



Building Healthier Environments
and Healthier Communities

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT DIALOGUE GUIDE



National Recreation
and Park Association



At the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), we believe that local park and recreation agencies are strong leaders for creating healthy and vibrant communities. There is an increasing body of evidence documenting the key contributions and benefits to physical and mental health, youth development, social well-being and economic vitality offered by parks, trails, open spaces and areas offering recreational opportunities. However, it is important to recognize that parks, trails and associated recreation facilities are part of the larger community context increasingly referred to as the “built environment.”

What is the built environment? Why is the built environment important?

Although there is no single definition for this term, it typically refers to the many human-made physical elements that form or influence the physical characteristics of communities (e.g., roads and sidewalks, buildings, commercial and neighborhood developments, parks, empty lots, schools, playgrounds, transportation systems and more) as well as the design, location and layout of these structures and facilities.

In short, the built environment is important because it influences a person’s level of physical activity and long-term health. For example, inaccessible or nonexistent sidewalks, bicycle paths, trails, parks and places to play contribute to sedentary habits. These habits lead to a variety of poor health outcomes associated with obesity and other chronic diseases.

Although the built environment is only one of many factors that influence health, it is an important factor that is the direct result of our collective decisions; i.e., the built environment of any particular community or place is the result of a series of decisions over time made by residents, property owners, and governments about how to design homes, businesses, schools, communities, cities, and regions. Similarly, decisions that we are making now regarding changes to our built environment will continue to affect — either positively or negatively — our individual and collective health and well-being. As noted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Healthy community design can improve people’s health by:

- Increasing physical activity;
- Reducing injury;
- Increasing access to healthy food;
- Improving air and water quality;
- Minimizing the effects of climate change;
- Decreasing mental health stresses;
- Strengthening the social fabric of a community; and
- Providing fair access to livelihood, education, and resources.”

NRPA is the leading advocacy organization dedicated to the advancement of public parks and recreation opportunities. Founded in 1965 through the merger of five national organizations dedicated to the same cause, NRPA has grown over the years — in total membership, in outreach efforts, in building partnerships, and in serving as the voice and defender of parks and recreation.

NRPA is dedicated to educating professionals and the public on the essential nature of parks and recreation. Through learning opportunities, research, and communications initiatives, we strive to generate significant public support for our movement in order to advance the development of best practices and resources that will make parks and recreation indispensable elements of American communities.

INTRODUCTION

However, this information is not always included in our public discourse.

It is important for local park and recreation professionals to create opportunities within their community for people to explore the role that the “built environment” plays in creating healthy communities, improving quality of life, and promoting community livability.

Making progress in these areas can be complex with long-term solutions requiring the participation of many different local leaders and stakeholders. Partnering with public and private organizations; developing coalitions of community leaders representing schools, businesses, public health agencies, municipal and county governments, and other key policymakers, and engaging the broader community in the development of plans and strategies that address their highest interests and aspirations can all be necessary for making and sustaining progress.

Convening diverse groups and laying the ground work for successful partnerships or coalitions may be a new role for many park and recreation leaders.

This tool is designed to help local parks and recreation organizations lead a discussion among a diverse team of community leaders and stakeholders to address creating a healthy community by improving the built environment.

This guide offers a starting place for building the trust, relationships, and shared understanding that are needed in order to make progress toward creating built environments that support and promote healthier people and healthier communities. And through the tips, materials and resources offered here, we hope that groups will use the attached action planning template (see “Our Next Steps”) to begin to identify steps they can take to enhance the built environment in their community in ways that promote and enhance health for all people.

Whether you are new to convening diverse groups, or have lots of experience building coalitions and partnerships, the discussion guide that follows will help you hold a highly productive conversation with potential partners. A well-planned and well-facilitated initial meeting will:

1. **Raise awareness about the role of the built environment in healthy communities;**
2. **Identify shared interests; and**
3. **Begin to establish a strong foundation for future collaborations.**

“The advantage of inserting a dialogue about all users at the earliest stages of project development is that it provides the designers and the engineers the best opportunity to create solutions at the best price. It is easier and cheaper to build it right the first time than to retrofit the project later.”

