

ACTIVE PARKS!

Increasing Physical Activity through
PARKS, TRAILS, AND GREENWAYS



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Public health and park and recreation professionals can increase physical activity and the use of parks, trails, and greenways by combining essential infrastructure improvements with additional activities like community engagement, programming, public awareness, and other access enhancements.

 PROGRAMMING

 INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

 ACCESS ENHANCEMENTS

 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

 PUBLIC AWARENESS



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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

This implementation guide is designed to support public health professionals and park and recreation professionals advance the *Active Parks! Increasing Physical Activity Through Parks, Trails, and Greenways* recommendation. The recommendation indicates that public health and park and recreation professionals can increase physical activity and the use of parks, trails, and greenways by combining 1) essential **infrastructure improvements** with 2) **additional activities** like community engagement, programming, public awareness, and other access enhancements.¹

To view the full recommendation and review from the Community Preventive Services Task Force, see [here](#).

The implementation guide provides an overview of this recommendation, including why it is important to center equity in this work. It also outlines a process to help communities implement this recommendation and offers additional resources and case studies that provide an opportunity to dive deeper into key steps of the process.

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Park, Trail, or Greenway Infrastructure

- Developing new parks, trails, or greenways
- Improving existing parks, trails, or greenways with additions or upgrades



ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Community Engagement, Programming, Public Awareness Activities, and Access Enhancements

- Community Engagement — ongoing collaboration with community members, particularly those who have historically faced barriers
- Programming — opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and other health benefits for all community members
- Public Awareness — activities that reach and inform all community members about programs and services
- Access Enhancements — improvements that increase access to and use of parks, trails, and greenways for all community members, including equipment, landscaping, ADA enhancements, and more

WHAT ARE PARKS, TRAILS, AND GREENWAYS?

PARKS

The Community Preventive Services Task Force defines parks as “designated public areas that often combine greenery with paths, facilities for physical activity and recreation, and places for relaxation and social interaction.”²

A park may be characterized by its natural, historic, landscape, or recreational features. Community members use parks for both active and passive forms of recreation, as well as for structured and unstructured activities and programming. Parks provide community members with a variety of environmental, physical, social, and mental health benefits. Parks may include designated spaces like green schoolyards, playgrounds, or other shared-use spaces that are available to the public and designed for recreational use. School property (playgrounds, athletic fields, etc.) can serve as park spaces if open to the public outside of school hours through shared use or other agreements.³

TRAILS AND GREENWAYS

The Community Preventive Services Task Force defines trails and greenways as “routes for walking, hiking, or cycling in urban, suburban, or rural areas (e.g., “rails to trails” conversion projects).” These routes may involve closing streets or sections of streets to cars to provide more space for walking and cycling (most often in urban areas).⁴

Trails can be located within parks, greenways and/or natural resource areas. Trails may be multipurpose and designed for walking, hiking, cycling, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, in-line skating, or other recreational activities. Trails can also include greenways, or land set aside for recreational use or environmental protection. Greenways may be established along a natural corridor (riverfront or stream valley), on land along a railroad converted to recreational use, or along a canal, scenic road, or other route. Trails and greenways often serve as connectors and transportation corridors that link parks and other recreational and/or public facilities (e.g., museums, libraries), public spaces, neighborhoods, shops/retail services, or other populated areas together.⁵

Photos courtesy of Dreamtime



INCREASING THE USE OF PARKS, TRAILS, AND GREENWAYS FOR SAFE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

To increase the use of parks, trails, and greenways for safe physical activity and physical, mental, and social health benefits, public health and park and recreation professionals can combine infrastructure improvements that expand equitable access to parks, trails, and greenways with additional activities such as:



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT — authentic, ongoing engagement with community members, particularly community members who have historically faced barriers to parks, trails, greenways, and recreational programming to ensure community participation and shared decision-making in all aspects of planning and implementation (e.g., surveying community members, creating a community advisory board, conducting community outreach at events).



PROGRAMMING — programs that offer structured opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and other health benefits for all community members (e.g., walking groups, exercise classes, organized sports, adaptive activities, out-of-school time programs). Equitable and inclusive programs consider accessibility and engagement across ages, abilities, neurodivergence (i.e., people who have cognitive functioning or processing that is different than what is considered standard), household incomes, cultures, race/ethnicities, languages, and skill levels.



PUBLIC AWARENESS ACTIVITIES — activities that reach and inform all community members about programs and services (e.g., banners, flyers, promotional campaigns, event days, social media). To ensure these materials are inclusive and accessible to all, consider ways to adapt the language to different reading levels, imagery, etc.



ACCESS ENHANCEMENTS — improvements that increase access to and use of parks, trails, and greenways for all community members (e.g., ADA enhancements, transportation connections, culturally relevant signage, street crossings, entry points from nearby neighborhoods, fair permitting policies, expanded hours of operation).

For the purposes of this guide, the term “infrastructure improvement” can refer to the development of new parks, trails, or greenways as well as additions, upgrades, or improvements to existing spaces. Infrastructure may include parks, trails, and greenways themselves, or other features that enhance a physical space including bike lanes, athletic fields and courts, crosswalks, playground equipment, exercise equipment, water features, landscaping, Americans with Disabilities (ADA) accessibility features, sidewalks, etc. Each of the additional activities can be implemented alone or combined with the other strategies to increase the use of parks, trails, and greenways for physical activity.⁶

Active Parks! Increasing Physical Activity Through Parks, Trails, and Greenways provides an effective approach for communities to increase physical activity that can be used in tandem with the [Activity-Friendly Routes](#)

to [Everyday Destinations](#) strategy. Both strategies focus on increasing physical activity by improving the design of communities. Parks, trails, and greenways are key destinations, which combine infrastructure with additional activities that engage communities, increase awareness, enhance access, or provide programs.

WHY PARK AND RECREATION EQUITY?

All people — no matter their race or ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, ability, or place of residence (urban, rural, or tribal areas) — deserve access to park and recreation programs, facilities, places, and spaces, including parks, trails, and greenways, that promote health and well-being. Yet, due to a history of unfair systems, including systemic racism and other power structures, policies, social norms, relationships, environments (physical and social), and resources, many people face additional barriers to accessing, experiencing, and benefiting from high-quality parks and recreation facilities (e.g., infrastructure and buildings), programs, and services.⁷

- The World Health Organization defines equity as taking steps to ensure that no unfair or avoidable differences exist among groups of people (whether these groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or any other means).⁸
- In the United States more than 100 million people, or 30 percent of the population, lack access to a park or trail within a 10-minute walk of their home.⁹
- Black and Hispanic persons and people with lower incomes are 50 percent less likely to have one recreational facility in their community, as compared to predominantly white and high-income persons.¹⁰
- Many communities of color and other historically marginalized groups, such as people with lower incomes, people who are LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities, lack the opportunity to experience parks, trails, and/or greenways — because either these resources do not exist near them, or if they do, they are not safe, welcoming, nor inclusive.¹¹

HEALTH INEQUITIES AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

Inequities within parks and recreation are not unique. Unfair practices, policies, and power structures have created health inequities — systemic differences in community conditions where people are born, grow, live, work, and age. This includes inequities in the built and social environments (e.g., transportation, land use, housing, safety), education, employment, healthcare, and other social resources and institutions.¹² Health inequities result in health disparities which are “reflected in differences in length of life; quality of life; rates of disease; severity of disease; injuries; and access to treatment.”¹³ Health inequities are most acutely felt by Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander persons, people of more than one race, people with lower incomes, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities. Older adults who are members of these populations often face health inequities at disproportionate rates, compared to the general older adult population.¹⁴

HEALTH EQUITY

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines health equity as “the state in which everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their highest level of health.” Health equity is achieved when no one is at a disadvantage for achieving this potential.¹⁵ Achieving health equity requires addressing historical and contemporary injustices and reducing the social disparities that impact a person’s ability to achieve health equity (e.g., social conditions like safety or access to transportation). For example, people who lack access to a park may also be less likely to obtain benefits from physical activity, exposure to nature, and outdoor recreation. However, just promoting the benefits of engaging in these activities will not eliminate these and other health disparities. Instead, public health and park and recreation professionals can take action to improve the conditions that create barriers to achieving health equity, prioritizing communities disproportionately impacted by social disparities.^{16,17}

HISTORICAL LACK OF INVESTMENT AND INCLUSION

Historic disinvestment has left marginalized populations without access to quality park and recreation opportunities. Modern forms of housing discrimination, exclusionary zoning, displacement, and other harmful policies and practices perpetuate disinvestment and prevent Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander people; people of more than one race; people with lower incomes; LGBTQ+ people; and other historically disenfranchised communities from enjoying spaces for recreation, even where they do exist.¹⁸ People with disabilities often face additional barriers to accessing and engaging in parks, trails, recreational facilities, or inclusive programs. In addition to inequitable investment in infrastructure and resources, historical policy decisions, exclusionary practices, and discrimination against these populations have created additional barriers to accessing and engaging in parks and recreational activities.¹⁹

To advance health equity, decrease health disparities, and address disinvestment, it is critical for public health and park and recreation professionals to prioritize advancing the *Active Parks! Increasing Physical Activity Through Parks, Trails, and Greenways* recommendation in areas and for people who historically have been excluded. This intentionality will help ensure all people can experience the physical, environmental, mental, and social health benefits that parks, trails, and greenways provide. Decreasing health inequities improves the health of all individuals and their communities and creates greater community cohesion and potential for economic gains.²⁰

