



Written by Peter Harnik

WHAT MAKES IT GREAT
AND HOW TO GET THERE

THE EXCELLENT CITY PARK SYSTEM



THE TRUST *for* PUBLIC LAND

CONSERVING LAND FOR PEOPLE

The Excellent City Park System

What Makes it Great
and How to Get There

PUBLISHED BY
The Trust for Public Land

Written by Peter Harnik

The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.

THE TRUST *for* PUBLIC LAND
CONSERVING LAND FOR PEOPLE

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Left photo: Nicol Park, Oakland. Photo Garlen Capita

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Greetings!

As the mayor of a large city and also the President of the United States Conference of Mayors, I am very much aware of the importance of parks to our daily lives, especially for those of us who live in highly urbanized areas. Among other things, parks provide opportunities to play, to exercise, to learn, to enjoy nature, to socialize, to relax, and to dream. Parks are a vital component in enhancing our communities and keeping them healthy and strong. In addition, parks positively impact our cities through increased tourism, enhanced retail potential, higher property values, and environmental mitigation.

I think all would agree that we need more parks, and more resources to program and maintain them. Cities and counties are struggling to make ends meet, and parks are frequently at the end of the line when budgets are allocated. However, a shortage of financial resources need not be a roadblock in the pursuit of park excellence.

The Trust for Public Land has been studying the relationship between cities and parks for more than 30 years. In this booklet, they have identified some solid guidelines to follow in seeking park excellence, and provide some wonderful examples of cities that have succeeded.

I invite you to read this booklet and learn new ways to make your city's park system even better. I also invite you to come visit our beautiful parks and beaches during your next trip to Southern California.

Sincerely,

Beverly O'Neill
Mayor of Long Beach
President, United States Conference of Mayors

FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

Great cities are known for their great parks, and one measure of any city's greatness is its ability to provide recreation, natural beauty, and signature open spaces for its citizens.

For over thirty years The Trust for Public Land has brought conservation expertise to America's cities—helping to envision and create more than 400 parks and gardens in 150 cities nationwide—protecting land for people close to home.

Successful parks pay dividends for cities—building civic pride, increasing tourism and economic investment, and contributing to health and quality of life. But while most of us think we know a great park when we see one, until recently we have lacked a framework for understanding how cities create and support successful parks.

This report helps to create that framework. *The Excellent City Park System* builds on measures of park system success first introduced in Peter Harnik's *Inside City Parks* in 2000. This volume enlarges the number of cities gauged against those measures to 55 as it introduces new concepts of what makes a park system great.

The Trust for Public Land is proud to have sponsored this research and to bring you this report as part of its continuing commitment to conserve land for people where they live, work, and play.



PHOTO JIM DENNIS

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Will Rogers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Will Rogers

FORWARD

The total area covered by urban parkland in the United States has never been counted, but it certainly exceeds one million acres. The 50 largest cities (not including their suburbs) alone contain more than 600,000 acres, with parks ranging in size from the jewel-like 1.7-acre Post Office Square in Boston to the gargantuan 24,000-acre Franklin Mountain State Park in El Paso.

The exact number of annual visitors has not been calculated either, but it is known that the most popular major parks, such as Lincoln Park in Chicago and Griffith Park in Los Angeles, receive upwards of 12 million users each year, while as many as 25 million visits are made to New York's Central Park annually—which is more than the total number of tourists coming to Washington, D.C.

City parks serve a multitude of purposes. Collectively, they provide playfields, teach ecology, offer exercise trails, mitigate flood waters, host rock concerts, protect wildlife, supply space for gardens, give a respite from commotion, and much more. Some, like New York's Washington Square, are celebrated in books, songs, and films; others operate in relative obscurity, frequented and beloved only by those who live in the general vicinity.

From the very beginnings of the park movement there has been interest in what makes for excellence. At first attention was focused on individual parks; later the inquiry was expanded to what constitutes greatness for a whole system. But each



PHOTO PETER VANDERWARKER, FRIENDS OF POST OFFICE SQUARE

It's only 1.7 acres, but Boston's new Post Office Square Park has revolutionized the look, feel, and desirability of working in the city's financial district.

analysis was confined to a limited view of parks, looking at isolated factors such as location, size, shape, plantings, uses, or historical integrity. No analysis addressed the creation of a park system as a singular entity within a city infrastructure.

With the general decline of city parks in the second half of the 20th century, followed by the recent economic rebound of cities in the late 1990s, there is renewed interest in understanding more precisely the relationship between cities and the

open space within them. What factors lead to all-around park excellence?

Growing out of a two-day retreat attended by park and urban experts, a detailed survey, and telephone research with city park directors around the country, The Trust for Public Land (TPL) has identified seven factors as key to city park excellence. These factors are explored in detail in this publication and are also embellished with vignettes of “excellent practices” from cities around the country.

THE SEVEN FACTORS OF EXCELLENCE ARE:

- 1. A clear expression of purpose**
- 2. An ongoing planning and community involvement process**
- 3. Sufficient assets in land, staffing, and equipment to meet the system’s goals**
- 4. Equitable access**
- 5. User satisfaction**
- 6. Safety from crime and physical hazards**
- 7. Benefits for the city beyond the boundaries of the parks**

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 1859, when Frederick Law Olmsted, Calvert Vaux, and more than 3,000 laborers created Central Park, the nation was swept by a wave of enthusiasm for urban “pleasure grounds”. Thousands of parks were constructed and millions of words were written about their features and attributes. Over the next 75 years the purpose and design of parks metamorphosed, but they remained so important to cities that even during the depths of the Great Depression many park systems received large influxes of money and attention through the federal government’s relief and conservation programs.

During the height of the city park movement, from about 1890 to 1940, great efforts were made to plan for parkland, to understand the relationship between parks and surrounding neighborhoods, and to measure the impact of parks. Leaders in Boston, Buffalo, Seattle, Portland, Denver, Baltimore, and elsewhere proudly and competitively labored to convert their cities from drab, polluted industrial cores into beautiful, culturally uplifting centers. They believed a well designed and maintained park system was integral to their mission.

Inspired by boulevard systems in Minneapolis and Kansas City, and by Olmsted’s “Emerald Necklace” in Boston, many cities sketched out interconnected greenways linking neighborhoods, parks, and natural areas. Careful measurements were made of the location of parks and the travel distance (by foot, generally) for each neighborhood and resident. The field of park



PHOTO PETER WOHLSEN, NEW YORKERS FOR PARKS

research was supported by the federal government through the National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, which provided funding for data collection, research, analysis, and dissemination.

Following World War II the nation’s attention turned toward the development of suburbs, and the commitment to the urban public domain began to wane. There was



Following World War II the nation's commitment to the urban public domain began to wane.

even a naive assumption that private suburban backyards could replace most of the services provided by public city parks. Many of the ideas regarding parks' role in city planning and community socialization were lost. More importantly, ideas about measuring park success, assuring equity, and meeting the needs of changing users languished.

Over the next half-century, much of the vast urban park system fell on hard times. Few cities provided adequate maintenance, staffing and budgets, and most deferred critically needed capital investment. Many parks suffered from overuse—trampled plants and grass, deteriorated equipment, erosion, loss of soil resiliency and health. Others declined from underuse—graffiti, vandalism, invasion of noxious weeds, theft of plant resources, and crime.

The decline was camouflaged. In the older northern cities, general urban deterioration grabbed headlines and made parks seem of secondary importance. In the new cities of the south and west, low-density development made parks seem superfluous. Intellectual inquiry into city greenspace dwindled to almost nothing, with the single exception of the “urban nat-

ural area,” the new concept of preserving wetlands, deserts, forests and grasslands for their ecological values and benefits.

