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How Urban Park Systems Can Best
Promote Health and Wellness
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Abstract

The Trust for Public Land conducted a study and determined that in order for a park system to poster mental and physical well-being, it must be used by the public. The professionals in the fields of public and mental health, parks and recreation, landscape architecture, and urban planning discussed and analyzed park elements such as trails, sports fields, playgrounds, drinking fountains, restrooms, and other facilities, and how they are provided, promoted, and signed. The professionals also considered important variables external to the parks such as access, walkability, and cyclability, and additionally park safety. Six major factors were determined to stimulate public use of parks: a mixture of uses and a maximum amount of programming; stress reduction- calming traffic and emotions; beauty and great design; proximity and accessibility, and co-location; and interconnected park web; partnerships for health.

Resource

FROM FITNESS ZONES
TO THE MEDICAL MILE:
*How Urban Park Systems Can Best
Promote Health and Wellness*



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Related publications from The Trust for Public Land

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The Health Benefits of Parks (2007)

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FROM FITNESS ZONES
TO THE MEDICAL MILE:
*How Urban Park Systems Can Best
Promote Health and Wellness*

By Peter Harnik and Ben Welle

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
1. A MIXTURE OF USES AND A MAXIMUM AMOUNT OF PROGRAMMING	6
Cincinnati Recreation Commission	8
Fitness Zones, Los Angeles	9
Urban Ecology Center, Milwaukee	10
2. STRESS REDUCTION: CALMING TRAFFIC AND EMOTIONS	12
Golden Gate Park, San Francisco	15
Sunday Parkways, Portland, Oregon	17
Seattle's P-Patch	18
Patterson Park, Baltimore	20
3. BEAUTY AND GREAT DESIGN	22
New York City's Playground Program	23
4. PROXIMITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND CO-LOCATION	25
Piedmont Park, Atlanta	28
Midtown Greenway, Minneapolis	29
Hermann Park, Houston	30
5. AN INTERCONNECTED PARK WEB	31
Platte River Greenway, Denver	32
6. PARTNERSHIPS FOR HEALTH	33
New York City Department of Parks and Recreation	35
The Medical Mile, Little Rock, Arkansas	36
CONCLUSION	37
APPENDIX	38

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to health and fitness, the United States is in crisis. Forty-nine percent of Americans get less than the minimum recommended amount of physical activity,¹ and fully 36 percent of U.S. adults engage in no leisure-time physical activity at all.² These people are not all obese, of course, but lack of exercise is certainly a risk factor for being overweight—and we are the most overweight nation on Earth.³ On average, an obese American racks up nearly \$1,500 more per year in health care costs than an American of normal weight, for a national total of \$147 billion in direct medical expenses.⁴ With health costs collectively making up between 17 and 18 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product,⁵ there is no doubt that the population needs to be more fit.

It is well established that physical activity helps prevent obesity and related medical problems. And there is mounting evidence that providing places to exercise—parks, primarily—can improve health.⁶ Research is also uncovering physical and mental health benefits simply from interacting with nature: reduced levels of attention deficit in children,⁷ improved cognitive ability,⁸ reduced aggressive behavior⁹—a general recharge of the brain.¹⁰

The mere presence of a park, however, does not guarantee a healthier population. Thousands of acres of city parks are not, for one reason or another, serving the important purpose of helping people become healthier. With a growing clamor from doctors, parents, overweight persons, and even those who just want to strengthen muscles, lungs, and hearts, it's time for parks to be more than simply pretty places. How can individual parks—and entire city park systems—*actually* help people be healthier and more fit?

In April 2008 The Trust for Public Land (TPL) organized a colloquium to study this very question. Twenty-two leading professionals in the fields of public and mental health, parks and recreation, landscape architecture, and urban planning spent two days discussing and analyzing park elements such as trails, sports fields, playgrounds, drinking fountains, restrooms, and other facilities—how they are provided, promoted, and signed. Attendees also considered critically important (but often overlooked) variables external to the parks, such as ease of access, walkability, and cyclability; transit service; and the density of the surrounding population. Finally, they discussed the critical issue of park safety.

The mere presence of a park does not guarantee a healthier population. . . . It's time for parks to be more than simply pretty places.

Based on this work, the group agreed on the overriding principle for a park system to foster mental and physical well-being: it must be well used by the public. The attendees also concurred on the six major factors that can stimulate this public use.

That guidance, followed up by a good deal of research and analysis and a search for best practices, has yielded this booklet. We hope it aids Americans in achieving better health.

1

A MIXTURE OF USES AND A MAXIMUM AMOUNT OF PROGRAMMING

Physical activity is key to health, and city parks are a resource for active urbanites.

But many parks don't make it easy to exercise. Some are too small, some too big and confusing, some too far away, some too frightening, some too unattractive and unimaginative. Some are mainly athletic complexes for specialized users—baseball, soccer, or tennis players as far as the eye can see. Others are primarily natural areas with occasional looping trails, boring for many competitive young (and not-so-young) people.

In the starkest terms, most parks simply don't offer enough choices and opportunities for activity. Rather than being like old-fashioned hardware stores, filled to the brim with unexpected delights and choices, many are more like convenience stores, with a small, predictable number of lowest-common-denominator wares.

The more facilities and discrete spaces that are layered onto a park, the more use it can get from people with different interests and skills. A golf course can serve a couple of hundred people a day; add a running track around the perimeter and the same space can serve thousands. (The one encircling Memorial Park Golf Course in Houston hosts 10,000 runners a day and is reputed to be the most heavily used exercise trail in the country.) A playground is a nice place for small children to race through and practice motor skills; adding an adjacent fitness zone of adult exercise equipment allows moms, dads, and nannies to get into shape while they're watching the kids. A softball diamond is a great place for 18 players; unstructured field space nearby opens up unending possibilities for twosomes to kick

a ball, toss a Frisbee, play catch, throw sticks to a dog, or much more. Thick woods are wonderful sanctuaries for wildlife and the occasional intrepid bushwhacker; forests with manicured trails, the occasional bench, and periodic grassy openings attract many more users.

Of course, mixing uses has its challenges and requires good design, adequate signage, and clear rules. Trail use, for example, can create conflict between walkers, skaters, and fast cyclists. Many cities appropriately prohibit fast cycling on trails shared by pedestrians. On the other hand, hard pedaling and fast running provide more health benefit than casual spinning and jogging. Other than putting bikes on roadways (see page 15), the only safe solution is to provide parallel treadways for fast and slow users—and to clearly mark the allowed uses by location or time of day. Then, too, the alternate trails need occasional enforcement.

Even if a park system offers varied spaces for physical activity, not everyone will know how to take advantage of them. Some users need to learn new skills, some need encouragement, some need an exercise regimen, some need social support. Even with all this, many require other assistance—partners, equipment, referees, time-keepers, music, safety paraphernalia, and more. In a word, programming. Good programming can increase park use many times over, make activity more enjoyable, and increase its benefits to health and fitness.

Traditional park programming consists of league sports, exercise routines, children's camps, and oldies-but-goodies such as ballroom dancing.

THE MORE YOU CAN DO, THE BETTER!

It's no surprise that New York's Central Park welcomes more visitors than any other park in the world: there's something for everyone.