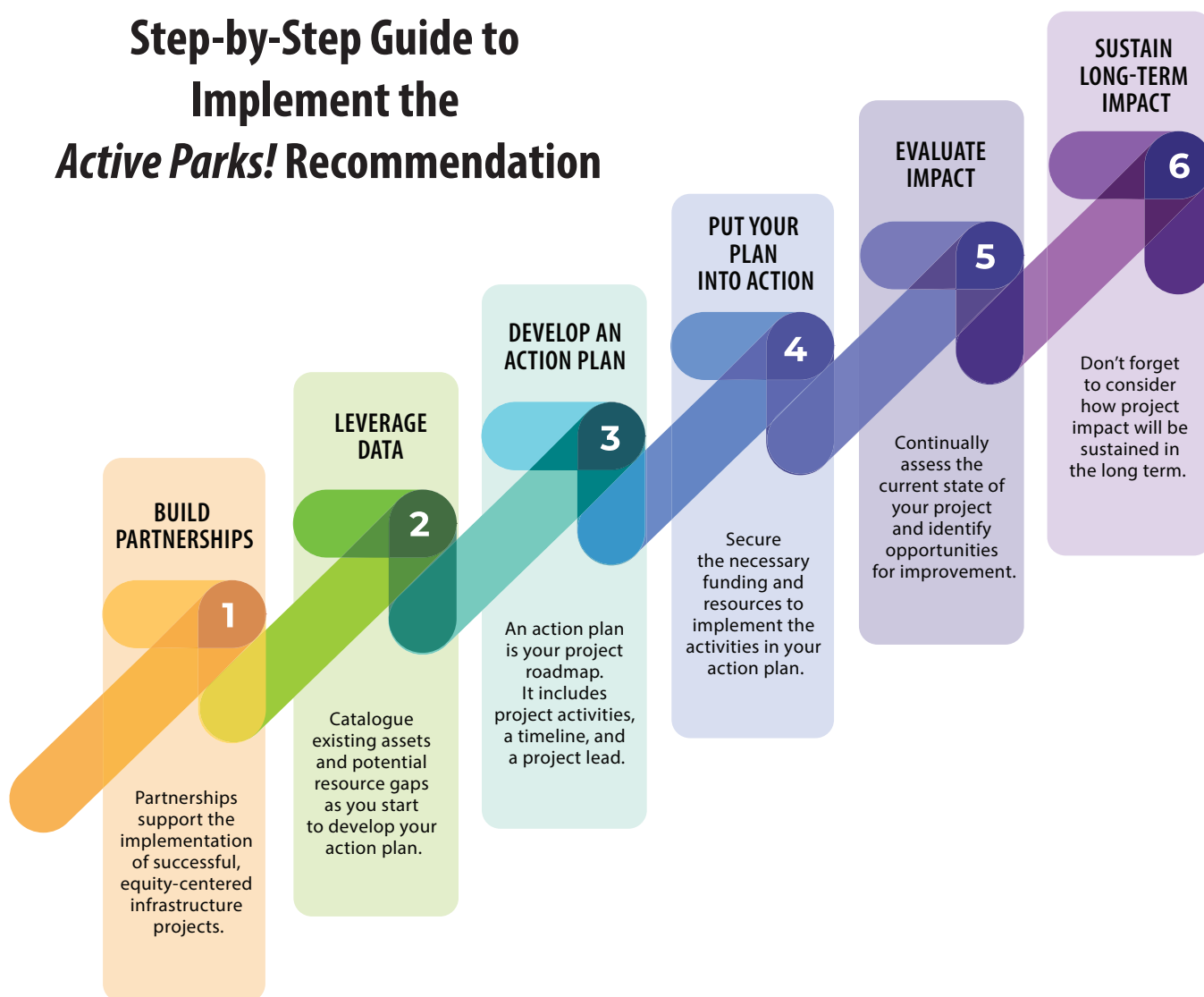
RESOURCES

- [Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This resource helps park and recreation professionals apply a racial equity lens when designing, implementing, and evaluating programs and services, and when developing infrastructure, maintenance, and operations plans.
- [Equity in Parks and Recreation](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This story map is a snapshot of policies and stories of park inequities throughout U.S. history. It is designed to acknowledge and reflect upon the experience of unequal access and abject practices and inspire the transformation of a just and equity-driven parks and recreation system for all.

SECTION II: IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

Section II of this resource outlines a process with key steps that public health, park and recreation professionals, and other community allies can take to implement the recommendation. Keep in mind that every community starts in a different place, and the implementation process outlined does not provide a one-size-fits-all approach but is meant to be flexible and adaptable to your community's needs.

Step-by-Step Guide to Implement the *Active Parks!* Recommendation



DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS AND BUILD COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Partnerships — whether strengthening existing or building new partnerships — are key to any successful, equity-centered park, trail, or greenway infrastructure project. Building partnerships that bring together a variety of interests and industries (i.e., cross-disciplinary and cross-sector partnerships), supports expanding, enhancing, and activating parks, trails, and greenways to increase physical activity.

Partnerships may take different forms. For example, some partners may choose to establish a formal agreement outlining roles, responsibilities, and commitments of partners, while others may not. While partnerships may look different, it is important that all partnerships be equitable, meaning that work is shared equitably (in alignment with capacity and resources of those involved), power is shared equally between all partners, and partners are rewarded and recognized for their roles.²¹

Work with the people who will use parks, trails, and greenways to design and activate these spaces. Be sure your partnership building efforts engage organizations that represent the strengths of the community and the people who historically have been excluded, most impacted by disinvestment and unfair policies, and lacked access to resources like parks, trails, and greenways. Equitable, inclusive community engagement is an ongoing process of working collaboratively with all people in a community to make sure a place, program, or service meets their needs. Gathering community input at the onset of a project — and finding ways to meaningfully engage the community from conceptualization through completion — builds relationships, creates community-driven solutions, and fosters a sense of community ownership. Beyond just collecting feedback, intentionally partnering with community members to share decision-making power and to increase the power and influence of underrepresented communities when setting project priorities can help eliminate the root causes of park, trail, and greenway inequities. Power-building approaches may include community organizing, youth and resident leadership development alongside more traditional capacity-building approaches like training, technical assistance, and funding.^{22,23}

Building trust with community members and partners also is critical to project success. Without trust, community members and partners may be hesitant to engage in project design and contribute. Without representation of the community in the process, the project may not meet the community's needs and desires. Building trust requires time, energy, a long-term commitment, and an investment in relationship building. It also requires acknowledging past indiscretions and failures, inviting shared leadership and decision-making, and delivering on your promises.²⁴

This guide is intended for both public health and park and recreation professionals. Please refer to the sections below that are relevant to your profession and make sure that you coordinate with efforts that may already be happening in your community.

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARK AND RECREATION DEPARTMENTS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS THAT PLAN, BUILD, MANAGE, AND ACTIVATE PARKS, TRAILS, AND GREENWAYS AS WELL AS OTHER PUBLIC SPACES

In any infrastructure project, it is important to involve your park and recreation department and/or other organizations that help build, manage, or activate parks, trails, and greenways. Most often these partners are city/town/county/tribal park and recreation departments, regional park systems, and special park districts, but they also can include state and national park and recreation systems along with nonprofit, park-related organizations such as land trusts and conservancies. Armed forces/military recreation also manage park and recreation land and facilities and offer programming, another partner to consider in your efforts. It's important to engage partners across multiple levels (i.e. local, regional, state) as all partners bring unique resources, strengths, and perspectives to the table. For example, city, county, and regional park and recreation agencies often work collaboratively but also independently. They own and manage different spaces and they may function differently operationally or have different areas of focus (maintenance of large destination parks and protected lands vs. local park, trails, greenways vs. recreational programming). Start your relationship-building efforts with park and recreation professionals and leaders — that way you can be coordinated in your approach and understand any ongoing efforts that may support it.

Other municipal, county, tribal, regional, state, and/or national departments, and/or organizations may already be involved or could become involved in park, trail, or greenway planning, development, and activation. These organizations could include planning, transportation, healthcare, “friends of” groups, conservancies, and community-based organizations, schools, libraries, faith-based entities, universities, or other community institutions. Be sure to include these groups in your community outreach to leverage organizational and community assets and resources.

Consider entering a shared use agreement. Shared use occurs when government entities or other organizations agree to open their facilities to be used by the broader community. One common example is a school playground available for public use after school hours. Shared use arrangements can allow new users for many types of spaces, such as gymnasiums, pools, playing fields, parks, walking trails, garden plots, kitchens, meeting and performance spaces, and pavilions. As a widely promoted strategy to create opportunities for physical activity, shared use is particularly useful for communities that want access to more park spaces. Shared use agreements are important formal documents between parties that outline key operations considerations including allowable use of the space and maintenance responsibilities, practices, and costs. These spaces are not a substitute for adequate public infrastructure investments, but they can be an important component of larger initiatives to promote healthy living and to advance health equity.²⁵

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITIES HISTORICALLY LACKING ACCESS TO AND INVESTMENT IN PARKS, TRAILS, AND GREENWAYS

Finding ways to build relationships with communities historically lacking access to and investment in parks, trails, and greenways is key to your partnership building efforts. Building relationships with trusted community leaders and community champions is an important step for both public health and park and recreation professionals. These relationships are critical to building support for your project with communities that may be hesitant to engage. Local leaders may serve as community organizers, work in local schools, run neighborhood businesses, lead faith-based institutions, or be youth leaders or community/tribal elders. Work with these trusted community members to be the project's representative in the community, and ensure their voices are at the table to help guide project decision-making. When engaging community members, consider how you will compensate them for their time and expertise.

Trust-building practices may require recognizing that communities may have a mistrust of government institutions or outside organizations; ensuring your workforce is culturally competent and representative of the community; being transparent and accountable; focusing on fairness; collaborating with community leaders to account for cultural humility, awareness, and sensitivity; and using a people-first approach to account for individual experiences. Trust building demands open and transparent communication. When community members offer input and contribute their time and effort, ensure that you are listening and communicate to them when actions have been taken.