But every pendulum eventually swings back, and the effort to revive city park systems has slowly gained momentum. When The Trust for Public Land was founded in 1972, it was the first national conservation organization with an explicit urban component to its work. At the same time, fledgling neighborhood groups began forming to save particular parks, either through private fundraising or through public political action. There arose a new appreciation of the genius and work of Frederick Law Olmsted, and in 1980 the Central Park Conservancy was founded. In that same year, pioneering research by William H. Whyte resulted in the publication of *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* and the formation of the Project for Public Spaces. The rise of the urban community gardening movement and the spread of park activism to other cities led in 1994 to a \$12 million commitment by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation and the creation of the Urban Parks Institute and the City Parks Forum. Meanwhile, city park directors formed their own loose network through the Urban Parks and Recreation Alliance.

Beginning in 1995 many older cities including Chicago, Boston, Washington, and Cleveland started bouncing back from years of population loss and fiscal decline. With new residents and a greater sense of optimism, they and other places like them began seeking to reestablish a competitive

urban area,” the new concept of preserving wetlands, deserts, forests and grasslands for their ecological values and benefits.

Beginning in 1995 many older cities including Chicago, Boston, Washington, and Cleveland started bouncing back from years of population loss and fiscal decline. With new residents and a greater sense of optimism, they and other places like them began seeking to reestablish a competitive

edge by combining their strong geographies and histories with their newfound economies. Elsewhere, in fast-growing, low-density places such as Charlotte, Dallas, and Phoenix, planners were belatedly trying to create vibrant downtowns and walkable neighborhoods for a more cohesive urban identity. In both old cities and new there was rising interest in the use of parks to help shape vitality.

A New Emphasis on Research

By the mid 1990s, after years of fieldwork creating parks, TPL became concerned about the woeful lack of basic information about city systems. Seeing the need for a round of exploration, TPL initiated a research program to collect data and revisit old ideas about parks and cities. Statistics regarding land ownership, recreational facilities, and budgets were assembled for the first time in more than 50 years.

The result of the research was the book *Inside City Parks*, co-published with the Urban Land Institute in 2000. The book, which looked at the park systems of the 25 biggest U.S. cities, resulted in a storm of publicity for places given the highest and lowest rankings and also stimulated many other cities to ask to be included in future studies. At the same time, a number of critics suggested the research was too restricted. The breadth and depth of a park system, they said, cannot be determined by simple statistics on acreage, recreation facilities, and budgets. It was time to determine

exactly what factors make for a truly excellent city park system.

To study this question—"What makes an excellent city park system?"—TPL convened a multifaceted group of 25 urban and park experts (*see page 14*). The intensive two-day meeting in Houston in October 2001 resulted in a list of **seven broad measures** that make the greatest difference in defining a successful system. Detailed surveys studying the **key indicators** of those seven measures were mailed to directors of 69 park and recreation systems in major cities. This report is based on the results of that survey.

The Trust for Public Land's goal for this project is to re-create the framework that existed in the early part of the 20th century to sustain city parks as valued components of a vital urban community. This report is a first step toward benchmarking goals for city park systems. It aims to help answer the question posed by mayors all around the country: *How do I achieve the best possible park system?*

During the height of the movement, great efforts were made to understand the relationship between parks and surrounding neighborhoods.



PHOTO PETER WOHLSSEN, NEW YORKERS FOR PARKS

**ATTENDEES, URBAN PARKS COLLOQUIUM
HOUSTON, OCTOBER 10-11, 2001**

Twenty-five urban and park experts met for two days in Houston in October 2001 to discuss in detail what attributes make for an excellent city park system. Culling through scores of factors and hundreds of observations, the group compressed the variables into seven principle measures. Based on these measures, detailed surveys were sent to the park directors of the systems in the biggest cities. This report is based on the deliberations in Houston combined with the results of the surveys.

The Trust for Public Land wishes to express its deep thanks and appreciation to the group of experts which gave so generously of their time, knowledge, and insights. TPL also thanks the leadership and top staff of the park agencies for taking so much time to ferret out answers to the numerous challenging questions posed by the survey.

Gayle Berens, Urban Land Institute, Washington, D.C.

Charles Beveridge, Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Washington, D.C.

Kathy Blaha, The Trust for Public Land, Washington, D.C.

Ken Bounds, Seattle Dept. of Parks and Recreation, Seattle, Wash.

John Crompton, Dept. of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University,
College Station, Tex.

Dan Dustin, Florida International University, Port Charlotte, Fla.

Caryn Ernst, The Trust for Public Land, Washington, D.C.

Mary Eysenbach, City Parks Forum, Chicago, Ill.

Jere French, Author, "Urban Green," Gulf Breeze, Fla.

Paul Gobster, U.S. Forest Service North Central Research Station, Evanston, Ill.

Nancy Goldenberg, Center City District/Central Philadelphia Development Corporation,
Philadelphia, Pa.

Peter Harnik, The Trust for Public Land, Washington, D.C.

Mark Johnson, Civitas, Denver, Colo.

Nancy Kafka, The Trust for Public Land, Boston, Mass.

Dale Larsen, Phoenix Dept of Parks and Recreation, Phoenix, Ariz.

Roksan Okan-Vick, Friends of Hermann Park, Houston, Tex.

Joan Reilly, Philadelphia Green, Philadelphia, Pa.

Maitreyi Roy, Philadelphia Green, Philadelphia, Pa.

Oliver Spellman, Houston Parks and Recreation Dept., Houston, Tex.

Lee Springgate, Point Wilson Group, Port Townsend, Wash.

Eric Tamulonis, Wallace Roberts & Todd, Philadelphia, Pa.

Tim Tompkins, Partnerships for Parks, New York, N.Y.

Erma Tranter, Friends of the Parks, Chicago, Ill.

Joe Wynns, Indianapolis Parks and Recreation Department, Indianapolis, Ind.

Leon Younger, Leon Younger & Pros, Indianapolis, Ind.

The Seven Measures of an Excellent City Park System

1 A CLEAR EXPRESSION OF PURPOSE

Park systems do not just “happen.” Wild areas don’t automatically protect themselves from development, outmoded waterfronts don’t spontaneously sprout flowers and promenades, and flat ground doesn’t morph into ballfields. Even trees and flora don’t instinctively grow—at least not always in a pleasing, usable fashion.

The citizenry must clearly set forth in writing the purpose of the park system and a mandate for the park department. The department must then use that mandate as a springboard for its mission statement and the definition of its core services. Most big-city park agencies have a legislative mandate and a mission statement, but about 20 percent of them have not formally defined their core services. A failure to develop this definition and to periodically check whether it is being followed can lead to departmental drift due to political, financial, or administrative pressures. On the other hand, having a strong concept of mission and core services can stave off pressures to drop activities or pick up inappropriate tasks.

For instance, in Chicago in the late 1980s, when newspaper exposes revealed massive waste and malfeasance within the Chicago Park District, Mayor Richard M. Daley brought in a new director, Forrest Claypool, to clean house. Under his philosophy that every organization can do only a few things really well, Claypool was shocked to discover that the Chicago Park

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

MANDATE, MISSION AND CORE VALUES

Long Beach, Calif., Department of Parks, Recreation & Marine

“We create community and enhance the quality of life in Long Beach through people, places, programs, and partnerships.”

That’s the mission statement of the Long Beach Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine. The phrase emphasizes that parks and natural areas are a conduit through which community is strengthened—a means to the end, not the end itself. Parks and recreation can involve anything from economic development to facilitation of community problem-solving to promotion of health and wellness to protection of environmental resources.

Right from the start of its strategic plan the department makes it clear that enhancing community and the city’s quality of life is the overall goal—and it outlines the necessary steps for doing so. The first goal as prioritized by citizens, “to meet community parks and open space needs,” requires investment in additional parkland and improved facilities. Other goals, such as “to facilitate productive service to the community through the department’s management philosophy, structure, culture, and employees,” requires actual changes in processes and in the organizational structure of the department.

The first of five key elements in the plan is “Core Values,” which include such broad items as diversity, lifelong learning, inclusivity, personal development, and play and celebration — issues that reach well beyond parks.

The final element is “Indicators of Success.” For each goal several indicators have been adopted, and information for these is periodically collected and evaluated. If a strategy is not working, it is revised or eliminated.