- Run, bike, or skate on miles of car-free roadway
- Paddle a canoe or row a boat
- Visit the lions at the zoo
- Ride a wooden horse at the carousel
- Catch and release a fish in the lake or Harlem Meer
- Swing in one of 21 playgrounds
- Climb on the Alice in Wonderland statue
- Hum a John Lennon tune at Strawberry Fields
- Applaud a performance at Shakespeare in the Park
- Float a model sloop in the sailboat pond
- Cut a figure-eight at one of two ice rinks
- Roll a ball on the lawn bowling field
- Serve and volley a tennis ball (indoors and out)
- Practice your side stroke at the pool
- Buy a hot dog or pretzel from a vendor's cart
- Dine at one of a half-dozen cafes and restaurants
- Clip-clop around the park in a horse-drawn carriage
- Meditate on a Greek statue at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Climb aboard a pedicab for a human-powered park tour
- Listen to a concerto during a SummerStage concert
- Marvel at syncopated roller dancing
- Get rhythm in the middle of a drum circle
- Get married in a flower garden
- Join a historical walk, ecology walk, fungus expedition, or bird walk*
- Holler "Bingo!" when you finally get the number you have been waiting for*
- Create arts and crafts in the Chess and Checkers House*
- Play traditional Native American games*
- Explore a castle by candlelight*

*Ranger-led programming

More recent additions have been Jazzercise, tai kwon do, tai chi, rock climbing, and bicycle "roadeos." But in response to changing technologies and new immigrant cultures, innovative ideas come along all the time. In Minneapolis, the park department offers open gym periods to play *sepak takraw*, a remarkable kick volleyball game brought to this country by Hmong immigrants from Cambodia. Raleigh, North Carolina, uses the reward of a free pedometer for diabetic children who sign up for special athletic programming that includes nutrition instruction. Seattle has launched monthly Women of the World swims at two pools at the request of Muslim women whose faith bars them from recreational activities with men. Women of all faiths are welcome, and the sessions are privately funded. Overseen by female lifeguards and held at pools without street-facing windows, the swims provide some women with exercise they otherwise would not get.

Of course, programming has a health impact only if people know about it, and that requires promotion and marketing through advertise-

ments, program pamphlets, TV and radio public service announcements, flyers, email, and social networking services such as Twitter. Outreach is difficult in times of tight budgets, but creative park departments attempt to find private sector collaborators in fields such as health, media, banking, and public utilities to help them spread the word.

Finally, every new program and every new facility needs to be evaluated, particularly when dealing with health, since this approach is standard in the medical community. It is not enough to assume that an activity has a positive impact. The only real way to know is through monitoring and before-and-after measurement. Sometimes the research can be done by the park agency itself. But when this is prohibitively time-consuming or expensive, it may be possible to partner with a local university, college, or high school whose student researchers can observe usership and even measure such health indicators as body mass index, heart rate, or muscle strength.



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ...
PROVIDE LOTS OF PROGRAMMING AND TELL PEOPLE ABOUT IT:
Cincinnati Recreation Commission

When it comes to programming, Cincinnati—the nation’s 56th-largest city—packs a wallop. On a per-capita basis, Cincinnati ranks in the U.S. top ten for its number of ball diamonds, recreation centers, swimming pools, tennis courts, basketball courts, and golf courses. More important for public health, the Cincinnati Recreation Commission’s programs attracted over 3.2 million participant-visits in 2009, some 691,000 of which were visits by youth. All this in a city of barely 330,000 residents—giving Cincinnati the highest per-capita recreation participation rate of all cities reporting information to The Trust for Public Land.

Among the hundreds of programs offered are youth and adult league sports ranging from soccer and basketball to track and field and kickball; senior programs such as golf, swimming, tennis, and the Senior Olympics; programs for the disabled, including wheelchair football and basketball; and such offerings for youth as after-school programs, summer day camps, and bike outings. In addition to the formal programming, most of the recreation commission’s 29 recre-

ation centers offer fitness centers and open gym hours. Residents can use the recreation centers and the city’s 26 pools for a yearly membership fee of \$25, or \$10 for seniors and youth.

The Cincinnati Park Board—a landowning and land management agency separate from the recreation commission—plays a part, too, by working to make Cincinnatians feel safer in their parks. In Burnet Woods, a place with a mixed reputation, the board thinned out invasive vegetation and installed a disc golf course through the forest. The sport, which is growing in popularity throughout the country, drew so many more people into Burnet Woods that the park became safer and more appealing even for visitors not there for the game.

Cincinnati Park Board

950 Eden Park Dr., Cincinnati, OH 45202
cincinnatiiparks.com

Cincinnati Recreation Commission

805 Central Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45202
cincyrec.org

Photos: left, Susan Lapidis; right, Phil Schermeister



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ...
PROVIDE EXERCISE EQUIPMENT AND FITNESS ZONES:
Community Redevelopment Agency of L.A. and L.A. Dept. of Rec. and Parks

Fitness zones are easy-to-use, accessible outdoor gyms designed to promote general health within a park experience, creating a supportive social context for getting fit. Using only a gravity-and-resistance weight system, fitness zones require no electricity and employ their users' body weight to engage different muscle groups. The exercise equipment is durable, vandal- and weather-resistant, and appropriate for people 13 years of age and older of all fitness levels.

Working under the leadership of The Trust for Public Land and with funding from health insurer Kaiser Permanente and the MetLife Foundation, the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation Department have installed 30 fitness zones across the region, including six in existing Los Angeles city parks.

Fitness zones are often placed in areas of high need, including communities with high rates of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Some are located adjacent to playgrounds to encour-

age adults to exercise while keeping an eye on children. Others are placed near administrative offices to reduce safety worries.

The El Cariso Regional Park in Sylmar is one example of a successful fitness zone. It includes nine pieces of easy-to-use outdoor gym equipment along with bilingual health and fitness information panels.

"The bottom line is that fitness zones attract new users to parks," says Dr. Deborah Cohen, a researcher with the RAND Corporation who carried out an exhaustive before-and-after study of the facilities in 12 parks. "We also know that fitness zones are used throughout the day, that fitness zone users increase the amount they exercise, and that they use the parks more frequently than other park users."

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Photo: Rich Reid



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ...
CONNECT THEIR COMMUNITIES AND CHILDREN WITH NATURE:
Urban Ecology Center, Milwaukee

Ever since the city and county merged their park departments in 1927, Milwaukee has had one of the largest and most respected park systems in the Midwest. But even the Milwaukee County Department of Parks, Recreation, and Culture can't do all its park programming alone. Fortunately, it has an outstanding private partner in the Urban Ecology Center.

Although the primary mission of the center is environmental education, its activities also promote public health. Each year, 15,000 students and teachers from 45 schools are exposed to the excitement and wonders of nature. They explore river corridors, hike trails, identify birds, and investigate wildlife habitat. Participants, about 85 percent of whom are low income, stretch muscles as well as minds. A significant number of them learn to feel comfortable in the outdoors—a place that many city kids fear. And many of them develop an outdoor orientation that they share with their families on weekends and that will continue into their adult lives.

The center came into being because of community concern over the decline of 24-acre Riverside Park, once a popular destination on Milwaukee's north side. Although the rundown park was largely shunned, science teachers at nearby Riverside High School became intrigued and began taking students there to observe ecological processes. Finally, in 1991, out of a trailer on park grounds, the ecology center was launched. As the organization grew, it launched a fundraising campaign to build a state-of-the-art headquarters and educational facility. The success of that effort led to an expansion of the program to Washington Park, a few miles to the west.

“For us, the health benefit comes from two directions,” explains Ken Leinbach, the center's director. “First, we always make sure the kids go outside. Even if it's 20 below zero we'll throw them in a pair of donated boots and head out for a few minutes. Second, we work to make our parks safe and accessible so that they

Photo: Jeff McAvoy



can be regularly used by the community even beyond our program hours. That doubles the health impact.” The Urban Ecology Center also makes available free to its members many types of sports and gardening equipment—including bicycles, snowshoes, cross-country skis, camping gear, sea kayaks, shovels, and rototillers. An annual membership costs \$25, with special rates for students (\$12) and households (\$35). The household rate is especially effective, since young

people come for school programs and often return with the whole family in tow.

Raising funds from almost a dozen local, state, federal, and private sources, the center stretches its \$2 million budget to employ more than 65 full- and part-time staff and interns and to oversee 1,200 volunteers. The center is paid \$4,000 by each participating school (about 40 percent of the true costs). Finally, it is subsidized by the county park department, which pays utility costs and leases it space for only \$1 a year. “It’s a no-brainer to partner with Urban Ecology,” says Parks and Recreation Director Sue Black. “They’re enlivening and revitalizing parks, bringing kids into contact with nature, and filling a void. I’d like to have as many as ten Urban Ecology Centers in my parks.”