Working with an existing advisory group like a tribal council or creating a new community advisory council are other ways to build relationships with community members and collect their input and feedback. Council members may include public health and park and recreation professionals; community members and leaders; and partners such as healthcare providers, universities, local government, nonprofits, and more. Ensure the people on the council embody the different interests and experiences of the community, understand its language and culture, and have a historic connection to the neighborhood. It is critical to ensure members include a diverse set of perspectives and experiences accounting for race, ethnicity, age, income, gender, ability, and other characteristics. Prioritize including people who have experienced a historical lack of access and investment in parks, trails, and greenways, and who are most impacted by health inequities. Engage the council early and often in the project to increase participation and to provide valuable feedback during the planning process. The structure of your advisory council can help sustain and institutionalize engagement efforts far beyond a single project or administration and give weight to future initiatives while relieving your team of some work.²⁶

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH PUBLIC HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

Like parks and recreation, public health departments (local, state, and/or national) also lead, support and implement various activities and strategies focused on improving community health. Public health organizations are increasingly interested in participating in community-based partnerships and helping advance community-driven solutions to address barriers to health and health inequities. Partnerships with public health organizations allow you to leverage their skills, resources, and reputation to establish a cohesive

and coordinated ecosystem that supports community health at large. Public health organizations also play a key role in collecting, analyzing, and sharing community health data that can inform decision-making and prioritize where investments are most needed.²⁷

Similar to how park and recreation agencies at city, county, regional, and state levels work collaboratively but bring unique strengths to the table, public health agencies at different levels can also function differently. Local and state public health departments can have different operational structures and governance, and different capacities, resources, skills, and expertise. They may also differ in how they function and deliver public health services and determine public health priorities. State public health departments often have a larger role in setting policy, conducting planning activities, monitoring state-wide public health data, and having regulatory responsibilities for environmental safety, sanitation, and water. Local public health departments are frequently on the frontlines of public health issues and work directly to deliver programs, services, or initiatives that improve the health of their communities and educate people about health issues. For example, while a primary role of public health departments is to monitor public health data/vital statistics, local and state public health departments may have access to and utilize different data sources and public health surveillance systems (i.e. community-level vs. state-level data). Engaging public health partners across all levels can help to ensure you are leveraging existing assets, skillsets, relationships, and resources.²⁸

COMMUNICATION

Setting expectations for roles, responsibilities, and communication is particularly important as you establish partnerships and build relationships. Define clear and equitable roles and responsibilities, agreed upon by all partners, at the beginning of a partnership. Assess and update these principles over time to navigate unexpected changes or emerging project needs. Individual staff and/or key project leaders may play significant roles in the design, implementation, and other supporting activities (e.g., community engagement, programming, public awareness, access enhancements) of park, trail, and greenway infrastructure improvements. So, keep the lines of communication between main points of contact open. This open communication is essential to your partnership's ability to withstand staff turnover or other organizational changes that might occur during the project. Ongoing communication is also necessary to discuss progress, navigate challenges, build solutions, and prevent larger issues from arising.²⁹

RESOURCES

Partnerships

- [*City Workshop: Principles of Successful Park Partnerships*](#) (City Parks Alliance): This guide offers recommendations for creating effective cross-agency and cross-sector park partnerships.
- [*Fostering Partnerships for Community Engagement: Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook*](#) (Urban Institute): This toolkit, complete with case studies, offers guidance for building and maintaining equitable partnerships that draw on community strengths.
- [*Shared Use Playbook*](#) (Changelab Solutions): This guide explores the benefits of shared use agreements between government entities and offers tools for implementing shared use initiatives that support healthy communities.
- [*Successful Partnerships for Parks*](#) (Urban Land Institute): This report offers case studies and lessons learned from successful cross-sector partnerships between parks departments and local entities.

Community Engagement

- [*Changing the Landscape: People, Parks, and Power*](#) (Prevention Institute): This resource outlines strategies for addressing park and green space inequities that prioritize power building among the people closest to the problem, so they can drive policy and systems-change solutions.
- [*Community Engagement Resource Guide: Creating Equitable Access to High-Performing Parks*](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This resource provides park and recreation professionals with a roadmap to implement equitable and inclusive community engagement strategies around the planning, design, construction, maintenance, and implementation of park projects and park plans.
- [*Let's Get Together, A Guide for Engaging Communities and Creating Change*](#) (Safe Routes Partnership): This toolkit provides a people-centered framework and strategies for community partners to effectively engage community members in programs and initiatives.
- [*Planning for Equity Policy Guide*](#) (American Planning Association): This resource offers guidance on developing and advocating for policies that center equity, including policies focusing on public space design, programming, and evaluation.
- [*Principles of Community Engagement*](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): This resource describes the principles of community engagement, offers guidance on managing organizational support and evaluating programs and engagement, and provides case studies of successful community engagement efforts.

CONDUCT OR REFERENCE A BASELINE ASSESSMENT

It is important to work with community members, partners, and other organizations to understand current needs, existing assets, or resources to inform infrastructure improvements and activate your parks, trails, and greenways to increase physical activity. Many tools can be used to collect information about what your community wants and needs, to gauge community readiness and interests, and to assess other factors that can reduce the risk of unintended consequences. For example, if a park is experiencing elevated rates of violence, addressing park safety may be the first step required before adding programming. Or, if a park is a popular space for passive recreation (birdwatching, picnicking, hiking, photography, etc.), then additional factors may need to be considered before adding new programming to promote physical activity. It is important you rely on several data sources that includes input from diverse perspectives to inform your planning process.

Ensure that your data collection efforts engage all community members in the process, especially people from non-dominant social groups, people most impacted by health inequities, and people who have historically lacked access to parks, trails, and greenways and to high-quality, park and recreation programs and services. Ensuring the equitable inclusion of individuals historically excluded from data collection and information sharing opportunities may require a shift or change in how you collect data. For example, you might implement new strategies that prioritize underrepresented groups and go beyond traditional means of quantitative data collection (e.g., surveys) and include qualitative methods (e.g., community meetings, focus groups), or a combination of both. Photovoice, a community-based research method that encourages community members to document reality through photography, and the use of youth and adult input collected through citizen science programs may provide qualitative information around park, trail, and greenway needs.^{30,31} Equitable and inclusive data collection may differ by community but could encompass a variety of strategies such as conducting direct outreach to priority populations, translating outreach materials, attending community meetings and events where priority populations may gather, utilizing new and innovative data sources, and other strategies. Leveraging the partnerships and relationships established with community members and trusted leaders is key to an inclusive data collection approach.

Ensure that data analysis and interpretation prioritizes equity and inclusion. When using qualitative data (non-numerical data), deliberately use quotes and stories from a variety of voices to illustrate and enhance findings. To avoid one perspective dominating the conversation, highlight differing points of view, when available, and explore potential reasons for those discrepancies. With quantitative data (measurable data), as from surveys, consider the characteristics of participants and how uneven numbers of respondents from different groups or small numbers of respondents overall may skew the results. Explicitly acknowledge any limitations. Finally, after analyzing the data, share the rough results with stakeholders and the community to provide an opportunity for them to participate in interpretation. Often, the most actionable and useful recommendations come from including as many diverse community voices as possible in the process from start to finish.

PARK AND RECREATION BENCHMARKS AND METRICS

While every community is different, national benchmark data can help identify best practices to better serve your community. Several benchmarks and metrics can be used to assess how parks, trails, and greenways are distributed within a community as well as to assess their quality; these metrics include the total number of parks, acres and miles of trails, types of programming, and the number and type of other park and recreation facilities and infrastructure. These metrics help identify areas with gaps in safe, close-to-home park and trail access, including lack of quality infrastructure, infrastructure that does not match community priorities, distribution of park and trail maintenance, distribution of capital spending, and the type and availability of programming.³²

Gather data on the quality of park, trail, and greenway amenities and the programs offered. A Geographic Information System (GIS) database allows you to map, visualize, and analyze many aspects of your community's park system such as park acreage, park access within a 10-minute walk of home, sidewalks, trail and walking access to parks, and transit access to parks. A GIS tool can layer these park metrics with demographic, environmental, community investment, and other data. If you do not have a GIS database, using online resources like The Trust for Public Land's [ParkServe](#) can help fill this gap.³³

State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans (SCORP) regularly include statewide data on parks, trails, and greenways. States are required to submit recreation plans every five years to receive continued funding through the federally administered Land and Water Conservation Fund. SCORPs consistently include data on the supply and demand for outdoor recreation infrastructure — including parks, trails, and greenways — priorities for future investment, and perceived benefits provided to the public by recreational experiences. More recent SCORPs assess recreation managers' perspectives on key issues (such as maintenance and management priorities) and strategies to increase equitable access to infrastructure.³⁴ The SCORP development process involves substantial input from both members of the public and outdoor recreation stakeholders. It is recommended park and recreation leaders, state health department officials, and other related groups provide direct and proactive feedback to the agency responsible for the plan's development to enhance the SCORP's emphasis on goals related to health, physical activity, and equity.

A walk audit can provide another helpful tool in assessing routes to parks, trails, and greenways. A walk audit assesses pedestrian safety and accessibility, plus helps identify areas to improve walkability and other modes of safe, active transportation across communities. Walk audits can be conducted individually or led by diverse groups of stakeholders; these groups can include community members of different ages, abilities, backgrounds, and interests, alongside public officials and private stakeholders.³⁵

PARK AND RECREATION COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

Conducting a park and recreation community needs assessment via surveys, focus groups, or interviews helps identify how community members currently use park and recreation services, their satisfaction with current services, and any gaps in offerings and engagement. Community needs assessments can gauge community members' opinions on how they feel their health and wellness needs are being met, details on their historical and current barriers to access, and priorities that may not be currently addressed. This combination



Photo courtesy of Juan Carlos Chan, City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks

of a satisfaction survey plus eliciting unmet community priorities makes needs assessments uniquely powerful feedback mechanisms. Remember to elevate data collection from people who have experienced a historical lack of access and investment in parks, trails, and greenways, and people most impacted by health inequities.³⁶ Combining these qualitative data collection methods with the quantitative analyses outlined above helps to interpret findings and elevate the perspectives of people who may be underrepresented in existing data sources.