For more information: Geoff Hall, Special Projects Officer, Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine, 2760 Studebaker Rd., Long Beach, CA 90815; (562) 570-3204, www.longbeach.gov.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Does your agency have, and make available to the public,
 - * a written legislative mandate?
 - * a written mission statement?
 - * a written set of defined core services?
- Does your agency publish a publicly available annual report? Does it provide hard, numerical information on outcomes? Does it provide useful budget numbers?

District had 13 divisions, only one of which was called "Parks." Going back to the agency's mission statement, he privatized much of the work, downsized to six divisions, and decentralized. Within less than a decade, the Park District was widely noticed for its excellence.

Also, to inform the public the department should regularly publish an annual report summarizing its system and programs and showing how well it fulfilled its

mandate. Less than half of big-city agencies publish an annual report — and most of the reports provide "soft" concepts and images rather than precise information, such as number of activities held, number of people served, and other specific outcomes and measurable benefits. Few agencies give a comprehensive budgetary report, and fewer still look honestly at challenges that weren't adequately met and how they could be better tackled in the future.

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

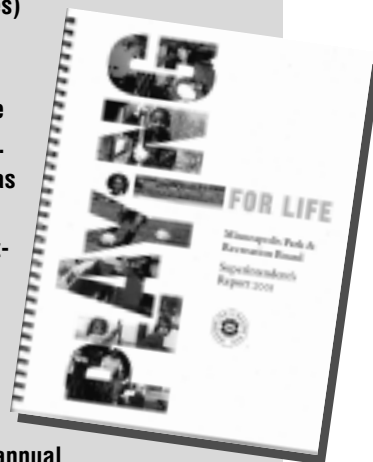
A TOP NOTCH ANNUAL REPORT MINNEAPOLIS PARK AND RECREATION BOARD

The ideal annual report is numerically precise, factually complete, and attractively readable. In short, it is a yearly document that elucidates park successes (and failures) and also elicits pride in the system.

The annual reports produced by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board recount in detail the year's events and highlights and also take the extra step of showing how certain projects tie in with the city as a whole. Surprisingly, the report doesn't shy away from various problems—such as tree loss to Dutch Elm disease, pollution of the city's lakes or crime in certain parks — and what is being done to address them. To feature partnerships and activists, it lists the name of virtually every individual and corporation who donated time and money. Finally, the report provides exceptionally detailed, complete and useful financial numbers.

Production of the 60- to 80-page annual report costs about \$20,000 (in addition to staff time), takes about eight months, and is handled by one staff member working with outside consultants. The agency prints 1,000 copies which are distributed to all city elected officials, neighborhood associations, the media, key partner companies and organizations, and are also placed in every library and in the office of every staffed park.

Contact: Donna Sommers, Marketing & Public Relations Manager, Minneapolis Park & Recreation, 2117 West River Road, Minneapolis, MN 55411, (612) 230-6407, www.minneapolisparcs.org.



2 ONGOING PLANNING AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

To be successful, a city park system needs a master plan.

A plan is more than an “intention.” It is a document built upon a process, demonstrating a path of achievement, and expressing a final outcome. The department’s master plan should be substantiated thoroughly, reviewed regularly, and updated every five years. The agency should have a robust, formalized community involvement mechanism—which means more than posting the document on a web page and hoping for feedback. The ideal master plan should have, at the least, the following elements:

- an inventory of natural, recreational, historical, and cultural resources
- a needs analysis
- an analysis of connectivity and gaps
- an analysis of the agency’s ability to carry out its mandate
- an implementation strategy (with dates), including a description of other park and recreation providers’ roles
- a budget for both capital and operating expenses
- a mechanism for annual evaluation of the plan

Although five years may seem a short lifespan for a plan, it is startling to realize how rapidly urban circumstances change. In TPL’s survey, about two-third of agencies were operating on out-of-date master plans and some were relying on plans formulated 10, 15, or more years ago—back in the days before the rise of computers and geographic information systems, not to mention dog parks, mountain bikes, ultimate frisbee, girls’ soccer leagues, skateboard courses, wifi plazas, and cancer survivor gardens, among other innovations.

The ability of good planning to build community support was demonstrated in

2001 in Nashville, Tenn., when Mayor Bill Purcell initiated a year-long parks and greenways process, the first such citywide conversation in the 100-year history of its parks. Upon completion, resident support had been so solidified that the city council enthusiastically funded a \$35-million capital spending plan, the largest Nashville park appropriation ever.

Not every city will always have a mayor who cares strongly about parks, but every park agency should have a formalized citizen advisory board with which it meets regularly. Its members should be appointed by the mayor or the city council, its sessions should be open to the public and its role should be to provide the agency with constructive criticism, helpful advocacy, user feedback, and fresh planning ideas.

While most park agencies have plans, too often they never reach fruition because key elements are trumped by other agencies or private interests. Visions of a new waterfront

On Seattle’s United Day of Caring, hundreds of corporations give employees the day off to work on such civic projects as improving parks. The combination of planning and participation helps make the Seattle system one of the country’s best.

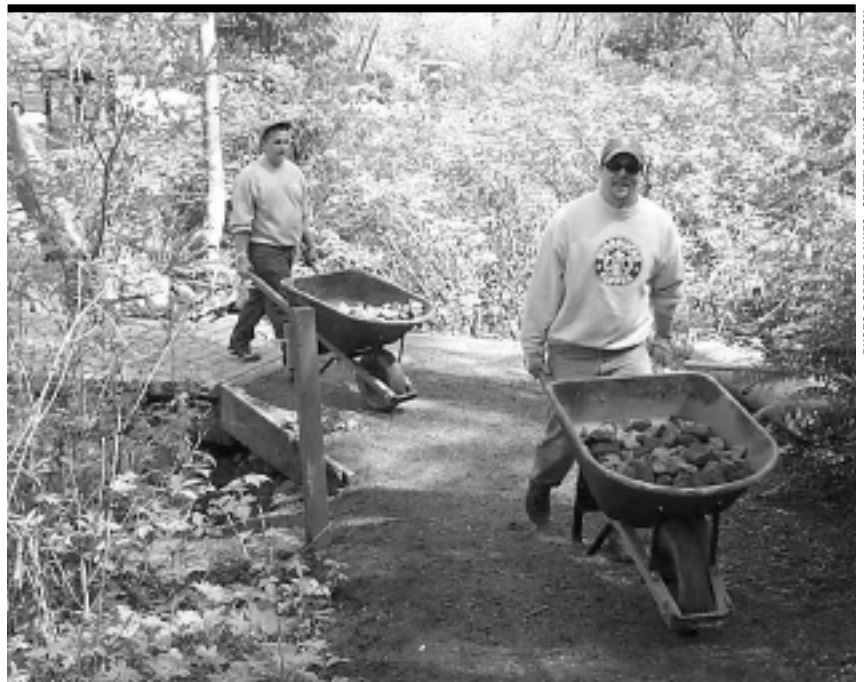


PHOTO ROBERT BAINES, SEATTLE PARKS AND RECREATION

park may be for naught if the transportation department has its own designs on the same parcel. Any park plan (and its implementation strategy) should be coordinated with plans for neighborhoods, housing, tourism, transportation, water management, eco-

nomie development, education, and health, among other factors. Ideally the agencies will reach agreement; if not, the issue should go to the mayor or city council for resolution—with plenty of public involvement and support from pro-park advocates.

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

THOROUGH PLANNING, MANY PARTNERS SEATTLE DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

“Seattle does planning morning, noon, and night,” jokes Kevin Stoops, manager of major projects and planning for Seattle’s Department of Parks and Recreation. It also has an extraordinary web of partnerships with non-profit service providers.

Creation of the agency’s 2000 park plan actually began five years earlier in a completely separate department—the Department of Neighborhoods. Over that period, the department worked with residents to create individual plans for 38 different neighborhoods. Only then did the Parks Department become involved to determine what residents wanted in terms of greenspace in their communities.