COMMISSIONER JAMES SIMPSON, NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

CONTENTS



A. USING THIS TOOL _____	4
This section offers a brief overview of several ways to use this tool.	
B. CONVENER TIPS _____	5
These quick tips offer suggestions regarding who to invite and how to organize the meeting for maximum participation and effectiveness.	
C. DISCUSSION GUIDE _____	6
The guide is a detailed agenda with questions and activities to help your group have a productive conversation.	
D. RESOURCES _____	9
Included here are facilitation tips, additional information about the built environment and healthy communities, an evaluation form, an action plan template for clarifying and recording your next steps and supplemental content for follow-up meetings.	

A. USING THIS TOOL

Because the built environment is multi-faceted, there are different ways to use this tool, including:

1. To host an initial conversation about one specific component of the built environment (e.g., parks, complete streets, transportation issues, bike and pedestrian lanes, trails, etc.);

2. To start a dialogue that looks at multiple aspects of the built environment within one neighborhood;

3. As a conversational starting point for a meeting of representatives from different organizations or neighborhoods to look more broadly at the relationship between their community's built environment and healthy lifestyles; or

4. This guide can be used to host concurrent neighborhood-level conversations across different neighborhoods as part of a comprehensive public engagement process. Themes that emerged from the meetings can then be compiled and compared, and individuals from each neighborhood conversation invited to then look at opportunities for improvement across the entire community.

These different approaches each have their potential advantages. Multiple conversations among a broad range of residents can build momentum and lead to a variety of outcomes including: grassroots activities; the creation of task forces; and the inclusion of resident recommendations into a strategic plan. Neighborhood-specific dialogues sometimes have the advantage of gathering people who already have a strong tangible connection and interest in the conversation, and also may be able to move more quickly and readily towards shared action following from the initial conversation. In all cases, the Action Plan Template: Our Next Steps (Attachment 5) will be useful in helping groups to be clear about how they are moving forward.

Whether your focus is on a specific component of the built environment, a neighborhood or section of town, or the whole community, plan to engage a diverse group of participants and be sure to invite formal as well as informal leaders.

The convener tips in the next section will walk you through the basics needed to organize and facilitate a successful conversation. For additional tools and advice about how to organize large-scale public dialogue, see the Resources Appendix for further information from Community Initiatives, Everyday Democracy, and National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation.

B. CONVENER TIPS

To enhance the quality of your community conversation, and also build a stronger potential for actions emerging from it, it is important to be thoughtful around the organizing and set-up of your meeting. Based on experiences of other successful community dialogues, we offer the following tips for *organizing* an effective conversation:

1. Be clear about what you are asking people to do and why.

- Explain the purpose of the meeting.
- Identify the goal(s) of the meeting.
- Let people know the time commitment for the initial meeting.

2. Identify a diverse group of 8 to 15 people, including:

- Formal and informal leaders.
- Participants who use parks and surrounding areas.
- People who may already be working to improve community health.
- People who are in a position to make decisions about parks and the physical environment.
- People from different parts of town, age groups, income or education levels, cultural or racial groups.

There are likely a number of different groups and organizations already with some level of interest or engagement in the relationship between the built environment and a healthier community. And there may be other groups who you recognize will be important “influencers” or decision-makers able to affect progress in this area. While the precise “mix” will look different in each community, some specific groups to consider could include:

- Town, city, county or regional planning departments or commissions.
- Transportation Authority.
- Public works department.
- Other government agencies serving youth, families and the elderly.
- American Association of Retired Persons.
- Schools.
- Business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary.
- Youth organizations such as the YMCA, or Boys and Girls Clubs.
- Local health care providers and health insurance companies, including local health departments, community health centers, hospitals or physicians groups.
- Private businesses.
- Elected officials and community leaders.