INTEGRATING COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENTS INTO PARK ASSESSMENTS

Community health needs assessments provide additional population health data to inform the development and activation of parks, trails, greenways, and other public spaces. Typically, public health departments or healthcare systems lead these assessments, which involve collecting primary data through surveys or secondary data through local public datasets. Assessments can help align shared goals to better understand barriers to health across the community and may include stakeholder meetings, community focus groups, surveys, interviews with community leaders, and/or population health data and other health-related data.³⁷ These assessments can provide important data related to rates of chronic disease and barriers to health resources and environments. Community health needs assessments can help identify where an investment in new or enhanced parks, trails, and greenways would be most equitable as well as which additional activities (e.g., community engagement, programming, public awareness, other access enhancements) would enhance equity.

COMMUNITY ASSET MAPPING

Community asset mapping and park and trail facility mapping are other ways you can collect information. Asset mapping is a group activity that involves identifying and cataloging services, spaces in the community, and resources (including intangible ones, such as historical or institutional knowledge or shared cultural traditions). Build a baseline by consulting with your park and recreation department first; they will have an existing inventory of the properties (parks, trails, greenways, and other spaces) that they manage along with other available park and recreation resources. This activity can be a component of your needs assessment or a standalone activity. Asset mapping can foster community buy-in and emphasize strengths and assets among stakeholders. It also can help identify areas in a community that have traditionally lacked necessary resources and assets. Examples of categories of potential assets are:

- Individuals (e.g., skills, experiences, individual businesses)
- Community-based, private, and nonprofit organizations (e.g., faith-based, social service agencies, hospitals, higher education, businesses)
- Public institutions (e.g., public schools, libraries, police, fire departments)
- Physical resources (e.g., parks, community meeting spaces, housing, commercial structures)
- Social or cultural resources (e.g., networks and groups, social resources)³⁸

HEALTH EQUITY ASSESSMENT FOR PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES

Conducting a health equity assessment is another opportunity to establish baseline data on the current state of organizational practices, policies, and operations and identify ways to better center and advance equity moving forward. One tool developed specifically for park and recreation agencies to assess health equity within their operations, practices, and programming is *Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation: A Framework for Action* from the National Recreation and Park Association. The framework includes an agency assessment tool that examines existing culture and standard operations across six key areas:

1. Local park and recreation history
2. Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion
3. Programs and services
4. Power and Privilege in programs and services
5. Policy and system change
6. Evaluation and impact

Findings from the assessment can be used to build an equity action plan and measure progress to advance approaches that support equitable access to parks, trails, and greenways as well as high-quality park and recreation programs and services.³⁹

RESOURCES

Assessment Guidance

- [Community Needs Assessment](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This resource guides parks and recreation professionals through the entire community needs assessment lifecycle and recommends how to use survey data to strengthen agency operations.
- [Community Readiness for Community Change](#) (Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research): This guide provides steps for conducting a community readiness assessment and details the stages of the Community Readiness Model. It includes community readiness interview questions, rating scales, and score sheets for assessing the five key dimensions of readiness.
- [Complete Parks Playbook](#) (ChangeLab Solutions): This comprehensive resource helps professionals evaluate the strength and weaknesses of a park system to inform improvements that will benefit community health. It describes and provides examples of each element of a complete parks system and offers guidance on how to implement each element.
- [Elevating Health Equity Through Parks and Recreation](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This resource helps park and recreation professionals to apply a racial equity lens when designing, implementing, and evaluating programs and services, and when developing infrastructure, maintenance, and operations plans.
- [Toolkit for Stakeholder Asset Mapping](#) (National Center on Advancing Person-Centered Practices and Systems): This toolkit provides guidance for agencies to identify community stakeholders and inventory current stakeholder engagement with agency programs and services to develop future offerings that are responsive to community needs.

Assessment Tools

- [Community Health Assessment and Group Evaluation Action Guide](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): This guide includes the Community Health Assessment and Group Evaluation (CHANGE) data-collection tool, which gathers data on community assets and areas of opportunity to develop initiatives that build community health.
- [Park Metrics](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): Park Metrics are agency performance standards and insights that can assist park and recreation professionals in the effective management and planning of their operating resources and capital facilities.
- [ParkScore](#) (Trust for Public Land): The ParkScore Index compares park systems across five categories — access, investment, amenities, acreage, and equity — and measures park access levels.

- [ParkServe®](#) (Trust for Public Land): This database and interactive GIS mapping tool provides insights about access to U.S. city parks to assist with park planning and advocacy. It provides the number and location of parks within a city, percentage and demographics of residents living within a 10-minute walk of a park, and percentage of city land used for parks and recreation.
- [Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit](#) (Race Forward): This guide provides sample questions to use in a Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA), a systemic evaluation of how a proposed action or decision may adversely impact different racial and ethnic groups.
- [Walk Audit Tool Kit](#) (AARP Foundation): This resource helps individuals and teams conduct a walk audit to assess the walkability and pedestrian safety of a location and identify recommendations to improve pedestrian safety.

Community members participate in a yoga class held by El Paso Parks and Recreation. Photo courtesy of El Paso Parks and Recreation, El Paso, TX.



DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Now it's time to engage your partners in using the data collected to develop an action plan. This plan defines you and your partners' approach to increasing the use of parks, trails, and greenways for physical activity. Your action plan will include the activities needed to achieve the goal, a timeline for doing so, and a person (or people) to lead the plan's execution. Working with your partners to develop the action plan helps ensure activities and tasks are distributed equitably. According to the recommendation, your action plan needs to include steps to 1) achieve your park, trail, or greenway infrastructure improvement and 2) combine it with one or more of the additional activities (e.g., community engagement, programming, public awareness, access enhancements).

Define Objectives

Explicitly defining objectives, or the steps you will take to achieve your action plan is key to increasing the use of parks, trails, and greenways for physical activity. You will need to define objectives related to infrastructure along with the additional activities. Objectives can be broken down into short-, medium-, and long-term and can be developed in alignment with the common acronym SMART. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes SMART objective characteristics as:

- **Specific:** Concrete, detailed and well-defined, so that you know where you are going and what to expect when you arrive.
- **Measurable:** Numbers and quantities provide means of measurement and comparison.
- **Achievable:** Feasible and easy to put into action.
- **Relevant:** Aligned with the action plan's stated goals and objectives.
- **Time-Bound:** A time frame helps to set boundaries around the objective.

ACTION PLANNING PART 1: INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

The development of a master plan, a process typically led by government agencies, can support developing action plans related to park, trail or greenway infrastructure improvements. While park master plans are great for action planning at the regional, community, neighborhood, or individual park level, other templates like trail and greenway master plans also can be helpful for standalone trail or greenway projects.

Park, trail, and greenway master plans are comprehensive documents that identify and prioritize gaps in your park, trail, or greenway system. They help you understand historic and current barriers to access and can support developing a plan that prioritizes addressing gaps and inequities. Designed to help communities take stock of current amenities and facilities to guide future growth and development, master plans that are grounded in equity and inclusion can help ensure parks, trails, and greenways benefit all community members, especially groups who have been traditionally excluded from these spaces.⁴⁰ The master planning and other infrastructure planning processes also create an opportunity to plan for ADA accessibility and assess for any unintended consequence of park and trail infrastructure projects (e.g., gentrification resulting in increased housing and other costs of living and/or displacement). Once you prioritize where park or trail enhancements are needed, define project objectives, and take the steps needed to achieve them.

ACTION PLANNING PART 2: EXPLORING ADDITIONAL, PROACTIVE ACTIVITIES

After creating objectives and an action plan for developing or enhancing your park, trail, or greenway infrastructure, it is time to start thinking about the other approaches that will help to activate the space to increase use and physical activity. These additional activities are critical to increasing use and physical activity. The Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) found insufficient evidence to determine whether park, trail, and greenway infrastructure increases physical activity when implemented without additional activities, concluding that having a high-quality park, trail, or greenway nearby does not by itself increase physical activity among community members.⁴¹

Below we will explore the community engagement, programming, public awareness activities, and other access enhancement strategies to increase the use of parks, trails, and greenways for safe physical activity.



ENGAGE COMMUNITY

Community engagement is an ongoing practice. Identify objectives for your action plan that are related to involving the community in planning for all types of activities (infrastructure, programming, public awareness, etc.). Using a variety of engagement methods can be more effective than a single method to involve community members in activities. A mixed-methods approach lets you experiment to see what works best for your community, reach a diverse population, and ensure all voices are heard. Community engagement can include touchpoints like focus groups, community events, interviews, door-to-door outreach, and outreach via text messaging or social media. Sometimes the right approach might be something personalized you create for each community.⁴² While community engagement is one of the recommended strategies to increase physical activity and use of parks, trails, and greenways, remember that it is an ongoing activity that is a key part of the overall implementation process to advance the *Active Parks! Increasing Physical Activity Through Parks, Trails, and Greenways* recommendation. Keep in mind that for each of the activities below (programming, public awareness, and access enhancements) to be successful, community engagement needs to be factored into the planning and evaluation process, and should prioritize engaging communities that have historically lacked access to parks, trails, and greenways and/or who are more acutely impacted by health inequities.



PROGRAMMING

Programming refers to a wide variety of structured opportunities and safe activities for community members based on their interests. Programming includes physical activity and social opportunities like exercise classes, walking groups, or youth sports. Programming also may include community events designed to engage people in health and wellness opportunities like 5K walks/runs, health fairs, or celebratory events. There are many factors to consider when adding programming to parks, trails, greenways, and other public spaces. Considerations may include: 1) other community level factors like improving the safety of the park, trail, or greenway; 2) if the programming being added will increase physical activity and improve health outcomes; 3) centering equity within access and fee structures program schedules; and 4) examining the staffing, costs, equipment, and other resources needed to run the program for long-term sustainability.