To start its process, the Parks Department spelled out everything it had previously promised each neighborhood and showed what had been delivered—and what hadn’t—from the last plan.

After the neighborhood sessions, staff met with its various advisory councils and created a draft plan which was presented at three public workshops (held on weekday evenings to allow for public involvement). Based on the public’s comments, a revised paper was presented to the Board of Parks Commissioners (the department’s citizen review board) after which a final version went to the city council for a vote. The process took over a year, involved the part-time work of four staff people plus a consultant, and cost approximately \$70,000.

As for public/private partnerships, Seattle’s Department of Parks and Recreation has an extraordinary 335 contracts with non-profit organizations including Seattle Works, the YMCA, Earth Corps, school groups, and ecology clubs—which collectively make up most of the volunteer base for the agency.

Theresa McEwen, volunteer coordinator for the department, explains, “We’re not just getting volunteers, but activists and partners. We benefit from their work, while hopefully fostering a sense of stewardship.”

Interestingly, even though Seattle spends more on parks, per capita, than any other large city, it is still not enough. Therefore, the Parks and Recreation Department has an ambitious and extensive Adopt-a-Park program.

Although the level of work generally requires the evolution of a full-fledged “friends” group, the adoption of a park usually begins with the interest of a single citizen who identifies a need, such as a play area or an ecological restoration. Staff from the department then meet on site with community members to discuss feasibility, standards, rules, and expenses. Next, the citizen group applies for a grant through the Department of Neighborhoods, and, if accepted, hires necessary assistance (such as a planner or restorationist). When on-the-ground restoration begins, the group officially signs a memorandum of agreement as an Adopt-a-Park collaborator.

Since the relationship involves considerable support work by the agency, Seattle takes these partnerships very seriously. To sign an Adopt-a-Park contract, the group is asked to show the agency it has the ability to do the work and to agree to at least a three-year plan of action.

Contact for planning: Kevin Stoops, Manager, Major Projects and Planning, Seattle Dept. of Parks and Recreation, 100 Dexter Avenue North, Seattle, WA 98109; (206) 684-7053

Contact for volunteer programs: Theresa McEwen, Volunteer Programs Coordinator, Seattle Dept. of Parks and Recreation, 8061 Densmore Avenue North, Seattle, WA 98103; (206) 615-0691, www.cityofseattle.net/parks.

As confirmation of its involvement with the community, the department should have formal relationships with non-profit conservation and service-provider organizations. These arrangements may or may not involve the exchange of money, but they should be explicitly written down and signed, with clear expectations, accountability, and a time limit which requires regular renewal. Having formal relationships not only enables a higher level of service through public-private partnership, it also provides the agency with stronger private-sector political support if and when that is needed.

Finally, no city can have a truly great park system without a strong network of park “friends” groups—private organizations that serve as both supporters and watchdogs of the department. Ideally, a city will have one or two organizations with a full city-wide orientation, assuring that the system as a whole is well run and successful, and also scores of groups that focus on an individual park and its surrounding neighborhood—concentrating on everything from cleanliness, safety, and quality to programming, signage, and special fundraising.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Is your park-and-recreation plan integrated into the full city-wide comprehensive plan?
- Do you have a park system master plan that is less than five years old?
- Does the agency have an official citizen advisory board or similar community involvement mechanism that meets regularly?
- How many contracts do you have with private non-profit organizations?
- Do you have a city-wide “park friends” organization? How many individual parks have “friends” groups?

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

FRIENDS GALORE!

PHILADELPHIA GREEN & PHILADELPHIA PARKS ALLIANCE

Whether or not there is brotherly love in Philadelphia, there certainly is love of parks. The city has 138 “friends of parks” organizations—two of them operating on a city-wide basis and the rest focusing on one particular park or playground.

Largest is Philadelphia Green which began in 1974 as a community vegetable gardening project and today is an urban greening powerhouse with a staff of 28 and a budget of \$4 million. Philly Green partners with private and public groups to landscape and maintain public spaces downtown and along gateways, but the main thrust of its work is in neighborhoods. There the multi-pronged program is growing crops, instilling pride, teaching skills, developing micro-businesses, stopping illegal dumping on vacant lots, refurbishing parks, and stimulating the redevelopment of blighted neighborhoods. All told, Philly Green has helped plan and implement more than 2,500 greening projects in the city.

The other city-wide organization, Philadelphia Parks Alliance, is more explicitly advocacy-oriented, pushing for more funding and for better stewardship of the large Fairmount Park system. Formed in 1983 by Sierra Club activists, the group incorporated separately and now has a \$300,000 budget and a staff of three. With a quarterly newsletter, annual meetings that include many of the local park groups around the city, and a “Green Alert” mailing list of 550 leaders, FPP is at the center of the campaign it calls “A New Era for Philadelphia’s Parks.”

And providing the muscle are 136 organizations standing up for their individual parks—removing trash, programming activities, helping with special projects, organizing celebrations, watching out for problems, and showing up at City Hall every year at budget hearing time.

Contact for Philadelphia Green: Joan Reilly, Associate Director, Philadelphia Green, 100 North 20th St., Philadelphia, PA 19103; (215) 988-8800.

Contact for Philadelphia Parks Alliance: Lauren Bornfriend, Executive Director, Philadelphia Parks Alliance, P.O. Box 12677, Philadelphia, PA 19129; (215) 879-8159, www.philaparks.org.

3 SUFFICIENT ASSETS IN LAND, STAFFING, AND EQUIPMENT TO MEET THE SYSTEM'S GOALS

Obviously, a park system requires a land base. But the size of that base is not an immutable number: big-city systems range in size from almost 20 percent of a city's area down to 2.5 percent, and from more than 45 acres per 1,000 residents to just over 3 acres per 1,000. While there is no ordained "optimum" size, a city's system should be large enough to meet the goals outlined in the agency's master plan.

Despite the truism "If you don't measure, you can't manage," many cities do not have accurate figures on their systems. It is critical that every agency know the extent of its natural and historical resources—land, flora, buildings, artwork, waterways, paths, roads, and much more—and have a plan to manage them sustainably. It is important to publish these numbers annually to track the growth (or shrinkage) of the system over time. Ideally, the agency should be able to place a financial value on its holdings and should have a plan to pay for replacing every structure in the system.

Because it is so much more expensive to create and operate "designed" landscapes (constructed parks that are mowed or regu-

larly cleaned up) than natural landscapes (those which are left alone, except for the occasional trail), it is valuable to know the acreage split between these two categories. The TPL survey reveals a large range: some urban park agencies have 100 percent designed lands and no natural properties at all, while others have as little as 10 percent designed and 90 percent natural.

Newer systems in younger cities are generally growing much faster than older systems in mature, non-expanding cities, but it is not true that older cities cannot increase the size of their park systems. In the past 30 years the amount of parkland in Denver and Seattle grew by more than 44 percent each. Conversely, some "new cities" have been falling behind in the effort to add parkland—Colorado Springs' system grew by 185 percent between 1970 and 2002, but the city itself grew in area by 206 percent during the same time.

Even cities which are considered "all built out" can use redevelopment to increase parkland. Outmoded facilities like closed shipyards, underutilized rail depots, abandoned factories, decommissioned military bases and filled landfills can be converted to parks. Sunken highways and railroad tracks can be decked over with parkland. Denver even depaved its old airport to restore the original land contours and create the city's largest park.

In New York, the Department of Parks and Recreation collaborated with the Department of Transportation to convert 2,008 asphalt traffic triangles and paved medians into "greenstreets"—pocket parks and tree-lined malls that are then maintained by community residents and businesspersons. In other cities, school systems

Newly created Ping Tom Park consists of five acres of green-space along the Chicago River in Chicago's park-poor Chinatown community. Although land is expensive, the city is powerfully committed to enlarging its park system and making it accessible to all.



PHOTO JILL METCOFF

and park departments are breaking down historic bureaucratic barriers and signing joint use agreements to make schoolyard fields available for neighborhood use after school hours.

