



## GREAT URBAN PARKS CAMPAIGN CASE STUDIES:

# ENGAGEMENT

Successful community engagement and an inclusive visioning process help green infrastructure projects adapt to unexpected challenges.

### Ambrose Kennedy Park – Baltimore

In developing plans for the renovation of Baltimore's Ambrose Kennedy Park, the Parks & People Foundation was able to capitalize on its history of more than 10 years' experience constructing green infrastructure projects within the city. In addition to a reputation for doing good work, this gave Parks & People the necessary experience to guide a project through the steps necessary to obtain permits from various agencies while still keeping to established deadlines (such as knowing the need to hire an expeditor to get through the permit process on schedule).

Laura Connelly, environmental park projects manager for Parks & People, says that they were fortunate to take on the Ambrose Kennedy project after years of groundwork had already been done by grassroots community organizations. Early on, there were times when the community felt that the project was moving too fast. Parks & People redoubled its efforts to ensure that all partners viewed the project as a continuing partnership from the very earliest stages. They were careful to ensure that the project was providing all the amenities the residents needed and made an effort to publicly credit and give kudos to all of their partners.

Since then, community-based organizations have thrown themselves into the park redevelopment. Rebuild Johnston Square, a local nonprofit, realized that the park would need daily and weekly maintenance, which the city may not be able to provide. In support, the 6th Branch, a returning veterans organization, is planning to double the amount of their regularly scheduled clean-up days, and Rebuild Johnston

Having access to flexible money early in the process is key, allowing you to move money around as necessary to address the constraints that come with specific funding sources.

—Lisa Schroeder, *Park & People*

Square is planning biweekly clean-up and planting days to foster stewardship and community involvement. Community leaders also collaborated with the Department of Social Services to set up a "train the teacher" program to train adults in the neighborhood on how to teach kids to respect, steward and love their park.

Parks & People pointed out that the design process could have been improved if they had not had to work from a previous plan for the park prepared by the city's Department of Parks and Recreation that was not informed by a community visioning process. While the ultimate outcome was embraced by all partners, time and energy was lost by having to re-imagine the design compared to a previous plan that was largely out of date. Parks & People president and CEO Lisa Schroeder said that, despite positive communication and back-and-forth with the residents that resulted in a mutually agreeable design, it would have been a better outcome to be able to find a way to truly elicit a design that starts with the community's desires.

### McKinley Park – Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy hosted multiple public meet-

ings to address different topics (design, workforce development opportunities, and community involvement) associated with the redevelopment of McKinley Park. In addition to larger, more formal presentations, they also held “living room meetings” for neighborhood residents to have a more intimate discussion about community divisions and ensure their park-related needs were being heard.

Heather Sage, the Conservancy’s director of community projects, says they have had a remarkable amount of community participation. Several small neighborhoods have come together around the park project in a way they haven’t before—they always show up, and their voices are loud and clear every time. The group is very multigenerational, led by a dedicated set of older adults who have lived in the area for many years and have a strong connection to the park. They now want to offer those experiences to their children and grandchildren.

The Conservancy has worked closely with a long list of community partners on nearly every aspect of the project, including several community-based organizations who documented the forest and wildlife resources within the park and created a forest restoration plan. Partners have included the Student Conservation Association, Urban Kind, a youth green corps, and Voices Against Violence, a group that is working with hundreds of young people from the McKinley Park area and other nearby communities. “We are trying to carve out elements of the project that are specifically directed toward local organizations and contractors, such as ecological monitoring and restoration at the perimeter or below the site, and building/construction components that the main city contracting team won’t handle,” Sage said. “We are focused on workforce development and are reaching out to community-based organizations.” As part of their commitment to provide economic opportunities for residents, PPC identified a portion of the project that is well-suited to community-based contractors (rather than regional or national players). The request for bids will be distributed by a local community group and advertised in the local weekly paper. The challenge in this case was to create opportunities for residents in a manner that was in keeping with the city of Pittsburgh’s existing processes, union rules, and contracting requirements.

A major challenge, however, is the community’s desire and need for jobs contrasted against the skilled design, engineering, and general contracting work needed for the design and construction of the park. Sage says, “We have learned new lessons every day. It is a challenge to go as quickly as we are going on this project. As a parks conservancy, we have not

**The community has been super jazzed about our project. On a really, really cold day, we had 25 people come out for an onsite outdoor meeting with the design team, and the bitter cold didn’t diminish their enthusiasm a bit.**

—Heather Sage, *Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy*

been a workforce development organization before this. We have found it is not as simple as saying ‘Yes, there is a job here for you’ to young people. To communicate the limitations and options is a challenge, and it is also a challenge for us to vision how this job might become a career path.” Through its partnerships, the Conservancy is learning how to form that path for young people in the community. She says that they need to concentrate on the soft skills as well, and by working with a local community development corporation and Landforce, a nonprofit that does environmental management work in the community, they hope to be able to bring job opportunities up to the next level. The Conservancy is encouraging community members to complete the National Green Infrastructure Certification Program (a training program developed by the Water Environment Federation and other partners to certify workers entering the green infrastructure field on installation, management, and maintenance of GI facilities) so they will have the capacity to help with maintenance in the future.

In many ways, the complexity of the design and review process have made it challenging to describe workforce development opportunities, especially since the time frame is a moving target. It can be hard to maintain the trust of community members along the way because of the difficulty in seeing the finish line, but the Conservancy is using this project as a way to glean a lot of information about their community partners’ capacities and insight into how to improve upon the process for future projects.

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This case study was written by Jennifer Henaghan, AICP, Deputy Research Director and Green Communities Center Manager at the American Planning Association.

Cover Image: Project partners take part in the October 2017 groundbreaking at Ambrose Kennedy Park. Credit: Parks & People Foundation

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