

Amid Urban Growth, Funding Cuts, Local Parks Face New Challenges

Public support for local parks is strong regardless of age, income, ethnicity, or even political affiliation. According to the National Recreation and Parks Association, 92 percent of the 1,000 people randomly selected for its annual survey last year agreed that parks are an important service provided by local governments. And, six out of seven surveyed had been to a local park in the last year, with visits averaging twice per month.

Furthermore, NRPA surveys show public support for local parks has not waned over the last 25 years. Nevertheless, the nature and role of local parks has evolved considerably and, as a result, the over 9,000 parks and recreation departments in the United States are facing new challenges.

Some of the changes are purely physical. The Trust for Public Lands explains that “potential parkland exists in unexpected places: from the top of freeway overpasses to parking lots and former industrial zones.” To wit, New York City’s popular High Line, an elevated linear park on a former train track, and its proposed Lowline, an underground park that would be illuminated by solar energy technology.

But it isn’t just the physical attributes of local parks that are changing. An Urban Institute report explains that “parks have long been recognized as major contributors to the physical and aesthetic quality of urban neighborhoods But a new and broader view of parks has recently been emerging.” Parks are no longer just “places of recreation” and “visual assets” but are considered “valuable contributors to larger urban policy objectives,” such as public health.

For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended improved access to parks as a key strategy for encouraging physical activity. But, parks must be designed in a manner that facilitates such activity — and that can require additional investments. A recent study co-authored by RAND Corporation explains that walking loops encourage people to partake in physical activity, but less than one-third of neighborhood parks across the United States have such paths.

Local parks also are increasingly important from an environmental perspective, as the challenges associated with urban sprawl and climate change escalate. For example, local parks that include green spaces or trees can help mitigate non-point source water pollution, counter urban heat island effects, provide habitat for animals displaced by development, and reduce air pollution, such as ozone.

At the same time that local parks and recreation departments are expected to expand their traditional roles, they face budget constraints. Despite an NRPA finding that four in five Americans agree that local parks are “well worth the average amount of \$70 per person paid in local taxes every year” to fund them, many parks are in need of additional money. Half of the local parks studied by RAND reported budget cuts in the last two years. As a result, localities are looking to a range of financing tools. According to TPL, among these tools are private-public partnerships, bond measures, and developer exactions.

For example, numerous privately funded groups support public parks, such as Friends of Warner Parks in Nashville, which has raised over \$30 million dollars since it was estab-



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lished in 1974. According to Board Chair Kevin Roddey, the funds have been used to acquire new land and bolster the nature center’s education and research programs. Roddey says Friends is “filling an important role, because budgetary constraints limit what the local government can fund.”

In addition, gifts from wealthy individuals are more and more common, such as a recent \$100 million gift for New York City’s Central Park. Other approaches include Houston’s 2007 open space ordinance, which requires developers to dedicate land for parks or pay fees.

In addition to budget woes, preserving land for local parks is increasingly difficult in fast-growing urban areas. As *E&E News* recently reported, lack of affordable housing in San Francisco is resulting in longer commute times, as people are forced to move well outside the city. When land is available within the city, affordable housing and environmental activists who support parks may be pitted against each other. And, from a sustainability perspective the choice may not be obvious, because long commutes contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

To face these and other serious challenges, parks and recreation departments around the country may have to adopt the motto of Leslie Knope on the popular TV series *Parks and Rec*: “There is nothing we can’t do if we work hard . . . and shirk all other responsibilities in our lives.”