In addition to land, the park and recre-

ation department needs sufficient public revenue for land management and programs. This entails both an adequate operating budget and a regular infusion of capital funds for major construction and repairs and land acquisition. A detailed sur-

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

INCREASING LANDHOLDINGS, ASSURING REVENUE CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT

Despite its world-famous lakefront system, Chicago has a shortage of parkland in the rest of the city.

But under the leadership of Mayor Richard M. Daley the metropolis has embarked on an ambitious and thoughtful effort to acquire additional land to more equitably serve its residents. Called the CitySpace Plan, it is a joint program of the Chicago Planning Department, the Chicago Park District, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, and the Chicago Public Schools.

Finding that 63 percent of Chicagoans lived in neighborhoods where parks are either too crowded or too far away, CitySpace in 1993 set out to methodically gain open space in five ways:

- convert asphalt schoolyards and portions of school parking lots to grass fields
- create trails, greenways, and wildlife habitat alongside inland waterways such as the Chicago River and Lake Calumet
- turn vacant, tax-delinquent private lots into community gardens
- redevelop abandoned factories into mixed-use developments that include parkland
- build parks on decks over railyards

Before plunging into this formidable task, the planners carried out a detailed analysis of virtually every square foot of the city, identifying both community needs and each parcel of public and private open space. They also worked with more than 100 other government agencies and civic, community, and business organizations to reach a full understanding of the many economic and regulatory processes which tend to stimulate (or prevent) the creation of parkland. By the end of the study, the CitySpace team was able

to use the complexity of Chicago's bureaucracy to its advantage instead of being stymied by it. Among the action steps developed were specific strategies to acquire funding, to obtain abandoned, tax-delinquent properties, to mandate open space in special redevelopment zones, and to change zoning laws.

The outcome has been impressive. Since 1993, under guidance of the plan, Chicago has added 99 acres to its park system, 150 acres to its school campus park network, a 183-acre prairie for a future state open space reserve, and two miles of privately owned but publicly accessible riverfront promenade. The city has also leased 10 acres along the Chicago River and provided permanent protection of 40 community gardens. The total cost of this increase has been in excess of \$30 million.

One reason the Chicago Park District has been able to afford land acquisition in a staggeringly expensive market is that the agency is authorized to receive a portion of the city's property tax. This guaranteed source of revenue not only shields the Park District from city council politics and cutbacks, it also enables the agency to issue bonds since lenders know that repayment is guaranteed from tax revenue.

"The Cityspace Plan enabled us to focus our acquisitions in the geographical areas of need," said Bob Megquier, former director of planning and development for the Park District. "It may be a slow and costly process, but at least we know that we are putting our resources in the right places."

Contact: Kathleen Dickhut, Acting Deputy Commissioner, Chicago Department of Planning and Development, 121 N. LaSalle St., Room 1101, Chicago, IL 60602; (312) 744-1074, www.cityofchicago.org.

KEY QUESTIONS

- **What was your agency's total actual revenue in the most recent completed fiscal year, including both operating funds and capital funds?**
- **What was the city's approximate total level of private donations for parks?**
- **What is the acreage you own (and/or control) within the city limits, broken down into three categories:**
 - * **natural areas (including water acreage)**
 - * **designed areas (including water acreage)**
 - * **undeveloped areas (land not yet open to the public)**
 - * **Note: If you own land outside the city limit, what is the acreage?**
- **How many acres, if any, do you operate in joint use with a school district?**
- **How many natural resources professionals—horticulturists, foresters, and landscape architects—do you have on staff?**
- **Is there a natural resources management plan?**
- **How much did your agency spend in the past fiscal year, including maintenance, programming, capital construction, and land acquisition?**
- **Is there a marketing plan for the park system?**

vey of the 55 biggest cities showed that, in fiscal year 2000, the “adjusted park budget”—the amount spent by each city on park operations and capital, minus everything spent on such big-ticket items as zoos, museums, aquariums or planetariums — came to an average of \$80 per resident. While that figure is probably not high enough—considering that every system is millions or billions of dollars behind its needs—it is certain that, in current dollars, this should be considered a minimum.

Moreover, there should be an effective, complementary private fundraising effort—one that serves not only signature parks but also the whole system. Although private efforts should never be designed to let the local government off the hook, they can be valuable in undertaking monumental projects or in raising work to levels of beauty and extravagance that government on its own can not afford. Private campaigns are also effective in mobilizing the generosity of corporations, foundations, and wealthy individuals which otherwise would not contribute to government agencies.

Excellent park departments not only receive adequate funding, but also spend their money wisely and commit themselves to effective stewardship. Outstanding stewardship means having enough qualified natural resources professionals to properly oversee the system and manage the work of pruners, mowers, and other laborers. Moreover, since a system rarely has enough paid staff to accomplish all its goals, the excellent department has a high-visibility, citizen-friendly marketing program whereby members of the public can understand the stewardship of the system and become involved, if they wish.

Finally, park departments must track their expenditures accurately and be able to report them to the public usefully and understandably. Most agencies have the raw information but too many of them do not provide it; numbers are either difficult for politicians, reporters, and the general public to get hold of, or the statistics are put forth incomprehensibly.

4 EQUITABLE ACCESS

The excellent city park system is accessible to everyone regardless of residence, physical abilities, or financial resources. Parks should be easily reachable from every neighborhood, usable by the handicapped and challenged, and available to low-income residents.

Most cities have one or more very large unspoiled natural areas. By virtue of topography—mountain, wetland, canyon, stream valley—they are not, of course, equidistant from all city residents. But created parks—squares, plazas, playgrounds, neighborhood parks, ballfields, linear greenways—should be sited in such a way that every neighborhood and every resident is equitably served.

Preferably, people and parks are no farther than five minutes apart by foot in dense areas or five minutes apart by bicycle in spread-out sections. Moreover, it is not enough to measure access purely from a map; planners must take into account such significant physical barriers as uncrossable highways, streams, and railroad corridors, or heavily-trafficked roads. Also, the standard for acceptable distance shouldn't be based on an idealized healthy adult, but rather on a senior with a cane, a mother pushing a stroller, or an eight-year-old riding a bicycle. Unfortunately, most cities do not provide this kind of park equity. Los Angeles has abundant parkland in its mountainous middle but precious little in the crowded south-central section. New York has vast acreage in Staten Island and the Bronx but a dearth of greenspace in Brooklyn. And most cities haven't accurately analyzed which of their residents are far from parks.

Cities should also assure park access by a wide range of challenged persons, including

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

ASSURING OPPORTUNITY FOR LOW-INCOME USERS

PORTLAND, OREGON

DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

"We have an overriding expectation that we will not allow poverty to be a barrier to participation in our park and recreation system," says Lisa Turpel, recreation division manager of Portland's Department of Parks and Recreation.

To drive home this message, the department states on every written document, "If you need financial assistance, talk to our staff." Those who request help are given a form which inquires about family income (self-reported and unverified). Based on the results (which are pegged to the federal government's qualification schedule for free and reduced fee school lunches), they may then be offered scholarships ranging from 25 percent to 100 percent of the cost of a program. There is a limitation of one scholarship per person per calendar quarter.

The program costs the department about five percent of its revenue. One Portland community center brought in \$980,000 in a recent year while providing \$48,000 in scholarships. Another, in a wealthier section, earned \$1.6 million and gave scholarships worth \$35,000.

"Most people ask only when they really need it," explains Turpel. "But the tricky part is to make sure that you're hearing from enough of the people who have the need. Just having to request scholarship assistance can be a barrier to many, particularly among seniors."

Those who are offered full scholarships are asked if they can undertake some simple but valuable duties for the agency, and many jump at the chance, according to Turpel. Among the jobs are stuffing envelopes, setting up a room for a class, helping with general clean-up, and answering the phone. One woman offered to sort through a large lost-and-found bag, throw out the worthless items, wash the rest and bring them back. Later she took the unclaimed items to Goodwill.