Urban Ecology Center

1500 E. Park Pl.
Milwaukee, WI 53211
urbanecologycenter.org

Photo: Theresa/Beth Whitfield

2

STRESS REDUCTION: CALMING TRAFFIC AND EMOTIONS

As beautiful, peaceful islands of greenery, parks can help reduce stress and promote mental health. But this is the case only if parks provide a safe and welcoming environment. An empty, frightening park, or one overrun with activity that requires constant vigilance, can increase stress and damage mental health. This is a complex issue. On the one hand, parks need active public use to provide the safety of “eyes and ears”; but well-used parks need rules and enforcement to ward off stress from overcrowding and inappropriate behavior.

Activities that may provoke stress include panhandling, behaving raucously (including playing loud music), riding bicycles at high speed on crowded trails, and, of course, leaving trash and litter from picnics. Such actions need to be controlled by setting clear rules and then enforcing them. Just because parks are green spaces doesn't mean they can serve as urban jungles. Despite agency cutbacks it is essential that there be some kind of uniformed presence to allay park users' concerns—if not police, then uniformed maintenance workers, or perhaps even an “orange hat” group of volunteers who patrol in pairs and carry communication radios. For every person who may be annoyed by the “petty” enforcement of park rules, many more will be grateful knowing that civilized, thoughtful behavior is being enforced. Research shows that this is particularly true among lower-income and minority park visitors.¹¹

A special stress factor is automobile traffic, particularly for parents with children. An excess of park roads and parking areas not only reduces

field space and the number of trees in a park, it also adds unhealthy noise and smog and may create real and perceived dangers from vehicles. Park managers who recognize the problem have instituted slow speed limits, speed humps, or circuitous routings—all designed to calm traffic. But some cities permit or even encourage fast, unimpeded traffic and even high-speed commuting through their parks. (Perhaps the most outlandish case was in Detroit, where for several years Belle Isle Park—designed by world-famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted as a pristine getaway—was annually the site of a Grand Prix auto race.)

Automobiles also increase stress in parks by pushing many bicyclists and most roller skaters off roads and onto pedestrian pathways. This can convert a pleasant walking experience into an annoying or even frightening one and decrease the total number of park users.

More generally—and counter to popular assumption—it has been found that automobile traffic reduces total park use. Cars bring people to parks, but they also create an intimidating monoculture that drives users away. For instance, Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C., receives only two million visits a year, compared to the nine million visits to much smaller Prospect Park in Brooklyn, New York. This is related to the 14 million annual auto trips through Rock Creek Park, most of which are through-drives and do not involve stopping for park visits. In contrast, there is almost no auto traffic permitted in Prospect Park. While some people assert that driving through a park is as valid as walking in one, it

is undisputed that the latter provides greater health benefits to the user and the public at large. Many motorists claim a “windshield view” mental health benefit from park driving, but none get any physical benefit from the experience. In contrast, car-free spaces with hard surfaces can feature an astonishing number of health-promoting activities—children biking, roller-skating, hula-hooping, or playing street hockey; parents pushing baby strollers; runners training for marathons; seniors power-walking or playing shuffleboard. And having more park users produces another health benefit: reduced crime. In Kansas City, crime in Kessler Park decreased by 74 percent the year that 2.6 miles of Cliff Drive were turned car-free on weekends.¹²

The numbers bear it out: converting park roadways to car-free multiuse spaces is attracting users of all ages. The best-known closures include the loop drives in New York’s Central and Prospect parks and the former three-mile drive in Atlanta’s Piedmont Park. Portions of park roads have been gated in Baltimore, Denver, and San Antonio. Regular weekend road closures occur in portions of Washington, D.C.’s Rock Creek and East Potomac parks, San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, and Charleston’s Hampton Park. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, cars have been banned on Memorial Drive along the Charles River every Sunday for 20 years. (The mile-long stretch is known as Riverbend Park on those days.)

A related approach is to close selected city streets on weekends, not only *within* parks but also *between* them. Known in Spanish as a *ciclovía*, the concept was initiated in Bogotá, Colombia, where on every Sunday more than one million people promenade along 81 miles of car-free roadways. The idea has spread through Latin America—including to Mexico City and Guadalajara, Mexico—and to U.S. cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, New York, San Antonio, and San Francisco. (In this country

the practice has a variety of names, including “Sunday Parkway,” “Summer Streets,” “Scenic Sunday,” and “Walk and Roll.”) In most cities, the lead agency is the transportation department, but it usually receives major support from the park and recreation department, particularly where the route goes through a park. With the increasing popularity of the concept, closed streets could become an important venue for health-promoting walking, skating, running, and cycling for large numbers of people.

The numbers bear it out: converting park roadways to car-free multiuse spaces is attracting users of all ages.

A completely different parklike space that can reduce stress and promote health is the community garden. Community gardens have been around for more than a century, but only in recent decades have city park departments comprehensively moved into this field. Many departments have designated garden areas within existing parks. A few have acquired established gardens and officially added them to the park system. The resultant spaces benefit public health in numerous ways: by promoting physical activity, social connections, and mental relaxation; by fostering feelings of self-worth and self-reliance; and by producing healthful food—of particular importance in low-income neighborhoods, where residents may have less access to fresh produce.

At the far unhealthy end of the spectrum, both mentally and physically, is outright violence in a park—either through injury from assault or through reduced park use from fear of an attack. Occasionally, a park gets a reputation for danger that is worse than the reality, such as when a homicide is committed elsewhere but the body is found in the park. But making parks feel safe

is a complicated interplay between culture, rules, enforcement, design, and programming, one that also involves socioeconomic factors in the surrounding neighborhoods. Although much about crime and violence is not yet understood, better-used parks are generally safer, particularly if some of the users are engaged in organized programs.

Importantly, not everyone perceives parks in the same way. Residents of wealthier neighborhoods, where danger and personal safety are not overwhelming concerns, frequently prefer leafy, natural parks. Residents of poorer neighborhoods often shun forested areas and prefer open areas with lots of activity. There, enlivening parks is a high priority—from sports leagues to festivals, cultural events to cleanup activities, tree planting and vine pulling to outdoor classrooms and exercise cooperatives, “screen-on-the-green” movie nights to volunteer safety patrols. High-capacity park departments may be able to organize many activities without help; others should at a minimum have an outstanding volunteer coordinator to encourage and support partnership efforts to make events happen.

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One effective way of increasing park use in dangerous areas is through “park-pooling”—group travel from neighborhoods to parks. Pennsylvania State University Professor Geoffrey Godbey interviewed a group of black women in Cleveland who walked together to a park, initially joined by a police escort. They told Godbey that they liked to see police, although as more women joined the group the escort eventually was not needed. In New York’s Central Park, there is an established meet-up time and location for females who wish to jog together for safety.



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ...
 PROVIDE CAR-FREE ROADS: *Golden Gate Park, San Francisco*

The successful Sunday test conversion of a road to a multiuse trail in New York’s Central Park in 1966 led San Francisco Supervisor Jack Morrison to propose a similar experiment in Golden Gate Park. The one-day, 15-hour car closure of the park’s Music Concourse in January 1967 was so well received that 1,000 enthusiastic supporters—including Mayor John Shelley—showed up at a meeting called by the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association to discuss the possibility of future closures. The next month, the park and recreation board voted unanimously to begin Sunday closures of John F. Kennedy Drive in the eastern section of the park.

The public health benefit from Golden Gate’s car-free roadway is hard to overstate, and it’s not just because of physical activity and reduced air pollution. Even more important is increased use. According to careful attendance counts by the San Francisco County Transportation Authority and extrapolations by the Center for City Park Excellence, offering a car-free park road

lures as many as 2.7 million more users annually to Golden Gate Park. Regardless of weather, in 2006 park use on car-free Sundays was 216 percent of the use on Saturdays, when the road was not closed.¹³ In other words, for every 100 people out in the park on Saturday, there were 216 walking, skating, running, cycling, stroller-pushing, dog-walking, and otherwise enjoying themselves on Sunday. Since that time, because of the study, partial road closures have been introduced on some Saturdays, too.

