

Green Infrastructure and Health

Landscape Assessment



Prepared for: National Recreation and Park Association
Prepared by: Willamette Partnership

This landscape assessment document was primarily authored by Beth Jacob of Blue Stocking Strategy. Additional input by Barton Robison of Willamette Partnership and Jenny Cox of National Recreation and Park Association.

Other consulting team members:

- Bobby Cochran, Willamette Partnership
- Emily Henke, Oregon Public Health Institute
- Beth Jacob, Blue Stocking Strategy
- Sean Watts, Sean Watts Consulting

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Our purpose in conducting this landscape assessment is to identify opportunities for park and recreation agencies to boost public interest and investments in green infrastructure, as well as to help park and recreation professionals make the case that green infrastructure improves community health, well-being and racial/economic equity. To this end, we conducted a media scan and a series of stakeholder interviews to determine key messages, stakeholders, opportunities, and barriers for green infrastructure implementation in parks. This landscape assessment is just a first step and will be followed by a communication toolkit that will operationalize these findings for park and recreation professionals.



Photo by Roman Kraft

1. Media Scan

In this assessment, we analyzed 142 articles in major national and local outlets over the past year. (See appendix for methodology.) This included national outlets like the Christian Science Monitor and New York Times; online niche publications focused on states and cities, such as Stateline, Governing, NextCity, CityLab and Crain's Business Chicago; and large city and state outlets, such as the Orlando Sentinel, Philadelphia Inquirer, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Los Angeles Times, and Dallas Morning News. Our search also included state and city-focused wire services, allowing us to see how this issue receives official coverage in municipal news releases.

Media scan: implications for audiences and messengers

In communications, messengers are the people who lead the conversation about an issue, providing a frame, context or rationale for taking action. Audiences are the recipients of those messages—the people who need persuading to act. As we assessed coverage of health equity and green infrastructure in cities and parks, we looked at those doing the most talking about the topic; how they were talking about it; and whom they were trying to influence.

Across the coverage we analyzed, the most common messengers include:

- Local policymakers: Mayors, City Councils and municipal agency leaders
- Nonprofit and philanthropic leaders: Local environmental and conservation organizations and their funders
- Community members

The most common audiences these groups were trying to reach were other elected officials/decision-makers and local residents (who, in turn, could influence policymakers).

Identifying the top messengers in conversations around green infrastructure and parks also helps us think about those we *don't* see or hear in the conversation, but who could add depth or legitimacy to our focus on the link between green infrastructure and health equity. For example, individuals and groups focused on civil rights or health were notably missing from the coverage we assessed, even in stories specifically focused on the effects of green infrastructure developments on low-income or communities of color. As we craft the communications tools, we will consider how we can explicitly welcome these groups into the conversation and ensure our messages are inviting for those outside the traditional environmental and urban planning spheres.

Additionally, local community members' voices made powerful cases in the media coverage we reviewed. They brought first hand illustrations to an issue that can otherwise seem technical or removed from lay people's direct experiences. As we develop our messaging for community members (and, in some cases, policymakers), we will look for ways to show the small-scale benefits of increased green infrastructure—in other words, those that affect individuals, families or neighborhoods.

Finally, we know from our stakeholder interviews that real estate developers are an important part of the equation when it comes to parks and green infrastructure. While the coverage we assessed did not include vocal opposition from developers, it also did not include any positive support. Given their role and influence with policymakers, our messaging will address the ways communities can increase green infrastructure without creating outsized burdens for them.

A note on messengers: As discussed below, media coverage shows a range of rationales for green infrastructure improvements in communities—from increased public safety to more jobs and opportunities for physical activity. While park and recreation staff can certainly employ these arguments themselves, strategic use of influential messengers can add important credibility. Our toolkit will include tips for engaging third-party validators who could serve as spokespeople, such as local healthcare providers or groups, civil rights groups or those focused on children's well-being and quality of life.

