



NRPA's mission is to advance parks, recreation, and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people.



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Revitalizing Inner City Parks: New Funding Options Can Address the Needs of Underserved Urban Communities

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that a walk in the park is more than just a nice way to spend an afternoon. It's an essential component for good health, according to University of Illinois environment and behavior researcher Frances "Ming" Kuo. City parks and open spaces

improve our physical and psychological health, strengthen our communities, and make our cities and neighborhoods more attractive places to live, work and play. Currently eighty percent of Americans live in metropolitan areas, making urban

parks an ever increasingly important feature of urban living.

Establishing and maintaining urban parks helps revitalize communities in a variety of ways including increasing economic development opportunities; increasing daily physical activity; reconnecting children with nature; and reducing crime by providing safe, healthy alternatives for at-risk youth. But most importantly, urban parks play an important role in improving public health.

It is well established that physical activity helps prevent obesity and related medical problems. And there is mounting evidence that providing places to exercise, parks primarily, improves health. Research is also uncovering physical and mental health benefits simply by interacting with nature: reduced levels of attention deficit in children, improved cognitive ability, reduced aggressive behaviors and a general recharging of the brain. Increasingly, a growing clamor from doctors, parents, overweight persons, and even those who just want to strengthen muscles, lungs, and hearts suggests that people today want more from their parks.

SUSTAINING URBAN PARKS: THE ROLE OF PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES

After nearly three decades of steady decline, changing public attitudes are encouraging many cities to support more investments in public infrastructure, including parks. Instead of being challenged to upgrade and maintain parks in the face of continuing neighborhood decline, park and recreation managers are now encouraged to utilize parks as a way to support positive changes in neighborhoods. And increasingly, park and recreation agencies are not expected to do this alone. In many cities and urban neighborhoods, they can count on the support of other organized constituencies, most often from the expanding community-based nonprofit sector. This trend could have many positive benefits for the United States as a whole, including a reduction in resources consumed and pollution but even more importantly, increased development and revitalization of urban parks can have a positive effect on the health and quality of life of our nation's urban residents.



In order to successfully maintain and increase the availability of quality urban parks and thereby improve

the health of urban residents, park and recreation agencies have an important role to play in the planning, coordination and implementation of new and revitalized urban parks and recreation facilities. The experience that park and recreation agencies can provide in helping to guide the development and planning process is invaluable. The challenge ahead lies in the ability of park and recreation agencies to lead the effort in obtaining financial support and human resources as well as managing the revitalization process. *continued >*



THE CHALLENGES FACING URBAN PARKS

Park and recreation managers report that funding support for their agencies is not solid. Few can count on budget increases to match growing responsibilities. In large cities, park expenditures have been flat or declining despite the encouragement

of taxpayers to increase spending. There has been inadequate investment in landscaping, playscapes, ball fields, walking and biking trails, recreation centers, and other community facilities, which are not replaced when they come to the end of their useful lives.

Undertaking the revitalization or creation of a new urban park or recreation area, agencies face challenges to the mission and programs of public parks as well as other issues that impact the viability of successful park and recreation programming including:

- Catering to a variety of constituencies that have different expectations and goals;
- Diminished funding and resources limit the ability of park and recreation agencies to respond to community needs;
- Public perception that access to urban parks and recreation programs should be free;
- Park and recreation departments are losing the competition for general fund dollars; and
- Deferred maintenance totals over \$1 billion in many large cities.

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING OPTIONS FOR URBAN PARK REVITALIZATION

During this period of fiscal restraint, park and recreation agencies must rely on their ability to leverage a number of funding resources perhaps not previously considered in addition to traditional efforts. Options for alternative funding may include one or more of the following:

■ Free v. fee

One possible solution to the urban parks funding crisis is for park and recreation departments to charge fees to their patrons for access to certain park and recreation activities such as special activities, camps, etc. Indeed, many departments are being pushed in this direction by a variety of factors, including the loss of general fund revenues and the creation of “cost recovery goals” for government agencies but also consider how charging fees may impact the underserved in the community.

■ Partnerships with other government agencies

Many park and recreation agencies have found opportunities by partnering with government agencies such as health departments and others with similar missions to address new park and recreation revitalization efforts.