In 2007, under the slogan “Healthy Saturdays,” an additional 1.5-mile stretch of the same road was closed for the full weekend between April and September. Ensuing controversy, however, has slowed the program’s expansion. “We’re now

Car-free Sundays on John F. Kennedy Drive in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park leave roadway space free for bicyclists and skaters. As a result, Sundays see higher—and healthier—usage than Saturdays.

Photos: Christopher Duderstadt

at less than three miles car-free for less than two days a week,” says Andrew Thornley, project director for the San Francisco Bike Coalition. “Cars still rule on 13 miles seven days a week, plus the other three miles for five days. The park could do much more to promote public health.”

A calculation by the Center for City Park Excellence indicates that closure of John F. Kennedy Drive seven days a week could increase total park usership by 69 percent, from about 12 million uses to 20 million uses a year. In addition, that larger group would be more physically active.

A significant reason for the controversy is that the park contains two major museums whose boards have strenuously opposed car bans. Also, Golden Gate Park is not near the public subway, the cable cars, or most trolley lines. But steps are being taken to minimize the need for cars in the park. In 2008, when an 800-car underground garage was opened to serve the museums, 800 aboveground spaces were simultaneously elimi-

nated and a park shuttle system was instituted, paid for by parking fees from the garage. There are also plans to permanently close some little-used park roads and to install meters to encourage more thoughtful use of cars.

“There are still many more things we could be doing [to increase park use],” said Gloria Koch Gonzalez, manager of Golden Gate Park. “So many neighborhood people don’t even know us. I’d like to see organized trips, by transit, from every community center in the city so children and parents could experience this great park and feel comfortable coming here, to learn, exercise, and enjoy.”

**San Francisco Recreation and
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San Francisco, CA 94117
parks.sfgov.org



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... PROVIDE CAR-FREE ROADS: *Sunday Parkways, Portland, Oregon*

In Portland, six to eight miles of streets are closed to cars on select Sundays throughout the summer. Each route showcases a different set of communities and threads through different parks. The main purposes are to stimulate healthful activity and encourage alternative transportation. Participation is also fun and memorable.

Sunday Parkways turns roadways into instant parks. In 2009, each event attracted between 15,000 and 25,000 people.¹⁴ Participants are mostly bicyclists, but about one-quarter walk, run, skate, or join the fun by juggling, walking on stilts, walking their dogs, or doing other imaginative activities unleashed by car-free street events. Real parks, which are intentionally included on each route, offer special events and attractions, such as hula hooping, wall climbing, face painting, and bike repair.

When the program was first announced in 2008, some observers predicted traffic chaos and called

it a “war on cars.” (Ironically, the initial uproar generated increased participation in the event.) But the transportation department carefully established a route that avoided major thoroughfares. Reasonable rules allowed residents of affected streets to drive (slowly) to and from their homes, guided through the crowds by police and volunteer marshals. Because of good planning, a unified stance by all Portland agencies, and careful coordination with neighborhood associations, the 2008 event was so successful that there were almost no complaints when the next set of three Sunday Parkways was announced for 2009. In 2010, the number of events was increased to five.

Proper logistics is critical to success in these events. The route must be defined and mapped; flyers designed, distributed, and mailed; vendors found and registered. Agreements must be signed between the departments of parks and transportation. Finally, a large number of volunteers must be recruited to help participants cross streets without traffic signals, assist local residents as

they drive to and from their homes, and provide information and first aid. (At intersections with traffic signals, Portland requires police presence.)

The budget for the three Sunday Parkways in 2009 totaled about \$240,000, with about \$100,000 coming from the city. In a clear sign that these are health-related events, insurer Kaiser Permanente pitched in \$20,000 to kick-start the idea in 2008 and continues to help fund the program.

“We were inspired by [the *ciclovia* in] Bogotá,” says Linda Ginenthal of the city’s transportation bureau, “but we’re doing it the Portland way. We are looking to physically knit the community together—and provide physical activity as well.”

Portland Department of Transportation
1120 S.W. 5th Ave.
Portland, OR 97204
pdxtrans.org

Photo: Greg Raisman



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... CULTIVATE A NETWORK OF COMMUNITY GARDENS: *Seattle’s P-Patch*

With 68 gardens totaling 23 acres and containing 1,900 plots cultivated by 3,800 gardeners, Seattle’s P-Patch is the national model for a city-run community gardening program. Other places, such as New York, may offer more total gardens, but none matches Seattle’s level of government

involvement in owning, protecting, coordinating, and supporting community gardens.

P-Patch is named for Rainie Picardo, a farmer who established Seattle’s first community garden in 1973 by allowing residents to cultivate plots on

his land. Today the program has an annual budget of \$650,000 and a staff of six, and Seattle residents cultivate more garden plots per capita than residents of any other major U.S. city.

Of Seattle's 68 gardens, 28 are officially in the purview of the park department—17 are located in corners of larger parks and 11 on freestanding parcels. Other city gardens are situated on miscellaneous plots of public land—under power lines, on the rights-of-way of “paper” (unbuilt) streets, or on property owned by the water utility or school district. All are managed by the city's Department of Neighborhoods, which handles registration, fees (about \$34 to \$67 per year, depending on plot size), enforcement of rules, and maintenance of the waiting list. (Even with the large number of gardens, demand is so high that some people have waited up to four years for a plot; voters in 2008 passed a park levy that included \$2 million to expand the number of plots to 2,400.) The department helps search for available land and offers matching funds to

groups wishing to establish new gardens or invest in existing ones.

Seattle's commitment to community gardening extends beyond its parks and neighborhoods departments. The city council has passed a resolution recommending the co-location of gardens on other city-owned property. Moreover, the city's comprehensive plan calls for a standard of one garden for every 2,000 households in high-density neighborhoods (known in Seattle as “urban villages”)—probably the most ambitious such target in the nation. The program also has a private partner, the P-Patch Trust, that greatly strengthens the program by serving as its watchdog and advocate.

Seattle Department of Neighborhoods
700 5th Ave., Seattle, WA 98104
seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch

Photos: Seattle P-Patch Program



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... COMBAT CRIME AND BRING BACK USERS: *Patterson Park, Baltimore*

Though Patterson Park is now considered the most successful park in Baltimore, this was not always the case. There was a time in the 1970s and 1980s when the city came close to losing the park and, with it, the surrounding Patterson Park neighborhood. Demographic changes to the neighborhood, crime, vandalism, and drug dealing began tipping the 135-acre park from amenity to liability. Structures were damaged and vegetation was killed; arson destroyed the beloved Music Pavilion. The nadir came in 1985, when a youth was severely beaten in the park in a widely publicized racial incident.

The first few save-the-neighborhood efforts sputtered and died. Finally, in 1993, community leaders produced a plan that included a vision for improving the park. Under guidance from a University of Maryland urban studies professor and funded by a federal grant, a student spent two years inventorying all the park's physical features, measuring erosion, and also organizing a park festival and an ongoing friends group. At

the same time, a visitor survey threw up two red flags: Patterson Park's users were overwhelmingly male, and almost half of the community's residents never went there at all. It became clear that any effort to maximize the park's value—including social and health benefits—depended on attracting new users, especially women and girls.

[A] visitor survey threw up two red flags: Patterson Park's users were overwhelmingly male, and almost half of the community's residents never went there at all.

What turned the tide was the Friends of Patterson Park, which quickly grew in effectiveness, in part because it received staff support from two local organizations working on housing and senior services. The Friends began by tackling infrastructure improvements—raising private funds and lobbying public agencies to renovate

the park's iconic pagoda, install new perimeter lighting, and reconstruct playing fields and two park entrances.

But the real turnaround was due to programming. Thanks to the Friends, the park gradually became the favored site for a wide variety of family festivals and events, including such longtime local favorites as the Turtle Derby (in its 70th year), Preakness Frog Hop, Doll Show, and Fishing Rodeo. Early years saw a canine extravaganza called Bark in the Park and a monthly Art Market Fair. Newer events include the Great Halloween Lantern Parade, the BikeJam Race and Festival, and the eye-popping Kinetic Sculpture Race of homemade human-powered vehicles.