- Parent groups (e.g., “walking school busses”).
- Non-profit organizations promoting biking, walking and other forms of active transportation.

3. Use a personal touch to recruit participants.

- Do some homework about those you are inviting, so you have a sense of why this issue might be relevant for them.
- Begin with a personal phone call or visit.
- Follow-up with a written invitation.
- Send a confirmation prior to the meeting.
- If the person you are recruiting is not available, invite them to suggest another person who might have a similar perspective.

4. Choose the time and location of the meeting carefully.

- Keeping in mind the invitees, decide whether business hours or evening hours will work best.
- Make sure the meeting space is welcoming and accessible to all kinds of people.
- Consider adding elements such as healthy snacks to create a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere.

5. Invite someone with facilitation experience to lead the discussion.

- If you plan to lead the discussion, become familiar with basic facilitation skills to ensure a successful meeting (see Attachment 1 in the Resources section for facilitator tips).

6. Evaluate the process.

- See Attachment 3 in the resources section for a sample evaluation.

7. Be prepared to establish next steps if needed.

- Use the *Action Plan Template: Our Next Steps* with the group to identify, clarify and record proposed action items emerging from the dialogue.
- Follow up with attendees and participants to clarify their roles and action items for potential next steps.
- Schedule follow-up meetings.
- Plan of action (sample/template as appendix).

C. DISCUSSION GUIDE

AGENDA (3 HOUR MEETING)

1. Welcome and Introductions _____ 15 min.

Introduce yourself and let people know the purpose of this discussion.

Possible meeting/discussion goals could include:

- **Begin to establish a shared understanding about the role and status of the built environment — and its impact on the health and well-being of community members.**
- **Identify shared interests among meeting participants.**
- **Identify possible opportunities for future collaboration.**

Invite people to say name, organization.

Establish discussion ground rules (see Attachment 1 for some sample “Operating Agreements”).

2. Explore common interests _____ 30 min.

Invite participants to talk briefly about their connection to the community. Also invite them to share a few things they may be working on to help the community.

- **Describe your connection to the community.**
- **From your perspective, what’s going well?**
- **What contributes to this community being a healthy, vibrant place to live, work and play?**
- **What is your organization working on to help create a healthy community?**
- **In listening to this discussion, are you noticing shared interests or goals?**

While listening to the discussion, take note of shared interests and goals.

3. Consider roles of the built environment in supporting healthy, vibrant communities ___ 45 min.

Offer the following definition of the “built environment” to all participants:

- **The built environment typically refers to the many human-made physical elements that form or influence the physical characteristics of communities (e.g., roads and sidewalks, buildings, commercial and neighborhood developments, parks, empty lots, schools, playgrounds, transportation systems and more) as well as the design, location and layout of these structures and facilities.**

In smaller groups of 3–4, invite participants to turn to their neighbors and discuss the following:

- **When you hear the term “built environment”, what image(s) comes to mind for our neighborhood/community?**
- **Which of these images seem more “positive” to you (i.e., help make this feel like a healthy and vibrant community) and which seem more “negative” (i.e., barriers or challenges to this feeling like a healthy community)?**

After about 15 minutes, invite at least one person from each smaller group to share highlights of their conversations with the whole group. (If more than one person from a smaller group wishes to share their reflections, that’s fine.)

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

Consider having this definition written out and posted on a flipchart for reference throughout the gathering.

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

Hand out one large, blank piece of paper to each small group. Hand out multi-colored markers or pencils to each group.

After each smaller group has had a chance to share some of their highlights, ask the full group:

- **What themes did you notice across all of your conversations?**
- **Are there certain qualities or characteristics of our neighborhood's community's that all or most of seemed to notice?**
- **Are there specific places and/or elements of the built environment that seem to be particularly positive examples? Particularly troublesome or problematic?**
- **What do these say about how our built environment is currently influencing health in our community?**

While listening to the discussion, take note of themes, repeated examples, similar stories, etc.

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

Record key ideas on several pieces of flip chart paper labeled *Strengths, Needs and How Changing the Built Environment Can Help*.