Contact: Lisa Turpel, Workforce & Community Alliances Manager, Portland Department of Parks and Recreation, 1120 SW Fifth Avenue, Suite 1302, Portland, OR 97204; (503) 823-2223, www.portlandonline.com/parks.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Do you know the distance from every residence to its nearest park? If so, what percentage of city residents are located more than one-quarter mile from a park of at least one acre in size?
- If your agency charges a user fee for any location or activity, does it offer income-based reductions or scholarships, or free days?
- Is there a formal disability advisory group to assist in meeting the physical and programming mission of your park system?

the elderly, infirm, blind, and those confined to wheelchairs. This includes appropriate surfacing materials, ramps, signs and handicapped parking. The best way of achieving this goal is through the creation of a Disability Advisory Committee which meets regularly.

Finally, agencies must assure equitable

access for those who can't pay full price. While it is acceptable to charge appropriate fees for some park facilities and programs, agencies should consciously plan for the approximately 20 percent of residents who cannot afford such fees, utilizing such alternatives as scholarships, fee-free hours, fee-free days, or sweat-equity volunteer work.

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

ACCESSIBILITY FOR THE DISABLED

VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA
PARKS AND RECREATION DEPT

Factual input, public funding, and guaranteed follow-through. These are the three ingredients of a program that assures access by all handicapped and physically challenged persons in the city of Virginia Beach, Virginia. And behind the effort stands the interest and commitment of Mayor Meyera Oberndorf.

The lynchpin of the campaign is the Mayor's Committee for the Disabled which consists of a broad cross-section of agency staff, private non-profit representatives, and members of the general public. Meeting monthly, the committee provides ideas to the government and also ensures that the disabled are properly served.

"Now that most buildings have already met the government's requirements under the Americans with Disability Act (ADA)," explained Robert Barnaby, chair of the committee, "a major focus of the committee is on our parks." A subcommittee on recreation is chaired by a staff member of the Parks and Recreation Department.

Funding decisions are made by the ADA Committee, which consists of the heads of all the city departments and meets once a year. In 1998 that committee authorized spending \$328,000, most of it for parks.

"The biggest need was for accessible bathrooms," said Barnaby, "and most of those have been completed by now. Another major need is for trails across the dunes and the beach to reach the water."

As for implementation, the parks department, working with representatives from the disabled community, does a "sweep" through a given park, identifies all the problems, and then tries to fix the problems simultaneously under one contract. In addition to restrooms, this includes adding curb cuts, widening walkways, assuring that paved surfaces are smooth (concrete or asphalt, not paver blocks), improving transition points from pavement to mulch, installing accessible playground equipment, and using different textured surfaces to assist the blind and elderly.

One factor in Virginia Beach's success was the merger of the formerly separate therapeutic recreation unit into the Parks and Recreation Department, eliminating inter-agency competition and cutting costs. The next goal is to help people with disabilities get from neighborhoods to the parks.

Contact: Colleen Wittig, Supervisor, Inclusion Support Services, Virginia Beach Department of Parks and Recreation, 2289 Lynnhaven Parkway, Virginia Beach, VA 23456; (757) 385-0400.

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

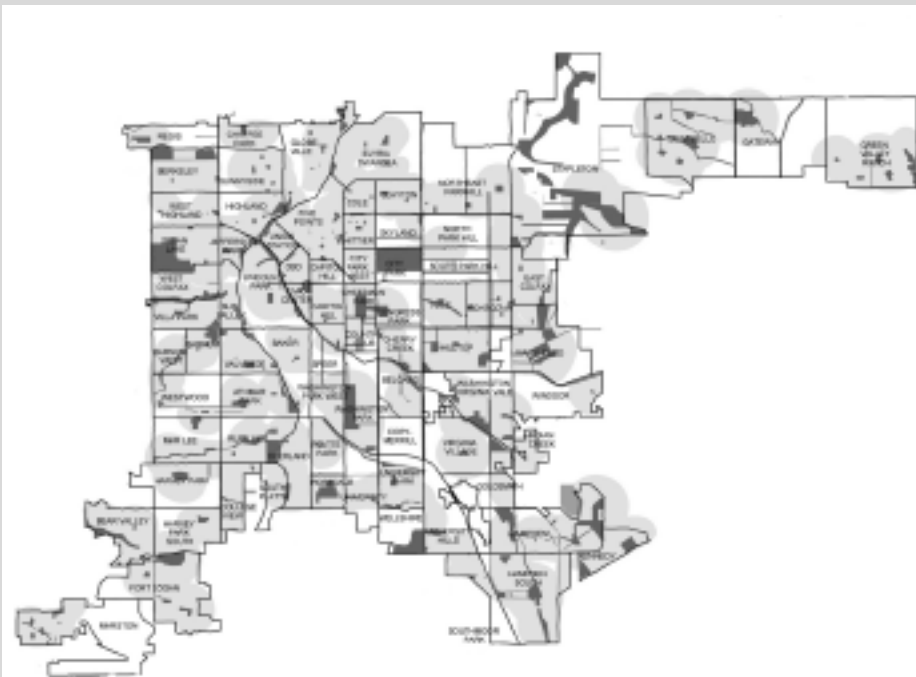
NO MORE THAN SIX BLOCKS FROM A PARK DENVER PARKS AND RECREATION

In Denver, more than nine out of ten residents live within six blocks of a park.

Not only does this fact show the accessibility of Denver's park system, it also reveals that the city—unlike most—knows its level of service.

"Geography is everything," explains Susan Baird, manager of the Master Plan Process for Denver Parks and Recreation. Since park access was the project's primary focus, Baird worked with consultants on a geographic information system (GIS) analysis that went beyond a neighborhood analysis all the way to a building-by-building study.

Specifically, researchers used a computer model to draw a six-block-radius circle around each traditional park (or natural area, such as a developed gulch).



By using computer mapping, Denver park planners can pinpoint every residence that is more than six walkable blocks from a park—and utilize that information to plan new acquisitions.

They did not count any of the city's numerous parkways, maintaining that while the parkways are visual amenities, they are not directly usable as parks.

Moreover, Baird notes, "The goal wasn't just any six blocks. We said that it's got to be a walkable six blocks, meaning that people can get to the park without having to cross a highway, railroad track, or body of water. Crossing a six-lane road is not access." Thus the Denver team truncated circles wherever they crossed barriers, further clarifying which residents did not have good enough access. Funding for the analysis came from capital appropriations for the master plan.

At 11 acres per 1,000 residents, the total amount of parkland in Denver is not extraordinarily high, primarily because the city does not have any huge parks comparable to

those in Philadelphia, Kansas City, Los Angeles, and many other places. However, Denver more than compensates for size with distribution. It is also committed to improvement: once the six-block percentage is raised from the current 88-96 percent of residents (depending on the quadrant of the city), Denver Parks and Recreation plans to tighten the radius down to four blocks, or about one-third of a mile.

Contact: Susan Baird, Denver Dept. of Parks and Recreation, 201 Colfax Avenue, Dept. 609; (720) 913-0617, www.denver.gov/Parks.

5 USER SATISFACTION

By definition, the outstanding city park system is well used. Having high usership is the ultimate validation that it is attractive and that it meets people's needs. High attendance also increases safety because of more "eyes on the park."

Knowing the level of park use requires measuring it, not only for an estimate of a gross total but also to know users by location, by time of day, by activity, and by demographics. And finding out the satisfaction level requires asking questions—not only of users but of non-users as well. Furthermore, to spot trends, these efforts must be carried out on a recurring, scientific basis.

The Trust for Public Land found that an overwhelming number of city park agencies are unaware of their total usership. Not having this number severely reduces an agency's ability to budget and to effectively request funding from the city council. Most departments can track their paying users—golfers playing rounds, swimmers using pools, teams renting fields. But this is only a tiny fraction of the true total. The lack of basic information is in stark contrast to, for

They look happy—but has anyone surveyed them? Or their parents? Or their neighbors who never go into the park? Could the park be even better?



