1 a garden, and its Grassroots Program funds the creation and renovation of community gardens. In 1992, Seattle set a goal of one community garden for every 2,500 households. Chicago actually plans to spend money each year acquiring properties for conversion into community gardens.[14]

Practice: Set aside special funds in statewide funding measures for urban areas and low-income communities.

In 2000 **California** passed Proposition 12, a park bond in the amount of $2.18 billion. This bond included special funding for a number of state programs aimed at urban, park-poor neighborhoods, and economically disadvantaged communities. Similarly, in 2002 California voters approved Proposition 40, a $2.6 billion bond for environmental resources. The measure contained a couple of special funding programs for urban parks. An analysis of these propositions conducted by the Planning and Conservation League (PCL) found that these special funds made it possible for community based organizations (CBOs) to finance a wide variety of sorely-needed parks projects in communities throughout the state; projects included youth and recreation centers, playgrounds, athletic fields, and environmental centers.[15] PCL quotes a representative of one grant-receiving organization as saying, "Prop 12 changed the course of history for our community."

IV. Increasing Funding Overall

Social equity is achieved through enabling higher funding levels for parks and open space across the board; open space and parks are typically underfunded even though they are broadly considered to provide public benefits. With greater funding, some low-income communities will benefit. However, to the extent that poor communities have less ability to generate local revenues through tax increases, solutions that rely only upon local revenues do not change the inherent inequities between rich and poor communities.

Also, to the extent that new revenues are raised through higher sales taxes or property taxes, the regressive impacts of these taxes have to be balanced against the potential benefits in terms of new green infrastructure in poor communities.

Higher funding across the board can contribute to greater parks equity when low-income communities benefit.

Practice: Support state-level incentives and matching funds.

The New Jersey state policy framework for local financing of open space conservation could be considered a national model. Collectively, local governments in New Jersey generate more than $200 million per year in support of land conservation. The state's success is due in great part to its policies encouraging local governments to dedicate taxes for open space through local ballot measures. The key elements of this state policy framework are: (a) the state gives local governments the authority to establish a dedicated fund for open space using the property tax; (b) the state makes a substantial and reliable annual investment in providing matching funds through the "Green Acres Planning Incentive Program" that provides a compelling incentive for local governments to tax themselves for land conservation; and (c) voters receive spending proposals for land conservation at all levels of government. This framework has created a political culture that supports public investments in land conservation.[16] To obtain the state matching funds, local governments must complete an Open Space and Recreation Plan that identifies opportunities for:

- trails, bicycle paths, and greenways that link existing recreation and open space sites;
- water supply protection, wildlife habitat protection, historic preservation, and preservation of forest lands and farmlands;
- public access to coastal and inland waters; and the development of recreation facilities.[17]

Practice: Back local tax increases and bonds.

Larimer County and the City of Boulder in Colorado have both passed dedicated sales taxes to fund open space preservation. More than 38,300 acres of land have been preserved in Latimer County through the ¼-cent open-space sales tax.[18] In Boulder, local sales tax revenues—combined with bond issues, private donations, and development dedications—have provided more than $150 million for the preservation and acquisition of more than 43,000 acres of open space.[19] Local home values have increased around the major greenbelt that was funded through the sales tax.[20]

Similarly, the **City of Seattle** went directly to its voters in 2000 for approval of a $198 million "Pro Parks Levy" to be expended over eight years within the boundaries of the city. The annual cost of this property tax to the average Seattle property owner during this eight-year period is expected to be approximately $.35 per $1000 in assessed property value.[21] The levy covers both capital (for land acquisition and development) and operating costs. As of 2005, the levy had leveraged more than $17 million in additional funding for acquisition, allowing the city to add a total of 32 acres of new park lands. The focus of the levy is to implement citizen-developed neighborhood open-space plans and to secure new properties for parks in underserved, densely populated neighborhoods (as identified through their "gap analysis," previously discussed in the "Standards, Measurement, and Assessment" and the "Targeting Resources" sections).[22]

Practice: Establish special financing districts.