Summer now brings concerts every other Sunday night, Shakespeare in the Park, outdoor movies, and four large cultural gatherings—Polish, Ukrainian, Hispanic, and African. Youth soccer leagues are ever present. Occasionally there are even more unique happenings, like 1999's Syn-

chronized Swimming Water Ballet by an ethnically and physically diverse cast of neighborhood residents ages 8 to 52.

“One of our goals was to do as much outreach as possible in the parts of the neighborhood that were less connected to the park,” said Kini Collins, former events coordinator for the Friends. “The main thing was to have fun!” Along with the fun, Patterson Park is delivering improved health for its neighbors and other Baltimore residents. Two health-related items on the Friends' wish list are a children's farm to teach about gardening and nutrition and a collaboration with nearby Johns Hopkins School of Public Health to capture specific health data for children and other park users.

Friends of Patterson Park

27 S. Patterson Park Ave.
Baltimore, MD 21231
pattersonpark.com

Photos: Friends of Patterson Park

3

BEAUTY AND GREAT DESIGN

To promote physical activity and mental development, parks need great playgrounds. To make trails and walkways welcoming, parks need excellent horticulture. To lure tourists and other first-time visitors, parks need art, visual excitement, and high-quality workmanship. To make all users feel wanted, respected, safe, and oriented, parks need pleasing and effective signage. If all these elements are present, they add up to that memorable result—great design.

It may seem odd that design could be related to health, but it's true: pleasing predictability encourages participation. If the basics are well provided, people will flock to the system and use it to the fullest.

Signage may be the most overlooked amenity. Parks without signs are like elevators without buttons, libraries without book numbers, or restaurants without menus. At best, signless parks are confusing and frustrating; at worst they are intimidating and frightening. To cite only one example of many, at an unsigned fork on a national park trail in Arlington, Virginia, one path leads 18 miles to Mount Vernon, while the other crosses the Potomac River to Washington, D.C. More than two dozen years after the trail's construction, there is still no guidance for the thousands of tourists each year who stand at that critical juncture, scratching their heads.

Good signage can do much more than just point the way. It can also provide distance measurements for walkers, runners, and cyclists; denote hours of operation or road closures; indicate the way to refreshments, restrooms, and emergency call boxes; relate historical and ecological information; convey rules and safety instruction; and even provide health tips and information about calories burned in a particular activity.

Another parklike space that benefits from good design is the urban schoolyard. Too often, schoolyards are poorly designed, maintained, and managed—simply slabs of asphalt surrounded by chain-link fences with a locked gate. For a few hours each school day, children use them to burn off steam, but the valuable land gets no activity after school and on weekends, even in neighborhoods desperate for park space. (In the worst cases, they are used as teacher parking lots.) In contrast, school systems and park departments in cities including Boston, Denver, Houston, New York, and Phoenix have cooperated in redesigning and rebuilding schoolyards into year-round play parks, serving students during school hours and the full community at other times. The best ones include trees, gardens, and performance stages as well as exercise gear and locations for exercise, games, climbing, jumping rope, and more.



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... MAKE FULL USE OF SCHOOL GROUNDS: *New York City's Playground Program*

In an unusual public-private partnership, New York City is rebuilding derelict schoolyards for students and opening them to the full community outside school hours. A three-way program of the board of education, the department of parks and recreation, and The Trust for Public Land, the effort focuses on park-poor neighborhoods and is part of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030, which aims to provide safe play places within a ten-minute walk of every child in New York City.

"It's hard to imagine a space that provides more health benefit for more young people per square foot than a school playground," said Mary Alice Lee, director of the New York City Playground Program for TPL. "Converting an expanse of cracked asphalt into a colorful, exciting space with a field, track, trees, performance stage, interactive garden, slides, climbers, hair-braiding area, and jump-rope area is revelatory for these kids. They just explode with activity and creativity." And then, after school and on weekends,

with the gates open, the children and families of the rest of the community get their chance, too.

The partnership, which began in 1996, is expected to create 256 playgrounds, resulting in nearly 200 acres of new city parkland by 2012. On average each playground costs \$1 million and begins with an in-depth participatory design process that includes community members, representatives from after-school programs, students, parents, school administrators, teachers, and custodial staff. During a three-month student-design phase, TPL meets weekly with four classes at the school. Students learn how to do surveying, conduct sunlight studies, and interview community stakeholders, and they work with landscape architects and equipment manufacturers to choose play equipment that is age-appropriate and within budget. "The empowerment of the participatory design process, especially for children in underserved neighborhoods, is critical," says Lee.

Of the renovated playgrounds, most are owned by the New York City Department of Education and maintained by school custodial staff; some are owned by the city parks department. The Trust for Public Land contracts with a local partner, such as a neighborhood organization, after-school group, or parent-teacher association to provide programming outside school hours. Frequently, the partner group works with the custodial staff to close and open the schoolyard on weekends and in the evening. Most of the schoolyards are open all day on weekends and during the summer and from 3 p.m. until dusk on weekdays. (In a few tougher neighborhoods, the hours are set at 3 p.m.–6 p.m. on weekdays, 10 a.m.–2 p.m. on Saturdays, and closed on Sundays.)

Interestingly, it is spontaneous play among students that has most increased following reconstruction of the playgrounds. While observations revealed a 25 percent increase in structured games and competitions, unstructured play

jumped by a stunning 240 percent. This includes not only play on exercise equipment and running around, but also socializing and “hanging out.” Unstructured activity is valuable in helping even the least athletic children enjoy recreation and develop social skills and imagination.¹⁵

In 2008, 19 percent of U.S. children between ages 6 and 19 were judged to be overweight. Providing an attractive, thoughtfully designed playground is an effective way to increase physical activity and combat childhood obesity. It is here that the New York playground program shows results. Based on a study of three renovated playgrounds in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens, the weekday visits (including after school) increased by an impressive average of 71 percent to just under 75,000 per site per year.¹⁶

The Trust for Public Land
666 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
tpl.org/nycplaygrounds

Photo: Marni Horwitz

4

PROXIMITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND CO-LOCATION

The closer the park and the easier to get to, the more likely it will be used. Conversely, people who live far from parks are apt to utilize them less.¹⁷

These obvious truths have implications for public health, but recognizing the problem does not automatically offer simple solutions for mayors, city councils, park directors, or urban planners. Creating new parks in a crowded, built-out city is a slow, arduous, and often expensive task. It can be done—it *is* being done in almost every city in the country—but it is not the only way to bring people and green space together. Much can be done outside the park fence, in the neighborhood, where the normal processes of urban construction, rehabilitation, and change occur at a faster pace.

A mistaken Victorian sensibility sometimes holds that the “purity” of parks should not intersect with the “untidiness” of commercial areas. In fact, people like that proximity.

Sometimes easiest to fix is the problem of accessibility. Some parks are underused simply because they are too hard to get to. Users may be blocked by steps, fences, walls, cliffs, railroad tracks, highways, waterways, or an unbroachable row of private residences. Some parks require a long jaunt to the other side just to gain entry. Others are literally visible from a home but unreachable by children without a chaperoned car ride.

Park access might be improved by constructing a ramp or pedestrian bridge in a key location, or by installing a traffic signal on a busy road. While such fixes might cost from \$50,000 to several million dollars, that is a small price compared with what is routinely spent on highways and parking lots and would be more than offset by savings in health costs resulting from more frequent park use.

People are more likely to use parks that are close to places where they spend time: restaurants, shopping districts, libraries, gyms, and other meeting areas. In some cases parks can be sited close to such destinations. In other instances businesses and attractions can be allowed or encouraged to locate near existing parks. A mistaken Victorian sensibility sometimes holds that the “purity” of parks should not intersect with the “untidiness” of commercial areas. In fact, people like that proximity. They welcome the opportunity to buy picnic food or an ice cream cone to eat on a nearby park lawn or bench—and if that sojourn can be combined with a brisk walk, jog, or basketball game, so much the better.

Or, a large downtown destination park might be considered for a bike station, like the one offered at Chicago’s Millennium Park. There, for a membership fee, park users have access to one of 300 secure bike spaces along with lockers, showers, and a repair shop. For tourists, there are rental bikes. Completed in 2004 for \$3.2 million, the facility today is so popular that it has a waiting list.