■ Donations from private individuals and corporations

One of the most common methods of raising funds for park and recreation facilities is to accept donations from private individuals and corporations. In particular, offering “naming rights” on new facilities can lead to major contributions, as can communitywide fundraising campaigns for specific new facilities – soccer fields, swimming pools, and so on. In all cases, partners must risk something to make the partnership more than an agreement to cooperate or to coordinate activities when it’s convenient. They accept these risks because of the payoffs involved—everyone has to get something from the venture.

Public-private partnerships for parks are proliferating across the country—and generating much excitement and interest. One reason is that public-private partnerships work. Parks partnerships are successfully combining the assets of the public and private sectors in novel ways to create new and refurbished parks, greenways, trails, and other community assets in our cities—often in the face of municipal budget constraints.

■ Donations from foundations

Private foundations receive their funds from an individual or family. Many of these family foundations are very small and serve as the vehicle for the personal giving of the donor and fund local social welfare groups, alma maters and other ‘favored projects’ of the donor.

Community foundations are similar in purpose to private foundations; however, they receive their funds from a number of different sources, rather than just one source, and are geographically restricted.

Company-based foundations receive their funds from profit-making corporations. These foundations are separate legal entities from donor companies.

■ Fundraising from nonprofit organizations

Partnerships with nonprofit organizations can be beneficial since in many cases nonprofits are already in the business of running park and recreation programs and nonprofit organizations can tap funding sources unavailable to public agencies. Nonprofit organizations may create endowments to fund ongoing needs through a competitive process. In this manner, grant funds from different sources may be used to work together.



CASE STUDIES

DISCOVERY GREEN

Location: Houston, Texas

Description: Discovery Green is a 12-acre park featuring an outdoor concert pavilion, restaurants, a mist fountain for hot summer days, several distinct gardens featuring public art, and outdoor “reading rooms” created from a downtown parking lot.



Challenge: For years, downtown Houston was an automobile-centric, placeless district without any public spaces for residents to congregate. The task at hand was to transform 12 acres of underused green space and concrete parking lots near the convention center into an urban oasis that could serve as a village green.

Outcomes: Through the development of a public-private partnership between the City of Houston and the nonprofit Discovery Green Conservancy in less than four years, the site became one of the most beautiful and vibrant destinations in Houston. The Discovery Green Conservancy works with hundreds of programming partners to present three dynamic seasons each year. In its first three years, the park welcomed more than three million visitors and hosted more than 800 public and private events. The partnership between the park and recreation agency and the Conservancy has proved successful with the Conservancy raising all the funds needed for the programming while ensuring that the park remains an accessible and inviting public gathering space in the center of the fourth largest metropolitan area in the United States.

Lessons Learned: Discovery Green was conceived not only as a public park, but as a landmark to attract convention revenue to the City, and as an anchor for downtown development. That goal was achieved as adjacent development, a residential high rise, a commercial office tower, hotel and a mixed-use development—a combined \$500 million investment—all came to fruition. Since the park opened, the adjacent George R. Brown Convention Center has hosted major conventions such as Microsoft and Society of American Travel Writers. The model has been so successful that new green spaces in Houston are being designed with Discovery Green in mind.



Focusing on new construction v. maintenance

In a time of limited resources, many city park departments have to choose between construction of new facilities and ongoing maintenance of old facilities. As stated above, the availability of private donations may sometimes skew priorities toward construction of new facilities even when there is not enough money to maintain what already exists.

Use of volunteers

As financial resources have become more constrained, park and recreation agencies – like many other government agencies – have increased the use of volunteers to complete tasks formerly performed by employees. In many departments, volunteers are performing critical tasks including operating camps, staffing feeding programs, coordinating maintenance efforts, performing marketing tasks and more. Volunteers are a viable and cost-effective answer to downsizing and limited availability of paid staff.

CASE STUDIES

HIGH LINE PARK

Location: New York City, NY

Description: Opened to trains in 1934, the elevated High Line rail line brought tons of produce and manufactured goods to Manhattan. During the next few decades, the rail line was used less and less due to an increase of trucks for transporting goods and in the 1980's, the line ran its last car. In the late 1990's, Robert Hammond and Joshua David helped start Friends of the High Line to convert the rail line into usable park space. Hammond and David enlisted the support of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's (RTC).