PHOTO JESSICA WHITE

instance, the transportation department, the school system, or the welfare department, all of which can make a strong factual case justifying their budget requests.

As for satisfaction, most agencies rely on informal feedback such as letters of complaint or messages relayed back by the staff. This is unbalanced and ineffective, and does not provide the agency with clear direction. It therefore tends to result in a park system that meets the efficiency needs

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Do you know the yearly use of your park system (i.e., user-days)? What is the attendance by time of day; by park; by activity? What are the demographics of your users and non-users?**
- **Is there at least one full-time person in the park agency (or elsewhere in the city government) devoted to surveying park users and non-users, and analyzing the surveys?**

of the provider rather than the comfort needs of the user. (Most infamously, many agencies "solve" the problem of dirty bathrooms not by cleaning but by permanently locking them.)

Naturally, it is not possible to accurately count all passive users of a system. However, observation, selective counts, and extrapolations—repeated over time—can provide meaningful data. Chicago takes aerial photos of large events and then uses a grid to count participants. The city also sets up electronic counters to measure the number of users passing a given point.

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

KNOWING ABOUT PARK USERS

FORT WORTH, TEXAS, DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

“Know your customers,” contends Randle Harwood, acting director of the Fort Worth Department of Parks and Community Services. “It’s simply good business.”

For Fort Worth, knowing customers is good business for another reason: in Texas the state does not cover the cost of producing a master plan unless it includes a needs assessment. The results of the assessment then become part of the master plan. This knowledge of usership benefits both the agency and the park visitor.

Under contract with a private company, Fort Worth conducted telephone surveys in 1991, 1997 and 2001. A random sample of residents in each park planning district was reached, including 500 youths between the ages of 12 and 16. Respondents included park users and non-users, and all were asked to rate the parks, recreation opportunities, and open spaces in Fort Worth. Citizens were also asked what new facilities would benefit them, from water fountains to parking spaces to hiking trails.

The survey tracks many variables, including frequency of use, time spent in parks, time of day when visits occur, day of week partiality, and such issues as taking out-of-town visitors to parks. It focuses on customer satisfaction, as well as on preferences and priorities. (In 2001 residents favored restoring parks over buying more land.) As a result, the department is regularly informed of areas that need improvement and also those which are showing success.

In 2001, 66 percent of those surveyed said they used the parks at least once; extrapolating to the full population of Fort Worth, that comes to 364,000 individuals. Of course, the total number of uses (or user-days) is much higher since some people visit a park every day. Although the agency does not have the budget to conduct a visual or electronic count of users, an extrapolation of the times-of-use data projects a total annual park visitorship of 43 million.

Using an outside survey firm has been beneficial to the agency, according to Harwood, particularly when presenting material to the city council to encourage bond programs. He feels that an independent voice presents greater objectivity and helps reinforce the professional views of the agency. The polling is also more extensive than that normally done by city agencies.

Designing and conducting the initial survey cost about \$30,000. After that, using a similar survey and fewer respondents, the cost dropped to about \$15,000 each time. In the future the department hopes to conduct the survey every other year.

Contact: Randle Harwood, Acting Director, Fort Worth Parks and Community Services, Fort Worth Parks and Community Services, 4200 South Freeway, Ft. Worth, TX 76115; (817) 871-5704

6 SAFETY FROM PHYSICAL HAZARDS AND CRIME

To be successful, a city park system should be safe, free both of crime and of unreasonable physical hazards—from sidewalk pot-holes to rotten branches overhead. Park departments should have mechanisms to avoid and eliminate physical hazards as well as ways for citizens to easily report problems.

Crime, of course, is dependent on a large number of factors that are beyond the reach of the park and recreation department—poverty, drug and alcohol use, population demographics, lack of stabilizing neighborhood institutions. But there are other factors—park location, park design, presence of uniformed personnel, presence of park amenities, availability of youth programming—over which the department has some control. Ultimately the greatest deterrent is the presence of large numbers of users.

Park visitors are also reassured if they see uniformed employees. Even if the number of actual police or rangers is quite small and their rounds infrequent, the perception of order and agency responsibility can be extended simply by dressing all park workers and outdoor maintenance staff in uniform.

Similarly, well-run youth recreation programs have been shown to decrease delinquency and vandalism. The excellent park system takes it even farther by tracking youth crime by neighborhood over time. Having hard numbers is the only way to know if targeted programs are having success.

Basic to any safety strategy is the accurate, regular collection of crime data in parks and, preferably, near parks, since parks and their surrounding neighborhoods are interrelated. Only about half the

surveyed agencies currently collect this data and, of those that do, most have no strategy to use the information. Another valuable piece of information is the ratio of male to female users in each park since a low rate of female users is a very strong indication of a park which feels unsafe.

KEY QUESTIONS

- **How many uniformed park personnel does your agency have or contract with? (Uniformed personnel can include park police, rangers, outdoor park workers or visible/recognizable volunteers in the parks, but does not include office workers.)**
- **Do you systematically collect data on crimes that occur in parks?**
- **Do you systematically collect neighborhood data comparing youth crime rates with the provision of recreational services?**
- **Do you know your system's ratio of male to female users, preferably on a park-by-park basis?**

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

A UNIFORMED PRESENCE IN THE PARKS

SAN ANTONIO DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

The universe of park security is divided into two groups: those cities with armed park police and those with unarmed park rangers (in radio contact with the regular city police force). The advantage of the latter is that park rangers tend to be more knowledgeable about resource issues and tend to have a visitor service ethic. The advantage of the former is more attention to criminal activity and quicker response to dangerous situations. (The terminology is not consistent, however, and some armed officers are called rangers.)

San Antonio has opted for trained police officers, complete with firearms and the authority to make arrests. It has about 130 officers, half working the city's popular and crowded Riverwalk, Paseo del Rio, and half working the system's other 180 facilities. The division operates two 10-hour shifts between 7 am and 3 am (modified from three eight-hour shifts after an analysis showed little criminal activity between 3 and 7 am). They get around by automobile, scooter, boat (along the Paseo), and mountain bicycle.

The park police were formed in 1958 as a small park ranger unit, primarily to handle traffic, parking and crowd control in major parks on weekends. Over time it grew in size and responsibility. In early 2002 the officers' titles were changed from "ranger" to "police," which represented "a tremendous morale booster to our men and women," according to Captain Raymond Castro, public information officer for the division. On the other hand, morale is hurt by the fact that the park police are paid less than the unionized city police, an issue that may surface in future budget conversations. (The park police force budget is \$6 million, which is about 20 percent higher than it would be for a staff of unarmed rangers, who are paid less.)

Of course, police alone can't make parks safe; the most important security factor is having large numbers of park users. San Antonio tries to stimulate this through quality maintenance and programming. In addition, the parks department requires that all its 850 outdoor personnel wear uniforms, thus providing an additional sense of presence and authority.

The Park and Recreation Department coordinates with city police in preparation for large celebrations in parks, and it has recently begun conducting a monthly meeting to review and implement directed patrol strategies to target criminal activity that may affect both a park and its surrounding neighborhood. Work is still needed, however, to institute an outstanding park crime reporting system; the park police know the number of reported incidents in the parks (and the fact that about one out of five calls is in response to criminal activity), but they must rely on the city police for follow-up investigations and arrest statistics.

Contact: Steven W. Baum, Chief, San Antonio Park Police, 600 Hemistair Park, #337, San Antonio, TX 78205; (210) 207-8590, www.sanantonio.gov/sapar.



PHOTO SAN ANTONIO DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

AN INSPECTION PROGRAM THAT REALLY COUNTS NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF PARKS & RECREATION

Unmaintained parks are more than unattractive. They can also be dangerous. But addressing the problem requires a systematic approach—particularly in a city with 1,700 park properties.

PHOTO NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION



Taking the challenge to heart, New York City Department of Parks & Recreation instituted its Parks Inspection Program, a comprehensive, outcomes-based performance measurement system

that relies upon frequent, random and strict inspections of parks and playgrounds.