Park and recreation staff in New Rochelle, New York, formed “Outside the Box in Our Parks” during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide safe recreation and fun activities for youth when almost all other activities were canceled. Photo courtesy of Sam Gomez, New Rochelle Parks and Recreation, New York.

Whether creating new or refining ongoing programming to improve access and quality, your action plan needs objectives related to engaging the community in program design to help ensure the community is represented in programming. Leveraging the community engagement strategies mentioned in this guide can support bringing together a diverse group of voices to help ensure all community members feel welcome in and benefit from programming.⁴³ Consider including action plan objectives related to the continuous evaluation of all physical activity programs to measure program impact and reach, health outcomes, and community member satisfaction. Keep in mind that people of color, people with lower incomes, people who are LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities face additional barriers to access programming, so it is important to develop, implement, and refine programs to keep their needs and desires top of mind.



PUBLIC AWARENESS ACTIVITIES

Another important factor in increasing the use of parks, trails, and greenways for physical activity is public awareness, which refers to making community members fully aware of enhanced accessibility to these settings, the amenities and programming available, and the places to find these offerings. Public awareness activities may include posting banners and flyers, marketing offerings via promotional campaigns (e.g., radio, television, print, social media), hosting public events, and ensuring that public awareness materials are inclusive and accessible to all (consider language, reading level, terminology, neurodivergent people, people who may be visually/hearing-impaired, etc.). Try to understand residents’ perceptions of the quality of these spaces and offerings. Building awareness and understanding perceptions requires collecting information from the community about current conditions like the value and usage of an amenity, community members’ knowledge of offerings, barriers and constraints to utilization, ways residents currently find out about offerings, and perceptions of safety.⁴⁴ Community engagement is critical to each additional activity, so

consider connecting with community members (especially historically marginalized groups) on how your agency can break down barriers to access, how the community would like to learn about programming in the future, and/or how community members prefer to communicate with your agency about available offerings. Consider incorporating these types of activities into your action plan if you choose this activity.⁴⁵



ACCESS ENHANCEMENTS

Examples of access enhancements include ensuring ADA accessibility, safe walking and biking connections, bike racks, street crossings, lighting infrastructure, expanded hours of operation, public transit to parks, trails, and greenways, adequate signage, and wayfinding signage that includes the grade of the incline and minutes to destinations (where appropriate). These enhancements are essential to ensuring all community members can easily access and safely use parks, trails, and greenways and to increasing the use of these spaces for physical activity. Due to unfair and discriminatory policies and funding, including disinvestment, people with lower incomes and communities of color have historically faced barriers to accessing safe and connected parks, trails, and greenways — important information to keep in mind as you begin improvements. If you select this activity, consider adding objectives that engage the community in deciding where access enhancements are most needed and what types of access enhancements will be most helpful. Use this data to develop entry points to parks, trails, and greenways that specifically connect low-income and communities of color to this infrastructure, a historic barrier to access, so these community members feel welcomed, included, and encouraged to use the space for physical activity.⁴⁶ In addition to engaging with the community, also consider including objectives related to collecting data on safe routes to parks, trails, and greenways using a walkability or accessibility audit to uncover where gaps in access exist.

RESOURCES

Action Planning (General)

- [Active Communities Tool](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): This toolkit provides guidance for cross-sector teams seeking to develop an action plan to improve built environments that promote physical activity. It includes two parts — the Active Communities Tool: An Action Planning Guide and the Active Communities Tool: Assessment Modules. [Module 5: Parks and Recreation Facilities](#) featured in this resource helps professionals assess plans, policies, environments, and resources that may impact facility access.
- [Creating an Equitable System-Wide Park Master Plan](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This resource guides the development of a system-wide master plan that sets a vision to remove historical inequities and ensure that parks, trails, and greenways are providing the most benefit to communities. It guides professionals on the four elements of a master plan: internal assessment, community engagement, resources and data collection, and development of an implementation plan. A [case study guide](#) is included.

- [Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages: A Step by Step Guide](#) (AARP, Trust for Public Land, 80 Cities): This resource offers detailed guidance on the creation and enhancement of parks and public spaces that are inclusive to all members of a community.
- [Parks, Trails, and Health Workbook](#) (National Park Service, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): This resource helps agencies incorporate public health considerations into the planning and development of parks and trails. The workbook offers guidance on community health profiles, site assessment and planning, park and trail system planning, and monitoring and evaluation as well as case studies, matrices, and health impact assessment resources.
- [Trail Building Toolbox](#) (Rails to Trails Conservancy): This toolkit includes an array of resources for successfully building trails, including guidance for community organizing and engagement, land acquisition, funding, planning, and design.

Engage Community

- [Toolkit for Health, Arts, Parks, and Equity](#) (Trust for Public Land): This toolkit offers case studies, principles, and policy guidelines on using place-based arts and culture to achieve health equity.
- [Youth as Health and Wellness Leaders in Local Parks and Recreation Best Practices Guide](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This guide helps park and recreation agencies plan, design, and implement youth-led health and wellness engagement initiatives and programs.

Programming

- [Community Wellness Hubs Toolkit](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This toolkit contains evidence and practice-based strategies, resources, and case study examples to guide professionals in advancing programming and services in parks and recreation in alignment with seven dimensions of well-being.
- [Healthy Out-of-School Time Coalition Physical Activity Resources](#) (National Institute on Out-Of-School Time): Explore evidence-based programs, research, and resources to learn effective methods at increasing physical activity for youth during out-of-school times.
- [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#), 2nd Edition (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services): A resource for health professionals, practitioners, and policymakers as they design and implement physical activity programs, policies, and promotion initiatives. It provides information that helps Americans make healthy choices for themselves and their families, and discusses evidence-based, community-level activities that can make being physically active the easy choice in all the places where people are born, live, learn, work, play and age.

Public Awareness Activities

- [Active People, Healthy Nation](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): Active People, Healthy Nation is a national initiative led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help 27 million Americans become more physically active by 2027. Explore evidence-based strategies to increase physical activity and use the community champion resources and multimedia tools to promote physical activity across your community.
 - » [Moving Matters Campaign Partner Resources](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) provides resources to help communities and organizations increase awareness and promote physical activity.
 - » [What's Your Role? Parks, Recreation and Green Spaces](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) offers guidance on the design, promotion, and implementation of strategies to encourage physical activity, highlighting successful examples from across the United States.
- [Awareness and the Use of Parks](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This report explores the role public awareness plays in driving park and recreation usage and presents a series of steps and a checklist to execute an awareness strategy.
- [Move Your Way® Community Resources](#) (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion): The Move Your Way® campaign is the promotional campaign for the second edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. Use the resource in this section to learn more about the campaign and how you can use it to communicate with your community about physical activity.

Access Enhancements

- [Accessibility Guidebook for Outdoor Recreation and Trails](#) (USDA Forest Service): This resource provides guidance on how to apply the [Forest Service Outdoor Recreation Accessibility Guidelines](#) (FSORAG) and [Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines](#) (FSTAG), both Architectural Barriers Act (ABA)-based accessibility standards for National Forest System facilities, routes, and features. It focuses on integrating accessibility into planning, design, construction, and maintenance of outdoor recreation facilities and trails while still preserving the natural environment.
- [Connecting People to Parks: A Toolkit to Increase Safe and Equitable Access to Local Parks and Green Spaces](#) (Safe Routes Partnership): This toolkit offers guidance for parks and recreation professionals to increase safe, equitable access to parks and green spaces through active transportation.
- [Human-Centered Mobility Principles](#) (Partnership for Active Transportation): This brief guide details five shared principles to guide mobility and community design choices: safety, streets are public space, public engagement and equity, data, and affordability.

PUTTING YOUR PLAN INTO ACTION

Now that you, and your partners have developed your objectives and action plan, informed by community engagement, it's time to develop a realistic implementation timeline. Below are sample actions to consider when developing short-, medium- and long-term park, trails, and greenway infrastructure improvements as well as additional community engagement, programming, public awareness, and access enhancement activities. Keep in mind the importance of centering equity. Consider how to prioritize meeting the infrastructure, programming, outreach, and access needs for people who have historically faced barriers to parks, trails, greenways, and physical activity opportunities.

Proper funding and resources are required to move forward with this step. Consider how you can generate and allocate funding to projects using an equity lens to address barriers to park access primarily experienced by low-income communities and historically disenfranchised populations. Several resources can help secure funding to implement equitable park, trail, and greenway projects:

- [*Investing in Equitable Urban Park Systems*](#) (Urban Institute): Drawing from interviews with park and recreation leaders and a scan of innovative practices and approaches from across the country, this report highlights funding strategies and models communities are implementing to place equity and communities at the center of park investments and funding decisions.
- [*Equitable Park Funding Hub*](#) (City Parks Alliance): The Equitable Park Funding Hub provides easy access to information on a variety of funding sources relevant for parks and recreation in low-income communities and communities of color, and highlights the partnerships required for successful funding.