Media scan: implications for messaging

1. Strong arguments for green infrastructure link it to at least one clear, tangible benefit to local residents—rather than as an environmental good alone.

In an era of a changing climate, media coverage was clear that cities have a powerful role to play by expanding the use of green infrastructure. From managing stormwater and flooding to defusing the effects of heat islands, green infrastructure improvements offer an array of environmental benefits.

However, not all city residents and policymakers—the focus of our toolkit—will be persuaded by these arguments alone. For these “green skeptics,” the most effective messaging we saw in news

coverage did not assume they would see green infrastructure as a worthy end in and of itself, even if it also improved the attractiveness or aesthetics of an area. Instead, the strongest arguments linked green infrastructure in parks to concrete benefits outside of the environment include jobs, public safety or health.

Effective messaging in the coverage we reviewed employed a “both/and” approach, offering clear, easily-understood examples of benefits to health, well-being and quality of life. See, for example, the statement by former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, published as a guest column in the Orlando Sentinel:

“When dirty air leads to childhood asthma, or when a flood destroys homes, people expect their local leaders to take action. And mayors understand that investing in clean air and green infrastructure is good for their economies. During my 12 years as mayor of New York, we were able to cut carbon emissions substantially while at the same time creating more than 400,000 new jobs.”¹

2. Establishing green infrastructure as an equity issue requires some explaining.

Improved racial and economic equity is a worthy goal of many green infrastructure advocates. However, in the coverage we reviewed this benefit was the least commonly discussed. When policymakers or other municipal leaders did mention equity, it tended to be tacked on to other positive effects, with little explanation and few concrete illustrations:

“Between the tree canopy and the urban forestry here we are making a difference,” says [Baltimore City Arborist] Mr. Dihle. “It all ties together. ... It ties into social equity, into climate adaption, everything.”²

This gap is an important one for us to tackle head-on in our messaging for two reasons. First, because many audiences will not readily grasp how green infrastructure installations will help address longstanding disadvantages for low-income and communities of color. Second, because others may rightly fear that “greening” a neighborhood will lead to gentrification and displacement.

“Fear of ‘green gentrification’ is also legitimate. Around the country there is evidence that parks added to low-income communities have contributed to displacing the very residents they were intended to serve. Think of the iconic High Line in New York City or the 606 in Chicago, where abandoned rail tracks were transformed into linear elevated parks that are now flanked by multimillion-dollar condominiums.”³

“Green infrastructure improvements create jobs, provide public health benefits, and are often implemented along with streetscape improvements that increase pedestrian safety. In practice, however, the employment opportunities rarely benefit local residents, and the streetscape improvements are not done with respect to the local cultures. Rain gardens and other green infrastructure elements often appeal to more affluent, white investors. They can cause real estate values to rise, which often results in involuntary displacement. Good civic investments should, at minimum, attempt to build the adaptive capacity of the most vulnerable community residents to the stressors that might result.”⁴

“Philadelphia’s streets are not equally green. Poor neighborhoods have fewer street trees than wealthier ones, making them more vulnerable to the effects of extreme heat and heavy rains. But although city officials are aware of the inequity, years of scarce resources and problems with the city’s method for planting new street trees means this disparity is perpetuating itself, not going away.”⁵

Given these very real concerns, strong case-making that green infrastructure can reduce economic and racial inequities must be accompanied by clear examples, such as how increased tree cover and shade can help cool homes without air conditioning.

3. Effective messaging to boost support for green infrastructure—especially messaging that incorporates health and equity—must also overcome barriers.