Another popular mechanism to finance new parks is a special financing district or other arrangement that allows the capture of property taxes, parking fees, or other revenues created or increased as a result of the park infrastructure. These methods have succeeded in financing the renovation and ongoing maintenance of Union Square in **San Francisco**, Pershing Square in **Los Angeles**, Bryant Park in **New York City**, the Park at Post Office Square in **Boston**, and Mellon Square in **Pittsburgh**.[23]

V. Efficient Use of Resources: Joint Use and Creative Reuse

Acquiring new land for parks within existing communities can be very expensive and time consuming. In fact, in some densely populated urban areas, there may be very little undeveloped land available for acquisition. It may be faster and more cost-effective to consider the options for rehabilitation and reuse of existing community assets and facilities, such as school yards, vacant lots, or other land owned by public agencies, as alternatives to new land acquisitions. This strategy benefits low-income communities because it opens up new green spaces at lower costs than if new land were acquired for parks.

Urban areas, and especially densely populated central cities, have less undeveloped land available for acquisition than suburban and exurban communities. So policies that make it easier to reuse and recycle remnant lands in urban areas as open space will help reduce inequities in access to open space for these communities. Here are some examples of promising practices in this area.

Practice: Become activists in partnership with local schools and public agencies.

In the Lower San Antonio and East Lake neighborhoods of **Oakland**, a coalition of nonprofit organizations is working to increase access to parks and open space in the low-income, immigrant community, which has more children per household than other parts of Oakland, but less parkland. One of its main strategies is to renovate the local school grounds and negotiate for expanded hours of access to the school grounds and playing fields. It is also working with community groups and government agencies to clean up the nearby waterfront estuary and increase public access to open space.[24] This coalition recently secured more than $1 million from the state for waterfront access and traffic safety improvements.[25]

Practice: Convert school yards into public open space through joint-use agreements and special funding programs.

The Neighborhood Parks Council of **San Francisco** found that the city's gaps in neighborhood access to open space would be significantly reduced if the school district's playgrounds were open for public use after school hours. Joint-use agreements between local school districts and parks and recreation departments are important tools to create new open spaces at minimal costs through the shared use of facilities.

The **City of Chicago** has been a leader on this front. Under a program funded jointly by the city, Chicago Public Schools, and the Chicago Park District, concrete school yards are converted into green spaces that are available for public use, with new landscaping, play equipment, trees, fencing, and lighting. One-hundred school yards had been renovated and opened for public use as of late 2003. Priority is given to neighborhoods identified as having insufficient parkland, Strategic Neighborhood Action Program districts, Empowerment Zones, Enterprise Communities, and other special development districts. This "Campus Parks Program" is only one of a number of efforts Chicago has undertaken to create more urban parkland through conversion of underutilized land in its "CitySpace Plan," which was launched in 1993. More than 10 years later, the city has added 99 acres to its park system, 150 acres to its school campus park network, and a 183-acre prairie for future state open space; it has also permanently protected 40 community gardens.[26]

Seattle's "Grey to Green Program" contributes funding to community-sponsored outdoor improvements to school grounds that benefit both the school and surrounding community. The program is administered by the parks department as a means to enhance school grounds and provide a greater variety, and better distribution, of park-like facilities throughout the city.[27]

Practice: Convert brownfields into parks.

In urban areas where little undeveloped land is available or where the cost of undeveloped land is prohibitive, underutilized remnant lands—vacant lots, public or utility-owned property, underutilized school sites, and streets that are wider than necessary—present a great opportunity for development of open space and parks. Land recycling and reuse can also be a good strategy for blighted inner-ring suburbs that have a mix of brownfields, abandoned factories, or vacant and tax-defaulted parcels of land.

In **Philadelphia**, an exodus of residents between 1970 and 1990 left behind thousands of vacant and abandoned parcels of land. Philadelphia Green, a nonprofit that is the largest American community gardening association, is helping neighborhood groups convert blighted parcels into community gardens and green space. A local community development corporation in New Kensington has joined the revitalization effort by transferring ownership of abandoned lots, in its 150-block neighborhood, to community associations and land trusts for redeveloping as community gardens, parks, and housing.[28]

Some innovative land recycling projects are happening in **California** as well. In **Sacramento**, the El Paseo Nuevo brownfield development is anchored by a public green space surrounded by civic amenities: including a library; day care center; and a church; the redevelopment of Sacramento's Southern Pacific rail yards will create a new waterfront park. In **Whittier** (in southeastern Los Angeles County), a coalition of nonprofit organizations and local governments is partnering to reclaim former oil fields to create a 3,000-acre open-space network throughout the county.[29]

It is sometimes faster and more cost-effective to rehabilitate and reuse existing assets and facilities than to build new parks.

Notes

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