Best of all is the provision of plenty of housing near parks. This is an old concept with a new

POPULATION DENSITY AROUND SELECTED PARKS

Park name	Size of park (acres)	Total number of people 500 feet from park perimeter	People per acre within 500 feet of park perimeter
Riverside Park, New York	325	63,897	159
Central Park, New York	840	55,321	127
Lincoln Park, Chicago	1,212	52,861	78
Golden Gate Park, San Francisco	1,018	22,254	41
Washington Park, Denver	169	6,549	38
Rock Creek Park, Washington, D.C.	1,949	23,591	21
Green Lake Park, Seattle	323	2,681	15
Balboa Park, San Diego	1,060	8,224	13
Fairmount Park, Philadelphia	4,237	30,018	11
Griffith Park, Los Angeles	4,171	5,467	4
Forest Park, Portland, Oregon	4,317	1,379	1

Source: *The Trust for Public Land*

name: park-oriented development. From Lincoln Park in Chicago to Riverside Park in New York to Lake Harriet in Minneapolis, the parks surrounded by lots of people are the ones that can provide the greatest total amount of health benefits. But often U.S. cities are zoned so as to prevent that outcome. Some communities are averse to the look of taller buildings around parks; others may even think that the fewer people in the park, the better.

If denser development is not possible, park use can also be increased by improving accessibility through walking, bicycling, and public transit. (Automobile access is less desirable because it requires acres of parking and eliminates the health benefit of walking and cycling.) Ample park entrances, great sidewalks, and bike lanes on connecting streets; pedestrian-friendly perimeter roads with plenty of traffic signals and crosswalks; and easy grades and smooth trails for elderly and wheelchair-bound visitors: all these contribute to great access. In large parks, high-use destinations such as playgrounds, basketball courts, and swimming pools should be sited near the edge of the park, not deep in the interior.

Bicycle access extends the “reach” of a park 16-fold over walking. This is because cycling is

about four times faster than walking, and the “catchment circle”—the surrounding area from which park users can be drawn—increases by the square of the distance from the park (see diagram on next page). Thus, improving bicycle access is an important way to get more people to the park (not to mention the health benefit from pedaling there and back).

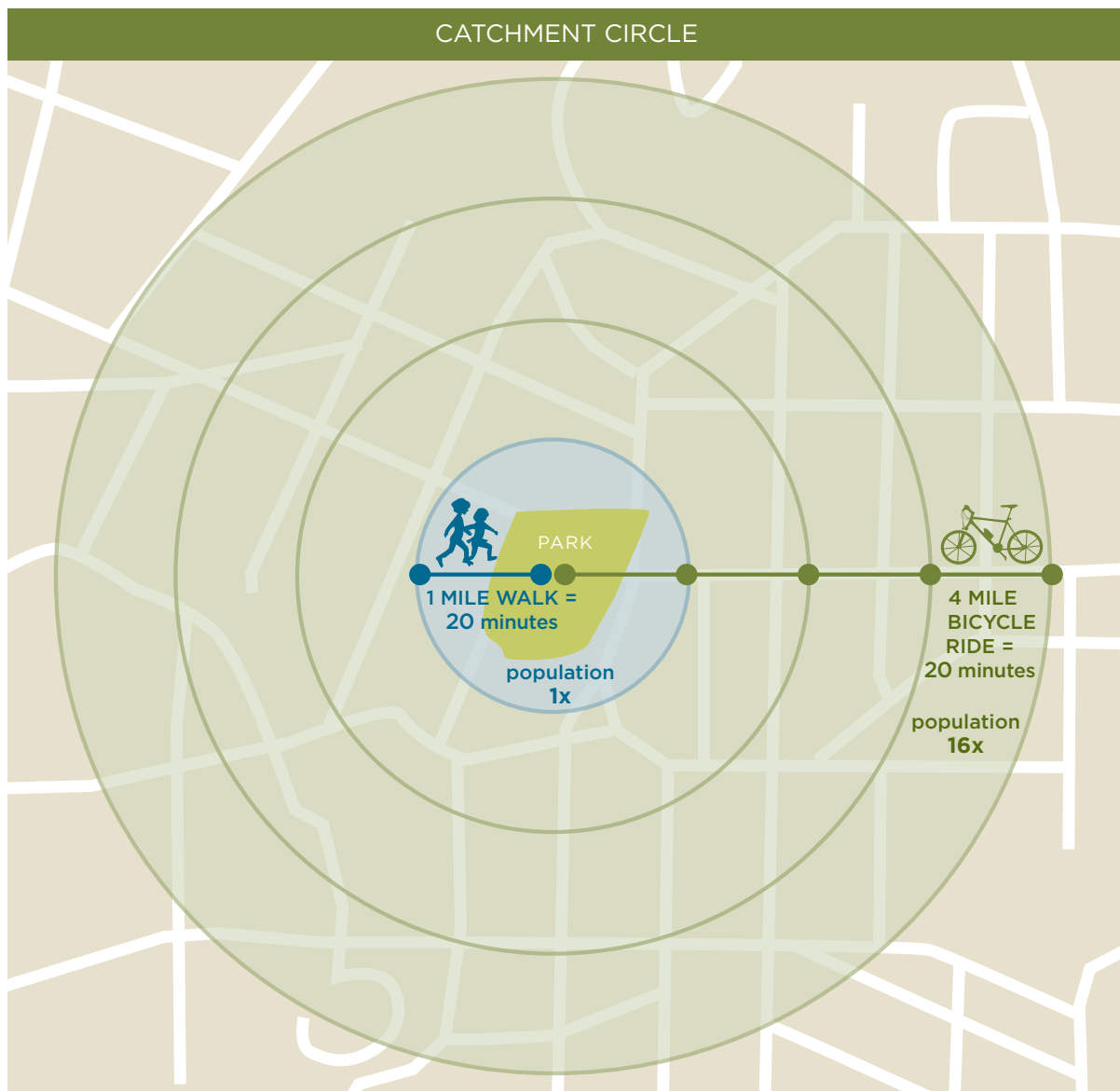
Good public transit improves park access even more. It is no coincidence that eight of the ten most heavily used parks in American cities offer subway or light-rail access within one-quarter mile, and all of them have bus service that comes even closer. In New York City major parks almost invariably have subway service. Other parks well served by subway and rail include Boston Common, Forest Park in St. Louis, Millennium and Grant parks in Chicago, and the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

As new transit lines are built, it’s sometimes possible to align them with parks. Seattle’s new streetcar line terminates at 12-acre South Lake Union Park. The city is working to increase housing and commercial density in this near-downtown location, and the alignment of park and transit is particularly helpful in reaching the goal. “Especially at lunchtime,” says former

Seattle Parks Foundation Director Karen Daubert, “you can see the crowds walking off the streetcar right into South Lake Union Park. It’s the perfect connection to this waterfront refuge.”

For larger parks, internal transit can also promote access. At 130-acre Washington Park in Portland, Oregon—home to the popular Rose and Japanese gardens—special Tri-Met buses

not only connect to the nearest light-rail station but also make eight stops inside the park. The service is inexpensive (or free with a transfer), runs every 15 minutes, and is aggressively advertised by the park department, Tri-Met, and event promoters. The route gets about 500 riders per day on weekends and 420 on weekdays. From a health perspective, taking transit results in far more walking than accessing the park in a private automobile.



The area of a circle grows by the square of the radius. If a park is easy to reach by bicycle, 16 times as many people can get to it in the same amount of time it takes to walk from a mile away. *Illustration: Helene Sherlock*



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... APPRECIATE DENSITY: *Piedmont Park, Atlanta*

In recent years, Atlanta's Piedmont Park has shown a marked growth in users. There are several reasons for this, including policies that have reduced auto traffic in the park, the rehabilitation of facilities, better signage, and additional programming. But also significant is the fact that more people now live in areas bordering or near the park. Unlike many other urban places, the Piedmont Park neighborhood is densifying, and the park itself is serving as a significant lure for development.