Residents enjoy time spent kayaking on Lake Sumter. Photo taken by Brian Sumner, courtesy of The Villages Recreation and Parks Department, Florida



SHORT TERM ACTIONS (6 MONTHS TO 1 YEAR)

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

- Conduct strategic maintenance and repairs such as trimming greenery, clearing trails, removing trash, maintaining clean and accessible restrooms, removing invasive species, controlling poisonous plants (e.g., ivy or oak overtaking trails), and removing graffiti
- Host pop-up demonstrations of park, trail, and greenway improvements for the community
- Assess access points and barriers to parks, trails, and greenways to make recommendations for improvements (e.g., fencing, entry points, signage, crosswalks, curb cuts, other features that increase access and improve ADA accessibility)



ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Access Enhancements

- Assess park features including signage, language, imagery, and historical inaccuracies that may exclude or create non-welcoming spaces for community members
- Engage with public transit officials to prioritize and bring new and improved public transit to parks, trails, and greenways

Community Engagement

- Engage community members of all ages and backgrounds, especially community members who have historically faced barriers and limited access to parks, trails, greenways, and physical activity opportunities, about:
 - New or improved park, trail, and greenway infrastructure
 - Program needs/preferences and other services provided in a park
 - How to reach and connect with your priority audience, using this information to guide public awareness approaches
- Engage community-based organizations, existing community advisory councils, or establish a new council representative of the community's diversity to inform infrastructure, programming and other services provided in a park

Programming

- Add programming based on community interests (e.g., walking groups, birdwatching, pickleball, physical activity classes, summer, and afterschool programming)
- Ensure staff and volunteers are representative of the target population and programming is inclusive and adaptive

Public Awareness Activities

- Promote activities so the public is aware of available opportunities
- Host a community-wide event like a 5K fun walk/run, promote existing initiatives and campaigns like Active People, Healthy NationSM or Move Your Way[®], or take part in existing events like Family Health and Fitness Day
- Host pop-up demonstrations of street improvements, signage, lighting infrastructure, and other access enhancements that are culturally relevant and would increase safe park access and use

MEDIUM TERM ACTIONS (1 YEAR TO 3 YEARS)

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Parks

- Add a single park amenity or infrastructure improvement to an existing park based on community input, such as elements that provide shade; share culturally relevant art to support belonging; and create spaces for gathering, play, and activity
- Add park safety and public health elements to existing parks such as access to free and safe drinking water, accessible restrooms, Wi-Fi, lighting, or emergency phones
- Remove barriers to park entry such as fences, gates, curbs, and bushes unless they are there to promote safety or prevent injury
- Add elements and park infrastructure to ensure ADA accessibility for parking spaces, seating areas, restroom features, and inclusive play spaces
- Plant trees and other native species to add shade and greenery; add green infrastructure elements to improve stormwater management

Trails and Greenways

- Re-grade or pave existing trails when renovations are needed, or when it is possible to make trails or trail segments accessible to people with disabilities.
- Add trail safety and comfort elements like lighting, benches, and signage; improve trail crossings at street intersections, plazas, parking lots, etc.
- Plant trees and other native species along existing trails to add shade and greenery.
- Make trails accessible and inclusive of people with disabilities, ensuring they meet ADA accessibility guidelines for width, slopes, surfacing, etc.



ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Access Enhancements

- Engage community members of all ages, including youth and older adults, in safety programs related to new or improved park, trail, or greenway infrastructure and/or programming
- Promote public transit to the park, trail, or greenway
- Schedule fields for sports and other permitted programs equitably to ensure that affordable and accessible recreational opportunities are available for all
- Expand hours of operation, add signage and wayfinding, improve crosswalks
- Install bike storage and/or e-charging equipment that allow users to store and charge e-bikes safely

Community Engagement

- Conduct community centered design sessions to plan park or trail improvements
- Develop partnerships and support community-based organizations to activate the park, trail, or greenway through programming and other activities (community engagement, public awareness, and/or access enhancement activities)

Programming

- Provide one-on-one support and adapted programs to ensure people with disabilities can fully participate in programs

LONG TERM ACTIONS (3+ YEARS)

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Parks

- Build a new park or major amenity
- Conduct a major park or park infrastructure renovation (e.g., playground, athletic fields and courts, major green infrastructure feature)
- Buy or transfer land for future park development
- Develop shared-use agreements with other institutions (e.g., schools, libraries) to ensure equitable and sustained public use of spaces

Trails and Greenways

- Establish separate cycling and walking paths for different activities on trails
- Buy or transfer land for future trail or greenway development
- Develop easements and/or shared use agreements with other institutions
- Build or close gaps in a new trail or greenway or connect trail systems across the community
- Develop new permanent entry points to trails and greenways, prioritizing communities that have historically lacked access to parks, trails, and greenways



ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Access Enhancements

- Add public transit access to parks, trails, and greenways
- Improve sidewalks and walking access to parks, trails, and greenways
- Improve bicycle paths to enhance bicycle access to parks, trails, and greenways

Community Engagement

- Conduct an annual survey of community members to determine how park use and physical activity has increased, and what improvements still are needed

Programming

- Offer community-driven, ongoing, permanent programming in shared-use spaces

Public Awareness Activities

- Develop long-term public awareness campaigns and goals as a community to incentivize the use of parks, trails, and greenways for safe physical activity

EVALUATE IMPACT

Evaluation provides professionals and community members an opportunity to better understand the current state of their system, examine how well their system is functioning, and identify opportunities for improvement. Ongoing evaluation is important because of the multiple factors that impact parks, trails, greenways, programming, and other activities. Collecting data and information is essential to improving processes and outcomes throughout all phases of a park, trail, or greenway creation or improvement project and activation of the space. Program evaluations can be used in the following ways:

- Share impact with funders, elected officials, or the public
- Identify lessons learned to improve future efforts
- Disseminate success stories to gain support and partnerships
- Determine the feasibility of replicating improvements/programs in other settings
- Understand and improve the equity impact of activities

Consider evaluation strategies early, as you set SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time bound) goals to guide your work. Incorporating community voices and diverse data sources in evaluation planning, administration, interpretation, and dissemination of evaluation results is equally important given it centers community in the evaluation process. Evaluation design considers what information best indicates you have successfully met your goals. Measurable, focused, and understandable metrics related to your efforts are critical for determining if you are making progress toward longer-term goals and outcomes and when refocusing is necessary to achieve goals. Collect data that will allow measurement of progress toward addressing barriers and closing disparities for historically excluded groups.

ASSESS THE SAFETY, CONDITIONS, AND MAINTENANCE REQUIREMENTS OF PARKS, TRAILS, AND GREENWAYS

Regularly measuring and maintaining the safety, cleanliness and functionality of parks and park amenities ensures that the community members who use the spaces can take full advantage of all of their benefits. Although agencies may differ in frequency, process, and desired target areas for inspection, having a standard and ongoing process in place is key for assessing conditions and how they influence use and activity, helping ensure park maintenance can be prioritized in terms of equity, budget, and need. Funding for maintenance of parks, trails, and greenways should be equitable among all neighborhoods, regardless of income status. Custom and standard tools exist for inspection of parks and facilities.⁴⁷

Consider all data sources utilized with an equity lens, particularly those measuring safety and/or perceptions of the safety of a park, trail, or greenway. Data collection should include both qualitative and quantitative measures and look outside of traditional measures of safety. For example, data on the rate of crime or violence should not be used to generalize the “safety” of a community because of systemic factors that may bias these numbers (e.g., policing disparities, crimes detected and reported). Using measures of systemic barriers including policing disparities, lack of youth programming, or measures of community safety including community cohesion and well-being, employment, and food security may be a better alternative.⁴⁸

TRACK THE PROGRAMMING AND ACTIVATION OF PARKS, TRAILS, AND GREENWAYS

Data are essential for understanding where programs can be improved to meet the needs and preferences of community members and to evaluate overall progress toward intended outcomes. Program evaluation typically involves the measurement of participant satisfaction, progress toward program goals, and a review of the extent to which a program was implemented as intended. Ideally, program evaluation is incorporated throughout the entire project life cycle, from conception to completion.

Evaluation plans are strongest when they include data gathered from internal and external voices, including leadership, staff, program participants, and community members, including those historically underrepresented in data collection. Data can be collected directly from individuals or groups with their permission (e.g., surveys, focus groups) or indirectly from public sources (e.g., observation, social media). Both types of data are valuable for measuring individual, program, and community level changes that describe progress toward outcomes. Keep in mind reliable data collection should occur on a typical or average day of the program, while taking into consideration limitations in time, funding, and other resources necessary to conduct an evaluation.

MONITOR PARK, TRAIL, AND GREENWAY USAGE AND ACTIVITY

Measures selected for monitoring park usage need to be driven by the purpose of the evaluation, input from community members and key stakeholders, and the identification of information that is most needed. Park usage data can highlight the positive returns on investments from the public and elected officials, and for park planners to understand how to best optimize limited resources and provide the best experience for visitors. Park usage and physical activity measurements also may highlight barriers to park use and identify overcrowding. Typical measurements may include who is using the park, how long they stay, and how individuals move through or use the space. These measurements can be accomplished through intercept surveys, observations, counters, cameras, and some emerging technologies such as cell phone data. Regardless of the data collection method, it is essential to consider ways to protect privacy and anonymity of survey data, observation or video data, counts, or movement.

One of the most common validated measurement tools for assessing park usage and activity is the System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) methodology.⁴⁹ This tool uses momentary time sampling of specified park areas for the direct collection of information about park characteristics (e.g., accessibility, usability, supervision, organization) and their users (e.g., physical activity levels, gender, activity modes/types, age, race/ethnicity). This tool's ability to observe participant characteristics may be useful for determining the extent to which all community groups are actively and inclusively using park, trail, and greenway amenities.

ASSESS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

It is critical to evaluate engagement activities after completing a project to determine if target populations were engaged. This evaluation should be ongoing to inform future engagement approaches and methods. Involving the community in the planning and administration of project evaluation and in the interpretation of results (e.g., citizen scientists, participatory research) will help to ensure that you are including questions considered most important and useful to the community and to build community trust. For example, transparent and authentic community conversations about progress toward established park safety goals will help you properly interpret those results through the experiences of community residents and lead to prioritizing actions that they believe will improve safety in local parks.⁵⁰

Hold evaluation planning meetings close to where community members live. Provide incentives, such as childcare and food, and offer meetings at times more easily accessible to the community. Facilitate maximum engagement by creating authentic opportunities for community members to be involved in project evaluation, identify specific tasks for community members at meetings and events (e.g., neighborhood walks) and on other channels (e.g., social media, public communications) such as participate in data collection, or share the most effective ways to receive communications about findings. If you find some community voices remain absent during the evaluation process, reach out to community leaders or attend cultural events in that community to build relationships and encourage involvement.