4. Mapping Activity¹ _____ 45 min.

Post a large map on the wall. Invite participants to “complete” the map, indicating any structures, facilities, design elements, physical qualities of the built environment they feel are important influences on how active people in the community can (or cannot) be on a daily basis. [NOTE: if you have a slightly larger group — i.e., more than 12 people — you may wish to split into two groups and provide each with their own starting map for this exercise.] Allow about 15–20 minutes for participants to add to their map.

Once people have completed their work on the map, invite them to take a few minutes to look at what they have created. Follow this up with a discussion using the questions below.

What stands out when we look at the map?

- **Are some neighborhoods designed to promote physical activity (e.g., functional sidewalks and street crossings; safe biking lanes; links to other destinations such as parks, retail centers or other neighborhoods) more so than others?**
- **How accessible are parks, trails and recreation areas in our community?**

Where do we see more community members being physically active? What may be some of the qualities or characteristics of the built environment in those areas that seem to be contributing to active lifestyles (i.e., what is it about these spaces that make them successful?) How well does our community's existing design and infrastructure support what we've said is important during the earlier discussion about the role of the built environment in healthy communities?

- **What successes can we build on?**
- **What unmet needs should be addressed?**
- **What opportunities do we see for improving our built environment in ways that will enhance the health of community members and the overall vitality of our community?**

¹ Attachment 4 provides an additional exercise to help the group deepen its analysis of the community's built environment. If there is time, you can insert the exercise here. However, it may also be a useful follow-up activity for a future gathering.

5. Identify potential next steps² _____ 30 min.

Invite participants to reflect on the conversation so far, and consider whether there is enough shared interest in order to move forward. If the interest is there, the questions below will help the group begin to explore next steps. (The attached *Action Plan Template* may help you record the group's responses and clarify your intended next steps.)

When you think about all we've discussed so far:

- **What stands out?**
- **What themes did you notice?**

What existing relationships, capacities, experiences and successes can we utilize and build upon if/when we move forward?

- **If we decide to move forward with work to enhance our built environment, what role might our different organizations play?**
- **Who else needs to be at the table?**

What specific next steps will we take?

6. Closing _____ 15 min.

If there is interest in moving forward,

- **Use the attached action planning template — “Our Next Steps” — to identify possible future directions.**
- **Discuss plans to reconvene the group.**

Thank everyone for coming.

² An additional possible follow-up is to invite participants to find or take photos of some of the different areas they identify as examples of places in their neighborhood or community that influence — either positively or negatively — the health and wellbeing of the community. This can then be used as the basis for additional conversations around areas of possible focused effort.

D. RESOURCES

ATTACHMENT 1: FACILITATION TIPS

It's important to stress that you don't need to have an expert facilitator to have productive meetings. The following are tips and ideas to help make your team experience as productive and enjoyable as possible.

Know Your Role

As the group's facilitator you should:

- Help the group understand its task/purpose.
- Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard.
- Create a safe environment for dialogue (including disagreement).
- Keep an open and balanced conversational flow.
- Focus energy of the group on the common task.
- Manage the group's time.
- Manage the group decision making process.
- Maintain neutrality when playing the primary facilitator role.
- Have available a mechanism through which contact information can be exchanged (e.g., a copied sign in sheet or a networking worksheet).

Set Simple Operating Agreements

Review "group operating agreements" and ask the participants if they agree with them or want to add anything. Basic operating agreements may include:

- Be respectful.
- Everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Share "air time."
- One person speaks at a time. Speak for yourself, not for others.
- If you are offended or upset, say so, and say why.
- You can disagree, but don't make it personal.
- Everyone helps the facilitator keep moving and stay on track.
- Personal stories are not shared outside the group.