The two main barriers our media scan identified are:

- Lack of knowledge: Much of the terminology around green infrastructure is technical for lay audiences—bioswales and permeable pavement, for example. As we develop our messaging, we will ensure it is easily understood and appropriate for each audience.
- Practical concerns—e.g., cost, maintenance, safety. In addition to obvious questions of cost to taxpayers, community members may have misconceptions about what green infrastructure will do in their communities. As a municipal leader quoted in a recent article said, “[People are concerned] that trees will lift your sidewalk; they’ll get into your pipes; they’ll drop their leaves, or people don’t want to clean up after the leaves,” she said. “One or two people have said to us that they’ll attract bears.”⁶

Taken together, media coverage of the health and equity benefits of green infrastructure in cities and parks provides important context for developing effective messaging. As we equip park and

recreation professionals with communications tools to make the case for green infrastructure investment to policymakers and community members, we will look for ways to:

- Use clear language and concrete examples of benefits to individuals and families beyond environmental benefits alone (e.g., linking clean air and asthma, as opposed to referencing air quality on its own).
- Be prepared for questions about gentrification and unintended consequences of green infrastructure, especially when talking about issues of equity and benefits for neighborhoods/populations who have long faced underinvestment and disadvantage.



Photo by Matthew LeJune

2. Stakeholder Interviews: Additional Insights

To date, we have spoken with five park and recreation agency staff/leaders from a diverse set of cities. Even with this limited sample, we can draw some conclusions about priority audiences, their values and barriers, and how practical communication tools can help with case-making for green infrastructure investments.

1. Majority of interviewees agreed that **the most important audiences to persuade are elected officials, their constituents (local residents), and in some cases internal park and recreation staff**. When it comes to internal buy-in, respondents pointed to the need to address practical concerns like staffing and maintenance costs, as well as overcoming the fear of trying something new (e.g., gray vs. green for stormwater management).
2. **Health or social equity benefits were not explicitly mentioned** when asked about reasons key stakeholders support this work. This underscores the need for us to make a clear, compelling and concrete case when it comes to these factors.
3. **The most common supporters that park and recreation staff point to for their work include select policy-makers, local environmental groups and neighborhood associations**. Our interviewees and many park and recreation agencies work closely with health, equity and civil rights, ethnic, social and economic justice groups, and have good relationships with their communities. An important next-step for some agencies may be to directly involve those communities and organizations in the green infrastructure process.

Again, this points to the importance of using inclusive language that clearly speaks and makes links to an equity-focused agenda as well as encouraging broader collaboration with these groups.

4. **Interviewees unanimously agreed that communications tools will be valuable for them in making the case with community members.** As many of the interviewees have had success in community outreach, we heard that it must be:
 - a. Sustained, with multiple touchpoints and forms of contact—from mailers to door-hangers to social media. Having information on the department website is insufficient, especially for groups who lack computer access.
 - b. Clear, brief and accessible for audiences with language barriers or limited subject-matter expertise.
 - c. In-person, where possible: attending community meetings, hosting listening sessions and initiating calls for public comment are critical tools for building local buy-in.

5. **Collaboration with other government agencies, community groups, nonprofits, and private partners are essential in increasing green infrastructure in parks.** Even park agencies in large cities rely on external partnerships throughout the process of planning, designing, and developing green infrastructure; some agencies even rely on community groups like “friends of parks” to help with the ongoing maintenance of green infrastructure features. These partnerships are most effective when agency leadership is supportive and directing the relationships.

The opportunity to do a deep dive into the landscape surrounding green infrastructure, parks and health equity instilled the need for communications tools that make the case for the multiple benefits of green infrastructure projects in parks. We look forward to translating these findings into practical tools for park and recreation professionals.

Appendix

Methodology

Our media scan was conducted using Lexis Nexis to conduct a combination keyword search of national and state publications and newswire services from July 2017 to July 2019. Search terms included were:

- green infrastructure
- health
- equity
- gentrification
- parks
- city/cities

The searches identified 142 articles that were scanned and analyzed for themes included in the scan.

We also conducted interviews with five park and recreation professionals from the following park agencies:

- San Francisco Recreation and Park
- Cleveland Metroparks
- San Antonio Parks and Recreation
- Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces
- Philadelphia Parks and Recreation

The findings from these interviews were generalized to avoid city-specific identifying information for the purpose of this particular document.

Citations:

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6. Briggs & Jaramillo (2019)