



GREAT URBAN PARKS CAMPAIGN
CASE STUDIES:

DESIGN & BUILDING

A successful green infrastructure design maximizes stormwater capture in a way that acknowledges and incorporates community feedback.

Montbello Open Space Park – Denver

The new Montbello Open Space Park in Denver is a major \$6 million-dollar construction project that includes an administration building, indoor and outdoor classrooms, trails, gardens, play areas, and simulated habitat displays. According to Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK) executive director Loretta Pineda, community engagement has been critical to the success of their green infrastructure project. Throughout the six public visioning meetings, they fielded many questions and learned about the community’s hopes for the project.

The land for the park was purchased in 2012 by the Trust for Public Land, which held the property until ELK could reimburse it the following year using funds from Denver Parks and Recreation, Great Outdoors Colorado, the National Park Service, and numerous private foundations. The city and county of Denver then took ownership of the property and granted ELK a 50-year lease.

While the completed project will offer innumerable benefits in STEM education, stormwater management, and other community improvements, ELK has been forced to compete for construction crews during a time of unprecedented growth in the Denver area. Pineda says this growth in both residential and commercial development has made it difficult to find qualified contractors and construction workers because many potential bidders are booked several construction seasons out. The extremely competitive market has driven up costs and lengthened project timelines, which makes it essential to have excellent communication with project partners and funders.

If the city does not have a standardized review process or design standards for green infrastructure, it can be difficult to maintain project time lines.

—Heather Sage, *Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy*

Citing NRPA’s flexibility and understanding regarding construction schedules and costs, Pineda says that an open, adaptable approach is valuable in dealing with circumstances that cannot be controlled. ELK had initially hoped to have the education center completed by spring 2017, but worked with its partners and funders to ensure that everyone understood the construction-related reasons for the delays on the project, which broke ground in May 2016. Although the active construction component of the project that is visible to the public was just over a year, project partners knew that the larger vision of the Open Space Park has been underway for years.

McKinley Park – Pittsburgh

In Pittsburgh, residents were less concerned with the stormwater management elements of the McKinley Park redevelopment than they were with the proposed amenities in their long-neglected park. The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy gathered feedback from neighbors about the park’s history and incorporated it into the plans, with the proposed design altered to include historic amenities such as play elements, picnic areas, and sledding hills.

The green infrastructure components of the project were, however, more of a challenge in obtaining the necessary city approvals. The Conservancy is one of Pittsburgh's nonprofit partners, with a cooperative agreement to do work in the city's parks that dates back more than two decades. The Conservancy was required to go through a lengthy legal process to obtain approvals for any capital improvements to city property. The city was fully on board with the project as a co-applicant, and the Department of Public Works (DPW) agreed to including a large portion of the project cost in its capital allocation for the budget year, as well as dedicating their staff time and resources to physically doing portions of the project. However, coordination with the Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Agency (PWSA) was challenging because there is not yet an official set of city design specifications for green infrastructure standards.

Several green infrastructure approaches were ruled out by DPW late in the process, forcing unexpected (and costly) redesigns. The original design called for stormwater to be collected by trench drains to storage underneath the brick road at the top of the park, which would then be slowly released downhill into the park. Although PWSA eventually approved of the green infrastructure approach, DPW vetoed the concept because its employees were doubtful about their abilities to maintain and plow over trench drains. This problem didn't surface until late in the approval process due to the lack of design standards providing the necessary guidance. The resulting design changes still capture stormwater, albeit a lesser amount and at a higher cost.

Lean city staffing can also take a toll on project costs and timelines. Due to low staffing levels that restrict available hours and training opportunities, DPW review timelines for green infrastructure took months instead of weeks. Although the Conservancy and city are experienced with one another as partners, the Conservancy's director of community projects Heather Sage says that each green infrastructure project is unique and can surface new and unexpected difficulties.

Boone Park West – Atlanta

Boone Park West was identified in a 2010 Park Pride-facilitated planning study as a site that offered excellent opportunity for green stormwater management, as the site was to be rebuilt as a public park. The planning study identified numerous neighborhood challenges in the Proctor Creek watershed within which the park is located: low income, disinvestment, high vacancy rates, and consistent combined sewer over-

We want to make sure we are not just checking a box for community engagement, but that the community input is what is actually driving the design.

—Michael Halicki, *Park Pride*

flows. They took a systems approach to solving these challenges with a connected network of parks and green space to address overflow or, as Michael Halicki, executive director of Park Pride, likes to say, "It's not a silver bullet, it's more like silver buckshot."

In a six-month-long visioning effort for Boone Park West in which the community has acted as a steering committee, Park Pride did an on-the-ground mock-up of what the park would look like and invited members of the community to add their ideas of what should go where. Now that they have completed their visioning plan, they have a clear sense of what the community wants to see. "This all started with the community," says Halicki. "They have been involved every step of the process." When residents raised concerns about a large pond that was depicted on an early conceptual drawing, Park Pride was quick to suggest an alternative with rain gardens and wetlands to replace the stormwater management function of the pond that better met the community's wishes.

Park Pride's visioning work is done with the community (not the city) as the client, so it doesn't come with a stamp of city approval and still needs to be vetted by the parks department. But Park Pride shares space with the parks department, so they have a very close relationship. All of the city-led planning efforts in the area have incorporated the results of that 2010 study because they appreciate the community engagement that was used to develop it.

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

Cover Image: A "coming soon" sign depicts plans for the redevelopment of Ambrose Kennedy Park in Baltimore. Credit: Parks & People Foundation

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