Challenge: Primarily, fund-raising was a great challenge (Friends of the High Line needed to raise about \$3 million each year just to keep the existing park running) but just as challenging was overcoming opposition and rallying both public and political support for turning the rail line into an elevated park.

Outcomes: After the opening in 2009 of the first 10-block-long section and a second section in June 2011, the High Line Park has quickly become one of New York City's major destinations spurring a flurry of investment in the surrounding neighborhood, and generating an estimated \$2 billion in new development.

Lessons Learned: The High Line Park is now run by the New York City Parks Department but maintenance is the responsibility of the Friends group. The High Line rail to trail experience demonstrates how with the participation of local park and recreation agencies and community groups, derelict industrial sites can be re-imagined into major attractions that generate renewed urban investment and development activity.



CASE STUDIES

CONCLUSION

Overwhelming evidence demonstrates the benefits of urban parks. They improve our physical and psychological health, strengthen our communities, and make our cities and neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work. But too few Americans are able to enjoy these benefits. In addition, the lack of places for regular exercise has contributed to America's epidemic of obesity among adults and children, an epidemic that will have dire consequences on both our health and our finances.

A group of studies reviewed in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* showed that "creation of or enhanced access to places for physical activity combined with informational outreach" produced a 48.4 percent increase in frequency of physical activity. A ten percent increase in nearby greenspace was found to decrease a person's health complaints in an amount equivalent to a five year reduction in that person's age.

Park and recreation agencies play a pivotal role in the development and revitalization efforts of urban parks and help provide environments that serve both the social well-being and health of urban communities. While interest in city parks is reviving and governments and civic groups around the country are revitalizing run-down city parks, the current economic downturn in states and cities and severe budget restraints are still a major threat to the health of existing parks, and the creation of new parks. The experience, management and operating capabilities of park and recreation agencies will continue to be instrumental in the design, development and maintenance of new urban parks and the revitalization of existing parks. In light of the current economic environment, the challenge for park and recreation managers is to actualize their well-developed plans for park and recreation revitalization by obtaining the necessary funding resources. Only by taking on that challenge can new plans be realized so urban residents can have the access to quality park and recreation facilities they require and deserve.

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MILLENNIUM PARK

Location: Chicago, Illinois

Description: Millennium Park, the newest addition to Chicago's extensive lake front park system, opened on July 16, 2004. This 24.5 acre outdoor cultural venue is a place for Chicagoans and tourists to enjoy gardens, ice skating, outdoor and indoor concerts, restaurants, festivals and fairs, fountains and water features, and interactive public art, all for free.

Challenges: The original concept was to cover unsightly commuter rail lines and a parking lot located at the northwest corner of Grant Park, with one of the largest "green" roofs in the country.

Outcomes: The new park was funded by an extraordinary public/private partnership. The city's \$270 million commitment was matched by the private sector with \$1 million minimum donations from 115 individuals, foundations, and corporations, which generated \$220 million for the park. This new green space is proof that a well-designed urban open space can have significant economic and social impact on a city.

The economic impact of Millennium Park is staggering. The estimated total value of residential development attributable to the park over a ten year period is \$1.4 billion dollars. The expanding residential population and the influx of 4 million annual visitors is attracting new business and enhancing the existing businesses adjacent to the park. As a result, there are more jobs, increased tax revenue, demand for retail spaces, expanded hotel occupancy and increased visits to the area's cultural institutions.

Lessons Learned: While construction delays and cost overruns attributed to poor planning, multiple design changes and cronyism affected the Millennium Park project. However, many critics have since praised the completed park as a shining example of an effective public-private partnership. One of the key factors in this project's success was the freedom given to patrons of Millennium Park, Inc. to alter the city's original design and work closely with park and recreation administrators. Valuable lessons learned during the project development include:

- Flexible planning and management must adapt to changing budgets, visions, and expectations;
- Presenting the park publicly as a gift from the city and patrons creates an environment conducive to fundraising;
- Phased opening of park elements can garner much needed public support mid-way through park completion when construction costs are mounting;
- Creation of a contractually separate entity to manage projects supported by private donors is necessary for securing their active participation and support; and
- Innovative park and public art projects can cause a major increase in property and sales tax revenue, stimulate real estate development, attract tourists, and boost local businesses.

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