A person rides a bike through the William Dexter Prince Memorial Pecan Grove at Oak Point Nature Preserve — a popular site for trail users and pecan pickers alike. Photo courtesy of Plano Parks and Recreation, Texas.



RESOURCES

- [Program Performance and Evaluation Office](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): This resource hub includes a variety of tools for professionals interested in evaluation.
- [Five Characteristics of High-Quality Parks](#) (Urban Land Institute): This report provides guidance evaluating park quality and includes case examples and characteristics of high-quality parks.
- [Health Impact Evaluation Framework](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This guide includes evaluation tools, data sources, data analysis, data collection tools, and other resources to help parks and recreation agencies measure the impact of their health and wellness programs and initiatives.
- [Improving Public Health through Public Parks and Trails: Eight Common Measures](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Park Service): This resource provides eight strategies for promoting public health via the evaluation, monitoring and management of park and trail systems.
- [Metrics for Planning Healthy Communities](#) (American Planning Association): This guide provides metrics for assessing, measuring, monitoring, and reporting progress towards healthy planning goals, focusing on five domains: active living, healthy food system, environmental exposure, emergency preparedness, and social cohesion.
- [Reimagining Public Safety A Toolkit for Cities and Towns](#) (National League of Cities): This toolkit details strategies for developing, implementing, and evaluating public safety initiatives offering case studies of innovative approaches to public safety in communities across the United States.
- [SOPARC Online App: System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities](#): This tool can be used gather data on park usage, park users' physical activity levels and demographic information, and built environment features.
- [The Built Environment: An Assessment Tool and Manual](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): This tool helps collect data on the features and quality of the built environment related to behaviors that affect health, especially behaviors such as walking, biking, and other types of physical activity.
- [YPAR \(Youth-led Participatory Action Research\) Hub](#) (University of California, Berkeley): This collection of resources includes lesson plans and other tools to support engaging young people in participatory action research to support improving their communities and the institutions designed to serve them.

SUSTAIN LONG-TERM IMPACT

Approaches that consider how parks, trails, greenways, and additional activities (e.g., community engagement, programming, public awareness, access enhancements) will be sustained beyond the initial development and implementation is key to long-term impact and continued use of parks, trails, and greenways for safe physical activity. Centering health equity at the systems-level — rather than focusing on implementing isolated activities — can help foster long-term, community-wide benefits, especially for communities that disproportionately experience health inequities. Working at the systems-level includes changing policies, procedures, environments, and other structural elements, plus changing relationships, norms, attitudes, and beliefs.

POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND OTHER STRUCTURES

- **Community Engagement:** The creation of a community engagement plan and the adoption of community engagement policies can help ensure that future built environment projects and other activities continue to meet community wants and needs.⁵¹ Park, trails, greenways, and programs that are designed in partnership with community members, especially those who have traditionally lacked access to these amenities and their benefits, are more likely to be utilized by the community and perceived to be safer.
- **Maintenance:** A maintenance plan outlines strategies to maintain the safety of parks, trails, and greenways and predict maintenance needs required in the future. An equipment/facility retention schedule can help you keep track of all your park assets and predict when you will need to upgrade and/or maintain those specific assets, so that you do not rely on the community to “call in” needed repairs.⁵² Community members in predominantly white, more affluent neighborhoods are more likely to call in repairs than people of color with lower incomes (a trend due to factors like mistrust of local government and/or language barriers), so implementing an equipment retention schedule can support your agency in intentionally prioritizing equity.
- **Partnerships:** Formalizing partnerships via partnership agreements can help sustain the long-term working relationship of organizations in alignment with shared goals. Partnership agreements need to be discussed regularly and used to ensure continued buy-in and accountability on behalf of all partners.⁵³
- **Shared Use:** Formal shared use agreements are essential to ensuring that spaces developed for overall community use are used as intended. Agreements will withstand future leadership and key personnel changes and will document responsibilities related to maintenance, programming, hours of operation, etc.⁵⁴
- **Programming:** Adopting a policy and practices to ensure that programming is funded, accessible to all, and provided with an equity lens across the community within new or improved parks, trails, and greenways can help support long-term use. This may include a policy that indicates funding will be distributed or program offerings will be prioritized based on historical disinvestment, rates of health disparities, or other socioeconomic factors.⁵⁵



Photos courtesy of Dreamtime

RELATIONSHIPS, ATTITUDES, AND BELIEFS

Increase the long-term sustainability and community-wide impact of your efforts by building and strengthening relationships and working to change existing attitudes and beliefs to increase support of equitable, quality park and recreation offerings.

Parks, trails, and greenways are not just nice-to-have in communities. They provide essential infrastructure, programs, and services that are vital to overall health and well-being. Building transformational park and recreation systems requires buy-in and support from the public, policy makers, public health leaders, and other public and private sectors to invest in parks and recreation. It is critical that elected officials, decision-makers, and cross-sector leaders understand the power of parks and recreation as a cost-effective, multiplier solution that is foundational to building and sustaining more equitable, healthy, and resilient, physically active communities. Building relationships and rapport with these key stakeholders is essential to the long-term support of these initiatives.

It is equally as crucial to challenge and dismantle the existing norms and biases that created barriers to quality park and recreation programs and services and widened health inequities for people who are low-income and communities of color. Protections need to be considered to not inadvertently widen disparity gaps and inequities through displacement and reducing affordable housing in neighborhoods where parks, trails, and greenways are created or enhanced as this may erode community trust. Consider building trust and relationships and establishing shared power structures and decision-making processes with community members as ongoing and essential practices to support long term engagement with parks, trails, and greenways. Encourage, respect, and appreciate other cultural beliefs, needs, and ideas.

RESOURCES

- [COVID-19 and Parks and Recreation: Making the Case for the Future](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): This toolkit provides key messaging to equip professionals and advocates with the knowledge and tools to communicate about the essential role parks and recreation has in the overall well-being of communities — especially recovering from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- [Health in All Policies](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): This resource center provides resources and tools that support a collaborative approach to health promotion that recognizes the importance of including health considerations when making policy decisions.
- [Making the Case: Parks and Health](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): A resource to help community leaders make the objective case to elected officials that parks are a critical part of the community’s public health infrastructure.
- [Parks and Recreation Is Essential](#) (National Recreation and Park Association): A set of five key statements with supporting research that showcase the fundamental role of parks and recreation in communities, including the impact on health, economic, environmental well-being.
- [Systems Change Measurement Toolkit](#) (National League of Cities, Children and Nature Network): This toolkit includes the Systems Change Outcomes Tracking Tool, used to measure city systems change outcomes that enhance children’s equitable access to nature. It also includes the System Change Internal Assessment Tool, a tool to measure how effectively a city is implementing systems change practices.

Ashley Lewis, youth programmer for Palm Coast Parks and Recreation, shows youth a praying mantis in her “Our Neck of the Woods” nature program. Photo courtesy of City of Palm Coast Parks and Recreation, Florida.



SECTION III: CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY: Magic Johnson Park South Los Angeles, California

improving existing
infrastructure



community engagement/
programming

Los Angeles (LA) County Parks and Recreation began a major, multiphase park renovation and infrastructure improvement project in December 2018 at Magic Johnson Park. This park, one of the largest recreational areas in South Los Angeles, is located on 100 acres that was once an industrial area between the 1920s and 1960s. The park primarily serves the surrounding Willowbrook neighborhood and provides a gathering place for 250,000 youth who live within a 5-mile radius of the park.

Prior to construction, a park master planning process began in 2014, which included a strategic community engagement and input process with the goal of making sure the renovations resulted in “a park by the people and for the people.” The master planning process involved community members with a historical connection to the park and neighborhood, elected officials, community partners, and project leaders including planners, the park and recreation department, and consultants, led by MIG, Inc.

When conversations initially began, community members were skeptical if the project would come to fruition. The community had experienced a historical lack of investment in their neighborhood, leading to mistrust between community members, government institutions, and outsiders. A long-term effort focused on rebuilding trust, relationship building, power building/power sharing, and bringing engagement opportunities directly to the community, resulting in a collaborative, community-driven, equitable process.

Together, the partners advanced a wide variety of community engagement approaches to determine what the community wanted and needed in the park. Approaches included several events held at the park, workshops held within the community, a community design workshop held in the adjacent Willowbrook neighborhood, a regional planning commission public hearing, and a community engagement meeting in the neighboring community. Following the planning, design, and construction, the first phase of the renovation was complete, and the park reopened for public use in 2022 – providing a much-needed respite during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This first phase of the multimillion-dollar renovation included improvements to existing amenities and the addition of major infrastructure features informed by the community. Infrastructure improvements included a new recycled water source and treatment system. The system diverts stormwater from the surrounding neighborhood and watershed, treats it, and stores it in the lakes to be used for irrigation in the park. Other large-scale improvements and additions included a new community center with computers, classrooms,

game room, and a multipurpose hall; a community event space for events and programs; a children's play area with shade structures; and a trail around the lake for walking, jogging, and other physical activities. Smaller infrastructure improvements included the addition of picnic tables and chairs overlooking the lake, improved lighting and walking paths, 300 new trees and 30,000 new plants, murals by local artists, water fountains, and new signage indicating where various features can be found in the park. The park also has soccer fields, restrooms, a fitness course, barbeque stations, and picnic shelters.

Community members can be found using and enjoying the park daily. Since the park has reopened, quality programming has also been added to activate the space, increase engagement, promote physical activity and use of the park. Ongoing programs offered at Magic Johnson Park include group fitness classes, educational and enrichment programs for all ages, community events and celebrations, and LA County Parks and Recreation's award-winning *Parks After Dark* program, which provides free programs (like resource fairs, movie nights, concerts, sports clinics, fitness classes, and more) for all ages on summer weekend evenings. The park also hosts the *Every Body Plays* afterschool program that provides a healthy snack combined with enrichment activities like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) projects, arts, sports, fitness, and more.