Between 2000 and 2009 alone, the City of Atlanta approved building permits for 16 new multi-unit rental and condominium apartment buildings within a half-mile of Piedmont Park, and the neighborhood gained nearly 100 single-family homes. All told, the park neighborhood gained 1,880 units, or about 4,500 people, over the decade. These people are the heaviest users of the park facilities. They compound their

health benefit by often walking or running to the park rather than driving there.

"Piedmont Park is one of the single biggest assets we have in the neighborhood," said Ginny Kennedy, director of urban design for the Midtown Alliance. "In everything we do, we encourage and try to reinforce access and visibility to the park."

Perhaps most significant, the Midtown Alliance—whose goal is to make midtown Atlanta an "exceptional place to live, work, learn, shop, and play"—spearheaded the area's 2001 rezoning. The changes enabled many more people to live and work near Piedmont Park—and benefit from its health-promoting effects.

Midtown Alliance
999 Peachtree St., Suite 730
Atlanta, GA 30309

Photo: Ashley Szczepanski



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ...
LOCATE PARKS AND TRAILS SO AS TO BENEFIT FROM OTHER USES:
Midtown Greenway, Minneapolis

Since its opening in 2000, Minneapolis's Midtown Greenway has quickly become one of the best-used bike routes in the country, largely because it combines a parklike experience with true functionality. The mostly below-grade former rail line is quiet to ride, bordered with green, and unbroken by street intersections. Yet its almost six-mile length parallels a major commercial street only one block away, offering easy access to grocery and hardware stores, restaurants, video rentals, and pharmacies. "Fast, safe, and pleasant" is how Midtown Greenway Coalition Director Tim Springer describes the linear park—but it is also convenient. Instead of returning home from a bike ride and climbing into the car for errands, many Midtown Greenway users are able to multitask. The greenway leads them to their needs, and their needs lead them to the greenway.

The city has consciously helped. When a massive old Sears warehouse was converted into the Midtown Global Market, officials built a connection from the greenway and also landed a federal loan to create the Freewheel Bike Center, which provides storage, repair, rentals, and sales. Next door is a coffee shop. Nearby, the new Sheraton hotel has an outdoor patio overlooking the trail (and directs guests to rent bikes from Freewheel). The greenway also intersects with transit along the Hiawatha light-rail line, giving some Minneapolitans a car-free commute with morning and evening exercise to boot. All in all, the collocation of the park with diverse destinations has made this not only a greenway, but a "healthway."

Midtown Greenway Coalition
3824 10th Ave. South
Minneapolis, MN 55407
midtowngreenway.org

Photo: Freewheel Bike Center



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... INCLUDE ACCESS TO QUALITY MASS TRANSIT: *Hermann Park, Houston*

With more than 2,000 parking spaces, Hermann Park was once among the nation's most auto-dependent parks. But the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, together with the Hermann Park Conservancy, has worked imaginatively to break the chicken-and-egg problem of cars without alternatives.

When the city's first light-rail line opened in January 2004, it featured two stops in Hermann Park—a huge victory for advocates. Although planners had known that the line would run from downtown to Reliant Park—Houston's sports, entertainment, and convention complex, including Reliant Stadium—the exact track alignment could have taken one of several possible routes. “We lobbied hard to get service for [Hermann] park,” said Rick Dewees, Hermann Park superintendent, “and we consistently supported that alignment through the planning process. Now we see quite a few people using rail to get here.”

That's not all. In an unprecedented move, the city and the Hermann Park Conservancy raised funds to convert the park's historic miniature railroad—long a tourist attraction—into a full-fledged component of the park's transportation system. The train now connects the two light-rail stations and serves the whole park. Because of these transit improvements, the park department believes that it can begin reducing the number of free parking spaces in Hermann Park. As a result, the amount of healthful walking should increase both inside and outside the park.

Hermann Park Conservancy

6201-A Hermann Park Dr.
Houston, TX 77030
hermannpark.org

Car-oriented Houston offers two different transit systems to service Hermann Park: a city light-rail line to get there and a narrow-gauge tourist railroad within the park interior. *Photos: left, David J. Schmall; right, Hermann Park Conservancy*

5

AN INTERCONNECTED PARK WEB

The better connected parks are, the more a park system can provide healthful recreation—and transportation, too. Interconnected trails, greenways, and parks support bicycling, running, walking, skating, skiing, and even wheelchair travel—reaching all the way from home to work for some users. And several small parks can be connected to create a “large-park experience,” with a tennis court in one park, a basketball court in another, a swimming pool in a third. Connections can be a system of sidewalks or bike lanes, complemented by outstanding signage and perhaps dressed up with a catchy name, such as the Wellness Walk or the Fitness Funway.

The easiest way to create interconnections that also extend a park system is in stream valley parks, particularly where a small stream flows into a larger river and both are flanked with trails. This kind of intersection, comparable to a highway interchange or a train junction, more than doubles the usefulness of a given route. An even more effective connection can be made by bridging a river with a pedestrian crossing, either a new bridge or a repurposed old one. Wherever this has been done—including in Austin, Cincinnati, Chattanooga, Little Rock, Minneapolis, Nashville, Omaha, Pittsburgh, and Tampa—the

bridges have become instantly popular attractions.

Another great connector is a rail-trail, a park path constructed out of an abandoned train track. Most of the more than 15,000 miles of U.S. rail-trails are rural, but an increasing number are in cities, including Atlanta; Chicago; Dallas; Houston; Portland, Oregon; Orlando; Seattle; and Washington, D.C.

Even without a stream or an abandoned railroad, it’s sometimes possible to create a linear corridor. It happened in San Francisco after the public utilities commission decided to retire an underground water main through Visitacion Valley, a lower-income immigrant neighborhood. The corridor had been kept free of weighty construction over the pipe, resulting in a six-block swath of weedy lots through the heart of the community. When the commission tried to sell the land, neighbors objected and worked with The Trust for Public Land to turn it into a park and garden. Today the Visitacion Valley Greenway supports both physical exercise and improved nutrition—and introduces visitors to the exotic Asian medicinal plants growing there.



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... CREATE CONNECTORS: *Platte River Greenway, Denver*

In 2009, the American Obesity Association rated Denver residents the least obese of big-city Americans. The reason, in part, is their sporty lifestyle. Supporting that way of life is the Platte River Greenway.

It took 30 years to create the greenway from a former industrial backwater. Today its 15 parks linked by 100 miles of trails attract hundreds of thousands of users. The middle 12 miles—which stretch on either end deep into the suburbs—are operated by the Denver Department of Parks and Recreation, with support from the private Greenway Foundation. Its centerpiece is 22-acre Commons Park, constructed as part of a new walkable neighborhood on a former railyard on the edge of downtown.

Not only does the greenway lure a continual stream of cyclists, runners, and walkers, the South Platte River itself was reengineered with rocks, riffles, and inflatable dams so that it offers whitewater rapids for kayakers and rafters.

Public investment in the greenway totaling about \$70 million has fueled \$2.5 billion in residential, commercial, retail, sports, and entertainment projects along the corridor. Denver, which for several decades was losing population, is now growing again—and recreational opportunities are one reason why.

The Greenway Foundation
5299 DTC Blvd., Suite 710
Greenwood Village, CO 80111
greenwayfoundation.org

Photo: Darcy Kiefel

6

PARTNERSHIPS FOR HEALTH

Creating a health-promoting park system requires greater expertise and resources than any park agency can provide alone. What's needed are partnerships with other public agencies, as well as with private foundations, corporations, citizens' groups, and volunteers.

Partnerships can be immensely powerful by leveraging the strengths of one partner with those of another—financial capacity with legal authority, for instance, or communication outreach capability with large numbers of participants.

But for every triumphant alliance, there seems to be another partnership that ends badly. The key to a happy partnership is a mutual commitment to an overarching goal larger than the missions of the individual entities. If narrow goals take precedence—boosting income or donations, improving name recognition, or generating individual publicity—the alliance is almost certain to fail. Leverage is not possible when a partner is working primarily for its own interests rather than for the larger cause.

When the larger cause is advancing health, park systems and recreation programs offer one set of skills. But there are also other agencies that share the goal and have their own set of skills to bring.