Support the Group Process

Even though your team has agreed on some basic operating agreements, you will need to monitor how well the participants are honoring these agreements and communicating with each other — who has spoken, who hasn't, and whose points haven't received a fair hearing. Here are a few ideas to support the process:

- A well thought-out agenda is the key to a productive meeting; agenda needs to include desired outcomes/ agenda items/key questions/time estimates. (It is always good to give people a chance to shape/refine the agenda before the meeting and help with the creation of the agenda for the following meeting).
- Send relevant materials being discussed a couple of days before the meeting to make sure people have enough time to review them.
- Give the group an estimate of time you propose they spend on each question and give them time updates as needed (have a "game plan" for how the group could use its time and then be flexible).
- Don't be afraid of silence (it will sometimes take a while for participants to offer an answer to a question you pose).
- When deciding whether to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Facilitators are frequently trapped into taking too much responsibility for the group which can undermine the group experience. Encourage the group to take responsibility for the quality of their process.

Focus On Content

In addition to helping the group with process, you will also need to help the group deal with the "content" of the discussion:

- Make sure the group considers a wide range of views.
- Ask the group to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Steer the group away from focusing too much on or be overly influenced by one point of view.
- Remain neutral about content and be cautious about expressing your own values.
- Help participants identify "common ground," but don't try to force consensus.

TIPS FOR HANDLING TYPICAL CHALLENGES

The Quiet or Shy Participant

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact: it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues to see if they want to speak. You can be more direct and ask them for their opinion: "Laurie, what do you think?"

The Dominator

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to help ensure an individual does not dominate the discussion. Once it becomes clear that a person is dominating, you must intervene and set limits. Start by reminding the group (and the individual) that you want to hear from all participants. Next, you might ask the individual to wait until everyone else has had a chance to give their opinion on the question. If the pattern continues you may need to be more direct: "Joe, please finish your point because I feel we are wandering a bit from our agreed upon agenda and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

Lack of Focus/Wandering Off Track

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

Responding to this can be a hard call. After all, the discussion belongs to the group members. Yet, it is the facilitator's job to maintain group focus. You may wish to give some leeway to participants who want to explore closely-related topics. However, if only a few participants are carrying the discussion in a new direction, the others are likely to feel frustrated, resentful, and bored. The facilitator should try to refocus the discussion, perhaps by asking, "How does your point relate to the ____?" or stating, "That's an interesting point, but I'd like for us to return to the initial question."

Lack of Interest/Excitement

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

When people help craft the agenda, they are more likely to engage in the discussion. However, lack of interest/excitement can happen when the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond after posing the questions. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle so that everyone has a chance to respond. Another possible reason for the apparent lack of excitement in the discussion may be that the group seems to be in agreement. In this case the facilitator might check this assumption and then gain agreement for moving on to the next question or topic on the agenda.

Conflict/Tension

POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is fine and useful. You must interrupt personal attacks, name calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. Remind group/the individual that it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but it is not acceptable to challenge them personally. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if the group members are bought into the ground rules, they will support you.

DIALOGUE V. DEBATE

DEBATE/DISCUSSION	DIALOGUE
Assuming there is one right answer, and you have it	Assuming many people have pieces of the answer and together can craft new solutions
Combative: participants attempt to prove the other side is wrong	Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding and commitment
About winning	About exploring common ground
Listening to find flaws and making counter-arguments	Listening to understand, find meaning, and agreement
Defending assumptions as truth	Revealing assumptions for re-evaluation
Critiquing the other side's position	Re-examining all positions
Defending one's own views against those of others	Admitting that others' thinking can improve on one's own
Searching for flaws and weaknesses in others' positions	Searching for strength and value in others' positions
Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position	Discovering new options, not seeking closure

Adapted from The Public Conversations Project, Study Circles Resource Center, The Common Enterprise and Community Initiatives.

ATTACHMENT 3: EVALUATION FORM

1. Please rate the discussion:

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

2. How well did the meeting achieve the goals listed below:

GOALS

- Begin to establish a shared understanding about the role and status of the built environment in our community.

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

- Identify shared interests among meeting participants.

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

- Identify possible opportunities for future collaboration.