Using hand-held computers and digital cameras, a team of trained inspectors annually conducts over 4,000 inspections of parks, rating each one based on 16 features such as protruding bolts, peeling paint, presence of glass and graffiti, and the

condition of athletic fields, fences, and rubber safety matting. Inspections are typically done on foot and include the sidewalk surrounding a park. In large natural areas, trails are walked and rated for cleanliness.

Inspections are performed every day and results are distributed and discussed bi-weekly at every level of the agency.

The ratings are further complemented by “ParkStat Plus+,” a monthly meeting to review performance measurement data and photos of unacceptable conditions in specific park areas. Directed discussions between senior staff and field supervisors center around statistical trends and innovations to reverse declining performance or to maintain progress.

It seems to be working. Between 1994, when the program was started, and 2001, the cleanliness rating rose from 74 percent “acceptable” to 92 percent, while the overall park condition rating has risen from 47 percent “acceptable” to 86 percent.

Contact: Robert Garafola, Deputy Commissioner for Management, New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, 830 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10021; (212) 360-1302, www.nycgovparks.org.

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE STAY OUT OF TROUBLE AUSTIN PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

Unstructured free time and young people can be a bad combination—and is consistently a challenge for the modern recreation department.

In 1996 the Austin City Council addressed that powder keg by creating the Social Fabric Initiative. Through the initiative, Austin Parks and Recreation Department developed a multi-layered program that includes a summer teen recreation academy, a neighborhood teen program, and an art-based program called “Totally Cool, Totally Art.” The next year the effort was expanded with “Get Real,” a roving leader program that sends trained staff out into the neighborhoods with vans, sports equipment and art projects.

“We needed to reach out to kids who weren’t coming to our

facilities or who didn’t have a facility near them,” explained Robert Armistead, manager of the program.

Austin Parks spends about \$1.6 million on the Social Fabric Initiative, employing 13 full-time staff and approximately 100 temporary and seasonal workers. According to a study by a researcher from Texas A&M University, the program is helping students improve their school behavior, attendance and grades, and has also helped them develop conflict resolution skills.

Contact: Robert Armistead, Division Manager, Programs, Austin Parks and Recreation Department, 200 S. Lamar, Austin, TX 78704; (512) 974-6700, www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks.

7 BENEFITS FOR THE CITY BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PARKS

The value of a park system extends beyond the boundaries of the parks themselves. In fact, the excellent city park system is a form of natural infrastructure that provides many goods for the city as a whole:

- cleaner air, as trees and vegetation filter out pollutants by day and produce oxygen by night;
- cleaner water, as roots trap silt and contaminants before they flow into streams, rivers and lakes;
- reduced health costs from sedentary syndromes such as obesity and diabetes, thanks to walking and running trails, sports fields, recreation centers, bike-ways, golf courses, and other opportunities for physical fitness;
- improved learning opportunities from “outdoor classrooms” in forests, meadows, wetlands and even recovering brownfields and greyfields (previously used tracts);
- increased urban tourism based on attractive, successful parks, with resulting increased commerce and sales tax revenue;
- increased business vitality based on employer and employee attraction to quality parks; and
- natural beauty and respite from traffic and noise.

Taken collectively good parks have been shown to increase the property value of residences up to a radius of about two-fifths of a mile. (Of course, troubled parks can have the opposite result.) The sophisticated park agency regularly collects financial data (or contracts with a university or other entity) in order to know which of its parks are positively impacting the surrounding neighborhood. It also informs the media, the tourism and real estate industries, and even the

mayor’s office at budget time. Unfortunately, few agencies maintain this economic database.

EXCELLENT PRACTICE

MEASURING PROPERTY VALUES INDIANAPOLIS DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

In the future, all cities will regularly measure changes in property values near parks. For now, the best example comes from Indianapolis’ Department of Parks and Recreation.

A former railroad line that was converted into a park for bicycling, skating and walking, the Monon Trail has proved valuable to its neighborhood. In a study carried out by Indiana University’s Eppley Institute, 66 percent of property owners living near the trail felt that it increased the resale value of their property, while only 5 percent felt the opposite. Sixty-four percent felt the trail made their property easier to sell while 10 percent felt the opposite.

The \$60,000 study, which also included research into five trails outside the city, was partially paid for by the state departments of transportation and natural resources.

The initial survey did not elucidate detailed economic information, but the next version will. Using computerized mapping, census data and property sales records, researchers will study the precise impact of all six of the city’s major greenways upon housing prices. A future version of the study could conceivably carry out a similar analysis for the rest of the park system.

Contact: Donald Colvin, Indianapolis Dept. of Parks and Recreation, 900 E. 64th St., Indianapolis, IN 46220; (317) 327-7031, www.indygov.org.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Does your city systematically collect data comparing property values near parks with those farther from parks, and report on the findings?

CONCLUSION

City parks do not exist in a vacuum. Every city is a complex and intricate interplay between the private space of homes and offices, the semi-public spaces of shops, and the fully public space of parks, plazas, streets, preserves, and natural areas. TPL envisions park systems which enrich cities, and cities which nourish their parks.

By reporting factual data and highlighting some of the excellent practices essential to city park management TPL hopes to set both a benchmark (an average standard that has been achieved by the big cities) and a high-level goal (some of the best models that have been established thus far).

TPL believes that hard data combined with the heartfelt motivation of park directors and citizen advocates will lead to a renewed appreciation of the importance of city parks by mayors, city councils, business leaders, and the general populace. Such appreciation will create better park systems within the full nationwide program of urban revitalization.

The latest facts and figures on city park systems is freely accessible from TPL's Center for City Park Excellence website at www.tpl.org/ccpe. TPL offers data on park systems for the 55 largest cities in the United States, including total park acres, acreage per 1,000 residents, acreage as a percent of city land area, operations and capital spending, and more. In some cases the information is also broken out by cities' population density levels so as to enable better comparison of cities with similar characteristics. TPL is pleased to make this information available to the public and encourages those interested to explore further.



EXCELLENT PRACTICE

AN ADMIRABLE LEVEL OF STEWARDSHIP PHOENIX DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

Put it all together—land, money, planning, public participation, commitment, awareness, volunteerism—and the sum total equals stewardship. For excellence in stewardship, it comes out looking a lot like Phoenix.

Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department starts with an exceptionally high quality planning process in which it inventories resources, analyzes geographical and user needs, reviews gaps in the system's connectivity, and sets forth budgets and an implementation strategy.

Through good fortune and good skills the agency has been allotted a generous budget. It maintains a large staff which includes a team of more than 40 foresters, horticulturalists, and landscape architects to assure good planning and nature management. Phoenix' maintenance budget computes to more than \$11,000 for every acre of "developed" parkland—land that is in contrast to the natural preserve acreage under its jurisdiction—a higher level than any other city park agency.

Partly as a result of the city's commitment, the people of Phoenix have also put in impressive levels of volunteer time for the system. In 2001 more than 22,000 volunteers donated more than 200,000 hours of work. In addition, there is a private Phoenix Parks and Conservation Foundation, through which citizens and businesses can make donations for specific projects. Past efforts have included the Japanese Friendship Garden, the Irish Cultural Center and a cancer survivors' park. The foundation recently restructured so that it may also serve as a land trust, holding land donations and receiving mitigation funds on behalf of the parks department from such agencies as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Finally, Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department has an effective marketing program, with a staff of three and a budget of \$150,000, which continually puts forth information about the system to the general public.

The proof is in the outcome. In 2001 the city of Phoenix ranked first overall in a comprehensive national study that measured how well U.S. cities deliver government services to local citizens, and the Phoenix parks department placed second to none.

Contact: Dale Larsen, Assistant Director, Phoenix Department of Parks and Recreation, 200 W. Washington St., Phoenix, AZ 85003; (602) 262-4998, www.phoenix.gov/parks.

To receive additional information or to share ideas, data, or best practices, please contact:

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