These include:

- Health departments. Health agencies possess vast knowledge, expertise, data analysis, and other capabilities that can make them ideal partners.
- Water or sewer departments. These agencies often own significant quantities of land to protect drinking water aquifers and manage stormwater runoff. Depending on legal requirements and limitations, a partnership might make some of these lands available for healthful recreation.
- Public works or transportation departments. These agencies control the other big parcels of urban public land—streets, sidewalks, and bridges—and can serve as key collaborators in all kinds of physical activities—runs, walks, bike rides, and much more. The link between parks and streets should be seamless, but it takes a thoughtful partnership to make it happen.
- Transit agencies. Good transit is the key to getting lots of people to and through major urban parks without overwhelming them with cars and the need for parking. Advertising space on transit and in transit stations is a good place to promote parks and park activities. Conversely, park users can become a new source of transit riders.

Private companies, individuals, foundations, and nonprofits that could serve as partners include:

- Health insurers and their foundations. Health insurers have a special interest in keeping their members and the wider public healthy, and they often choose to fund programs that promote public health. Examples include support for fitness zones and trails by the foundations of insurers Kaiser Permanente and MetLife.
- Hospitals and clinics. Frontline health care providers may be among the largest economic entities in a community. Like health insurers, they often look for ways to promote health in the community. Although there are numerous physical, practical, and legal constraints to partnerships, there are also opportunities for collaboration.
- Doctors and nurses. What could be more natural than a prescription for physical activity? That's what happens in Portland, Oregon's voluntary pilot Active Youth Prescription Program. Overweight children ages 6 to 12 are given a doctor's prescription to simultaneously reduce "screen time" and engage in programs at a city recreation center where staff are trained to provide them with support and encouragement.
- Disease-fighting charities and recreation-promoting organizations such as bike and running clubs. This is another natural collaboration. Such organizations can supply members and donors to partnerships, while park agencies can supply land, facilities, and trained leadership.
- Sporting goods and sportswear companies. These include manufacturers and retailers of sneakers, bikes, skates, playground equipment, ski jackets, soccer balls, and so much more. Partnerships with these companies—particularly when they are hometown firms—represent an obvious alignment of interests.
- Friends of parks groups. These, of course, are the classic partners in most cities. While few friends groups can bring any money to the table, they are an excellent source of volunteers, public outreach, advocacy, information, local connections, and other value to a park agency.



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ...
PARTNER WITH PUBLIC AGENCIES:
New York City Department of Parks and Recreation

With eight million residents, New York has recreational programming needs that would overwhelm the city's Department of Parks and Recreation on its own. The department therefore has an ambitious partnership with a large number of public agencies and private organizations.

Perhaps most significant is "Shape Up, New York," a fitness initiative that encourages healthy lifestyles and improved self-esteem through noncompetitive exercise. Funded by the health department and managed by the parks department, Shape Up sessions are staffed by professionals in personal fitness, yoga, cardio kickboxing, and step aerobics and offered both in parks and at New York City Housing Authority facilities. Added to after-school programs, Shape Up provides an enjoyable, low-stress approach that can help ease even sedentary youngsters into a workable exercise regimen.

Another joint effort with the health department offers a 16-week course for diabetics at a

Bronx recreation center that incorporates health instruction with an exercise regimen. A third, in conjunction with the city's Commission on Women's Issues, is "Step Out, New York City," a program of organized community walks in which participants receive pedometers to track their daily steps.

New York Parks and Recreation also hosts and heavily markets four free seasonal festivals that are supported by companies including Red Bull, the Olympic Regional Development Authority, and the Mountain Creek ski facility. January's Winter Jam encourages residents to try cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowboarding, sledding, rock climbing, and hockey. The goal, according to Marketing Director Christine Dabrow, is to try new things in the outdoors, hoping that "something will spark."

New York City Parks and Rec Department
The Arsenal, Central Park, New York,
NY 10065, nyc.gov/parks

Photo: NYC Department of Parks and Recreation



HEALTH-PROMOTING PARK SYSTEMS ... PARTNER WITH PRIVATE PROVIDERS: *The Medical Mile, Little Rock*

Many doctors prescribe exercise for their patients. In Little Rock, Dr. Robert Lambert and his colleagues at Heart Clinic Arkansas prescribed a path.

The result is the Medical Mile, the centerpiece of Little Rock’s Arkansas River Trail. Located in Riverfront Park and adjacent to the Bill Clinton Presidential Library, the facility offers a healthful opportunity for running, skating, walking, and cycling while also serving as an educational museum of information and inspiration about wellness. Among many exhibits, there is a 1,300-foot, three-dimensional mural wall, a wellness promenade, and a body-mind-spirit entry plaza. The themes of exercise, smoking cessation, and better nutrition were developed by a project partner, the Arkansas Department of Health.

The heart clinic’s involvement was catalytic to the project’s success. In December 2003, clinic physicians unanimously voted to undertake a two-year, \$350,000 fundraising effort to assist

the parks and recreation department in making it happen. After reaching that goal in only three months, they expanded the concept and increased the budget to \$2.1 million—a goal they also met. The physicians’ success demonstrates that the medical community can go beyond traditional park donors to tap the generosity of all residents.

In dedicating the facility, Mayor Jim Dailey said, “From the perspective of the City of Little Rock, the trail is an economic, health, and environmental conservation stimulator.” Diana Allen of the National Park Service—another project partner—has called Little Rock “a cradle of innovation with health care and recreation partnerships.”

Heart Clinic of Arkansas
10100 Kanis Rd.
Little Rock, AR 72211
heartclinicarkansas.com

Photo: Little Rock Parks and Recreation

CONCLUSION

Even if parks didn't provide all the urban benefits they are known for—improving the environment, attracting tourists, creating a sense of place, building community, and enhancing property values—they would still be critically important to city dwellers everywhere because of their potential contribution to public health and wellness. But platitudes about healthy parks are not enough. If park agencies are to truly justify all the land and tax money they utilize, they must actually serve their health functions as powerfully as do doctors, hospitals, and public health agencies.

Today's efforts to design urban parks for their health benefits and to create health-enhancing

park programming close a circle that extends all the way back to the beginning of the parks movement. In the mid-19th century, Frederick Law Olmsted and others called for the creation of parks, parkways, and “greenswards” as refuges from unhealthy air and the stresses of urban life. Today's urban air quality is improved, but Americans have found other ways to put their bodies and spirits in jeopardy. Parks continue to offer solace to people and solutions to public health problems.

This booklet is intended to help park and health care professionals work together to ensure that park systems best serve human health and wellness.

Notes

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APPENDIX

The following people took part in the two-day colloquium “How Can Parks Best Promote Physical Activity and Mental Health?” on April 8-9, 2008, in Denver, Colorado, which led to the creation of this report:

Chris Adams, The Adams Group, Denver (facilitator)
Marcia Atkinson, Heart Clinic Arkansas, Little Rock
Nilda Cosco, College of Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh
Andy Dannenberg, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta
Bob Farnsworth, PlayCore, Inc., Chattanooga
Heng Lam Foong, The Trust for Public Land, Los Angeles
Geoffrey Godbey, Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania
Lee Anna Good, Forest Park Forever, St. Louis
Peter Harnik, The Trust for Public Land, Washington, D.C.
Jennifer Worth Isacoff, The Trust for Public Land, San Francisco
Kevin Jeffrey, New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, New York
Richard Killingsworth, The Harvest Foundation, Martinsville, Virginia
Jane Kulik, Wenk Associates Inc., Denver
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Mary Alice Lee, The Trust for Public Land, New York
Anne Lusk, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston
Lisa Moore, PlayCore, Inc., Chattanooga
Khanh Nguyen, The Colorado Health Foundation, Denver
Tom Norquist, GameTime, Chattanooga
Milton Ospina, The Trust for Public Land, Denver
Michael Rowe, Yale School of Medicine, New Haven
Zari Santner, Portland Parks and Recreation, Portland, Oregon
Kathy Spangler, America’s Promise Alliance, Washington, D.C.

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