EXCELLENT GOOD FAIR POOR

3. Are there topics or issues regarding the built environment that we missed during this discussion? If yes, what?

4. What next steps would you recommend?

5. Would you like to continue to stay involved?

YES NO MAYBE

6. Contact Information.

NAME _____

E-MAIL _____

PHONE _____

ADDRESS _____

RESOURCES

ATTACHMENT 4: EXERCISE TO BUILD ON PARK MAPPING ACTIVITY.

This can be done in a follow-up meeting in order to help community leaders deepen their shared understanding about what is working and where to invest future resources and effort.

STEP 1: Invite participants to spend a few minutes filling out the built environment “report card” for each neighborhood in your community.

NEIGHBORHOOD: _____	A. DOING GREAT	B. DOING WELL	C. DOING OKAY	D. NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
Current Level of Use/Activity				
Extent, Accessibility and Safety of Sidewalks				
Extent, Accessibility and Safety of Bike Lanes				
Linkages between residential, retail, schools and recreation destinations for pedestrians and bikes				
Safety (how comfortable do people feel walking, biking or otherwise being physically active in this area)				
Distribution of and accessibility to parks, trails and recreation facilities				
Overall design and “feel” (are we encouraging or creating barriers to people making physical activity part of their daily lives)				
Other (add additional elements/criteria at your or the group’s discretion)				

STEP 2: Invite participants to share the results of their report cards with each other. Where does the group agree? Where are there differences?

STEP 3: When you look at the report cards, what successes do you see? How can the community build on these?

STEP 4: What challenges or gaps need to be addressed?

ATTACHMENT 5: ACTION PLAN TEMPLATE

OUR NEXT STEPS

What change(s) do we want to see?

What specific action ideas do we want to work on?

ACTION IDEAS/ STRATEGIES	WHAT IS ALREADY BEING DONE?	WHAT OBSTACLES AND/ OR OPPORTUNITIES DO WE SEE?	WHAT INFORMATION DO WE NEED?	SOME IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS: • Who will take the lead? • Other key participants?

RESOURCES

ATTACHMENT 6: INFORMATION ABOUT THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Below is a list of available resources that may be helpful for you to reference. Please note this list is not inclusive, but rather a short list of compiled resources that NRPA has found useful in the past.

Active Design Guidelines — Promoting Physical Activity and Health in Design: www.nyc.gov/adg

Active Living by Design: www.activelivingbydesign.org

Active Living Research: www.activelivingresearch.org

American Public Health Association: www.apha.org

Built Environment and Active Transportation: www.physicalactivitystrategy.ca/pdfs/BEAT/BEAT_Publication.pdf

The Centers for Disease Control, Designing and Building Healthy Places: www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces

The Centers for Disease Control, Physical Activity Resources for Health Professionals — Active Environments: www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/professionals/environment/index.html

Design for Health: www.designforhealth.net

The Landscape and Human Health Laboratory: www.lhhl.illinois.edu/index.htm

Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech: www.mi.vt.edu/research

National Center for Safe Routes To School: www.saferoutesinfo.org

National Recreation and Park Association: www.nrpa.org

Parks and Recreation: Essential Partners in Active Transportation: www.nrpa.org/2010researchpapers/

Public Health Law & Policy Planning for Healthy Places: www.healthyplanning.org

Rails to Trails Conservancy: www.railstotrails.org/index.html

Safe Routes to School National Partnership: www.saferoutespartnership.org

Trust for Public Land (TPL): www.tpl.org

The U.S. Green Building Council, *Understanding the Relationship Between Public Health and the Built Environment:* www.usgbc.org/ShowFile.aspx?DocumentID=1480