The next phase of the renovation will continue to add more walking trails, a dog park, educational native habitat gardens, amphitheater, and a quarter-mile fitness loop with exercise equipment.

CASE STUDY: Lafitte Greenway New Orleans, Louisiana

improving existing
infrastructure



community engagement/
programming

In New Orleans, Louisiana, the Lafitte Greenway runs several miles from Armstrong Park just outside of the historic French Quarter, to City Park along Lake Pontchartrain. Historically, the area was a transportation canal, bustling with people walking along the water, and visiting the local gardens and businesses. The area has experienced a myriad of changes over the years, including becoming home to several rail lines, segregated playgrounds and forced interstate highways that destroyed vibrant African American neighborhoods.

The area was decimated after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. After the hurricane, local citizens and the New Orleans Recreation Development Commission (NORDC) created a master plan for the greenway and its development in partnership with the community-led Friends of Lafitte Greenway. The planning process involved years of community engagement led by a Planning Advisory Group that helped to make decisions and coordinate additional community engagement efforts, including a robust set of design workshops, community presentations, interviews, and consultation with city departments and other organizations with interest in the project. Friends of Lafitte Greenway was created by the community and comprised primarily of members living in the neighborhoods surrounding the Greenway as well as those with a historical connection to the park. This group continues to play a critical role in informing the planning, design, and activation of the park — all while centering equity throughout each stage.

Today, group members continue to train and deploy a community engagement team to actively collect feedback from community members and drive public awareness. Engagement efforts include the Greenway Ambassadors, a Streets Team that helps spread the word about events and surveys and maintains relationships with other partners, a collaboration between community leaders, topical experts, and partners who provide advice and input.

An analysis of the existing conditions throughout and surrounding the greenway was conducted during the master planning process. The assessment examined community demographics, environmental challenges, transportation barriers, and more. Based on this assessment as well as needs identified by the community, the plan called for a multiuse transportation corridor, a linear park, and the purchase of privately-owned land to create an accessible greenway. The plan also included a path for cyclists and pedestrians — complete with lighting, shady trees, lawns, and ADA-compliant crosswalks and signals. To provide a safe space for community members to engage in physical activity as well as to connect with nature and neighbors, a playground and outdoor fitness equipment were added. The plan outlined a proposed maintenance plan that would take stock of the existing resources in the city.

Today, the 2.6-mile linear park is a bustling hub that serves as an essential and popular transportation corridor that connects neighborhoods, physical activity opportunities, nature, and residents' day-to-day

destinations. As a key part of the New Orleans transportation network, the greenway is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with staff present between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. each day. The New Orleans Recreation Development Commission maintains the greenway.

Improvements to the Lafitte Greenway resulted in revitalization of the area beyond the greenway, connecting communities and businesses in the adjacent areas and neighborhoods. For example, near the greenway sits in a medical corridor that includes LSU Medical Center, the Louisiana Cancer Research Center, and the new Veterans Affairs hospital. All community members can utilize these spaces for a myriad of health benefits.

To further enhance community connection, the Friends of Lafitte Greenway and other community partners provide community-driven public programs focusing on health, nature, and community. A variety of programs are offered to activate these spaces, including monthly gardening classes, free outdoor fitness classes, arts and cultural celebrations, and annual community events like the *Hike the Lafitte Greenway* event. These essential programs and activities help promote public awareness and engagement in the park.

Friends of Lafitte Greenway continue to engage with the community to inform future infrastructure improvements and programmatic elements. Future plans are focused on a large-scale habitat restoration project that will plant cypress trees in the greenway's bioswales and pollinator gardens to support a wildflower meadow. These additions not only will continue beautifying the greenway but also will provide multiple benefits like expanding the urban tree canopy; reducing overgrowth; reestablishing clear sightlines in response to community concerns; increasing shaded areas for walking, biking, and other recreational and leisure activities; and improving stormwater infrastructure.

CASE STUDY: Ken-O-Sha Park Grand Rapids, Michigan

improving existing
infrastructure



community engagement/
programming/access
enhancements

In 2021, the Department of Parks and Recreation for the City of Grand Rapids celebrated the reopening of Ken-O-Sha Park, a sprawling greenspace located behind Ken-O-Sha Elementary School that includes paved trails, a picnic shelter, basketball court, and a playground. Areas within Ken-O-Sha Park were underutilized before renovations began in 2019. The renovations, which cost a total \$586,200, were made possible via funding support from an earlier parks millage project combined with several grants from the National Recreation and Park Association. New improvements now include a natural playscape using recycled fallen trees, a screened portable restroom, access enhancements like pathways that connect Ken-O-Sha Park to Plaster Creek Trail plus wayfinding signage, green infrastructure, and an outdoor classroom.

Grand Rapids invited the local community to take part in planning infrastructure improvements at Ken-O-Sha through a series of community engagement opportunities, providing community members the chance to drive the direction of the project. At the first community engagement event — with incentives like food, activities, games, and a structured exploration of the park — Grand Rapids collected feedback from 130 individuals. Following the initial event, Grand Rapids used design charettes, focus groups, and social media to center equity and community voice.

The team found a clear consensus for park improvements that prioritized youth learning and engagement, improved natural areas and water quality, and brought new people to the space. Grand Rapids collected community members' thoughts (through an activity similar to asset mapping) around existing features of the park that they loved and wanted to see highlighted, such as the locally famous large glacial rock in the woods, the sycamore trees, and the annual "duck march" of a mallard duck family that lives near the school. Grand Rapids appreciated community members' local knowledge and expertise, which led the way for project designs that meaningfully enhanced natural spaces and connected them to the community in a deeper way. Neighbors have voiced appreciation for the use of natural materials, like recycled logs in play features and seating, as well as for the gathering spaces and educational areas that highlight watershed care. Grand Rapids further leveraged the project to engage communities they previously had little connection with. Despite the pandemic, the department was able to deliver on resident ideas and create new excitement around the neighborhood green space.

The Ken-O-Sha Park project was one of several green schoolyards created in Grand Rapids to create outdoor learning and nature-based play areas that connect children to nature in park-deficient neighborhoods. The project at Ken-O-Sha Park reinforced the importance of working with the local community to co-create infrastructure improvements and activate green spaces. After completing the renovation, the Department of Parks and Recreation in Grand Rapids provided wrap-around support for teachers to ensure the space would be used effectively. This included professional development opportunities for outdoor learning strategies, and continued support to create excitement for the space through volunteer events.

The project drew partners together in meaningful ways to extend the impact of the department's outreach, education, and environmental restoration. Through this project, Grand Rapids was able to create meaningful employment for six young people through the Green Stewards program, increasing exposure to natural spaces in their city as well as careers in parks and recreation. Partnerships through Friends of Grand Rapids Parks and Plaster Creek Stewards also support ongoing community volunteer and engagement events at the site.

Improvements Ken-O-Sha Park have increased connections between trails and natural areas. Several community members stated that before the project, they had not explored other areas of the park (like the multiuse path, creek, or natural areas). Additionally, park visitors who regularly use Plaster Creek Trail indicated that they had not previously visited the school site. The new accessible connection between Plaster Creek Trail and Ken-O-Sha Park, along with new nature play features scattered along the path, encourage exploration while increasing physical activity and time spent outdoors.

In addition to providing a place for community members to increase physical activity, the project has fostered wider access to outdoor learning and exploration for students at Ken-O-Sha Elementary School. This outdoor classroom increases opportunities for physical, social, and mental health benefits through time spent learning and playing in nature. Grand Rapids looks forward to seeing how Ken-O-Sha Park transforms community health and promotes social cohesion and environmental stewardship for generations to come.

CASE STUDY: McKinley Park Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

improving existing
infrastructure



community engagement/
programming

Beginning in 2016, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy implemented a major park improvement project of their historic McKinley Park, a long-neglected park in Pittsburgh's Beltzhoover neighborhood — also known as "Chicken Hill." The project focused on addressing key community priorities, such as improving connectivity within the park and between the Beltzhoover neighborhood, installing green infrastructure to improve stormwater management and runoff from nearby streets, and providing essential environmental benefits.

Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy hosted multiple public meetings to address different topics (design, workforce development, and community involvement) associated with the redevelopment of McKinley Park. In addition to larger, more formal presentations, they also held "living room meetings" for residents to have a more intimate discussion about community divisions and ensure their park-related needs were being heard. These community engagement efforts were quite successful. Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy reported a remarkable amount of community participation with several small neighborhoods coming together around the park project in a way they hadn't before. The multigenerational group was led by a dedicated set of older adults that lived in the area for many years and had a strong connection to the park. They were passionate about providing those experiences for their children and grandchildren. Additionally, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy gathered feedback from neighbors about the park's history and incorporated it into their improvement plans. The proposed design included historic amenities such as play elements, picnic areas, and sledding hills.

The Conservancy worked closely with a long list of community partners on nearly every aspect of the project, including several community-based organizations that documented the forest and wildlife resources within the park and created a forest restoration plan. Additional partners included the Student Conservation Association, Urban Kind, a youth green corps, and Voices Against Violence — a group working with hundreds of young people from the McKinley Park area and other nearby communities.

As part of the restoration, based on community input and needs, the Conservancy installed several infrastructure improvements including rain gardens to redirect stormwater from four sewer inlets; a new pavilion with concrete stairs and an accessible ramp to support community events and activities; a new slide built into the historic hillside behind the pavilion; and an accessible trail created with crushed limestone throughout the northern section of the park. The project restored two historic sandstone staircases, repaired the sidewalk along one of the main entry points, and added improved connections to the park from other entry points. The park features a playground, senior center, skatepark, and an upgraded basketball court — all of which was financed by the Urban Redevelopment Authority. Janel Young, a local artist that grew up in the Beltzhoover neighborhood, also beautified the area with a mural titled "Home Court Advantage."

The park continues to serve as a gathering spot for generations of youth and adults in the Beltzhoover neighborhood and is used by the community for a variety of activities including walking, biking, skating, social activities, sports, and more.

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