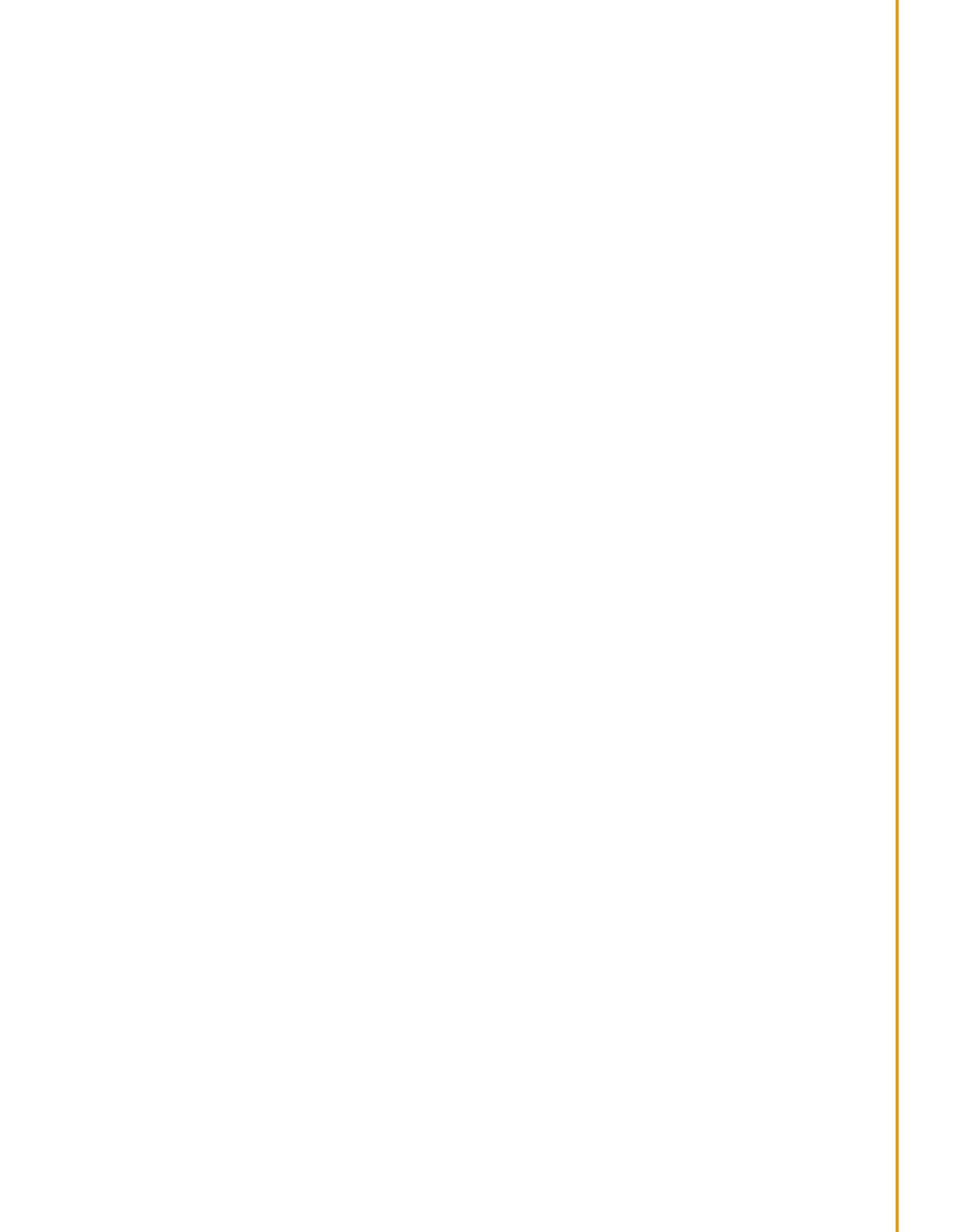
Washington Parks & People: www.washingtonparks.net

ATTACHMENT 7: RESOURCES FOR PUBLIC DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY CHANGE PROCESSES

Everyday Democracy: www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Index.aspx

Community Initiatives: www.communityinitiatives.com

National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation: ncdd.org





**National Recreation
and Park Association**

22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148-4150

1.800.626.NRPA (6772)
7-1-1 for speech and hearing impaired

www.NRPA.org