



PARKS AND RECREATION SYSTEM PLANNING

A NEW APPROACH FOR
CREATING SUSTAINABLE,
RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019955368

All Island Press books are printed on environmentally responsible materials.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Keywords: Bicycle and pedestrian access, Collaborative planning, Commission for Accreditation of Parks and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA), Comprehensive plans, Economic development, Green infrastructure, Health and wellness, High-Performance Public Space, Land development regulations, Level-of-service guidelines, Livable community, Long-range vision, National Recreation and Park Association, Park classification, Plexus, Preliminary implementation framework, Public realm, Resilience, Signature parks, Social equity, Strategic planning, Sustainability, Trails and greenways, Urbanization

INTRODUCTION

A Framework for Community Sustainability and Resilience

Parks and recreation system planning has long been overlooked as an effective tool for community sustainability, resiliency, and livability. It has been over thirty years since the World Commission on Environment and Development published *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Report), proposing a multilateral, interdependent path for creating economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable communities. More recently, the concept of resilient communities—those capable of rebounding from both acute shocks and chronic stresses—seems to have superseded sustainability, perhaps because it is more accessible and quantifiable. And the concept of a livable community—one that is safe and secure, has a variety of affordable housing options, is connected by multiple modes of transportation networks, has clean air and water, protects its natural areas and wildlife habitat, and provides high-quality community facilities and services—has become part of the standard community planning lexicon.

Regardless of the preferred term, local communities in the United States and throughout the world have sought new approaches, tools, and techniques to become more balanced, healthy, and prosperous over the past several decades. They have created sustainability plans, climate action plans, stormwater plans, affordable housing plans, transportation plans, vulnerability analyses, sea-level mitigation plans, and other plans and initiatives. Yet one resource that is often overlooked as a tool for sustainability, resiliency, and livability—and is already owned and controlled by local communities—is their parks and recreation system.

Parks and recreation systems include parks, civic spaces, conservation areas, trails and greenways, historic and cultural sites, stormwater ponds, and other lands owned and managed by public agencies. Not only can they account for up to 50 percent of a community's landmass; they also can generate significant sustainability and resiliency benefits for a community. Such benefits can range from creating a framework for growth to combating climate change. Dr. John Crompton, University Distinguished Professor at Texas A&M University, identified nineteen community-wide benefits in particular, listed in box 0-1.

These benefits don't automatically accrue to a community, however; they require careful and thoughtful planning, design, maintenance, and operation of the parks and recreation system. Generating significant benefits also requires leadership, collaboration, and transcendence of organizational silos. None of this is easy, and there isn't much guidance available about how to change approaches steeped in the simpler aims of the 1950s. This book aims to change that.

Generating greater sustainability and resiliency benefits at a system-wide level requires embracing two big ideas. The first is that parks and recreation systems can generate multiple sustainability and resiliency benefits if they are thoughtfully planned, designed, and managed as part of a broader public realm that includes transportation, stormwater, and utility systems. The second idea is that we need a more comprehensive and collaborative parks and recreation system planning process to realize these benefits.

Generation of Significant Benefits

First, planners have long been aware of the potential benefits of parks and recreation systems. Frederick Law Olmsted, considered the father of landscape architecture and the American parks movement in the late nineteenth century, noted that "a park exercises a very different and much greater influence upon the progress of a city in its general structure than any other ordinary public work."¹ However, these ideas need public support, and Americans' appreciation of the value of parks and open spaces had waned by the second half of the twentieth century. This growing ambivalence may be due to

Box 0-1**Community-wide Benefits Generated by Parks and Recreation Systems****Economic Prosperity**

- Attracting tourists
- Attracting businesses
- Attracting retirees
- Enhancing real estate values
- Reducing taxes
- Stimulation of equipment sales

Environmental Sustainability

- Protecting drinking water
- Controlling flooding
- Cleaning air
- Reducing traffic congestion
- Reducing energy costs
- Preserving biological diversity

Alleviating Social Problems

- Reducing environmental stress
- Community regeneration
- Cultural and historic preservation
- Facilitating healthy lifestyles
- Alleviating deviant youth behavior
- Raising levels of education attainment
- Alleviating unemployment distress

Source: John L. Crompton, *Community Benefits and Repositioning: The Keys to Parks and Recreation's Future Viability* (Ashburn, VA: National Recreation and Park Association, 2007), 61.

a variety of factors, such as the growth and expansion of cities into suburbs, middle-class flight from urban areas, the diminished role of local governments in physical city planning, the degradation of urban parks and open spaces, and the privatization of public spaces.

As a result, many communities lost sight of the integral relationship between parks and a community's quality of life, as observed by the noted American urban planner, educator, and author Alexander Garvin in 2002.

It has been many years since parks were thought of as central to the planning of cities. Their very existence has eliminated pressure for additional park development and made it possible for other issues to dominate the urban planning agenda. Nor is there the same certainty that existed during the 19th century that exposure to nature or active recreation can alleviate the effects of slums and poverty. Nevertheless, public open space remains an effective tool for shaping the American city.²

Perhaps as a reaction to loss of benefits provided by undermaintained parks and to urban growth with little regard for open space, a renewed appreciation of the role of parks and the public realm as a framework for livable communities has clearly emerged over the past two decades, evidenced by increased investment in urban signature parks, green infrastructure, and complete streets. Complete streets, for example, are intended to meet the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit riders—in addition to cars—to accommodate the needs of all users. “This is an exciting and remarkable time to be designing parks for American cities,” wrote the noted landscape architect Joe Brown in 2000. “Urban parks are being recognized, at long last, as a critical part of any revitalization strategy, an impressive stimulus to development. . . . We are seeing a greater commitment to America’s urban parks than we have seen for decades.”³ Greater awareness and commitment have brought higher expectations for a return on investment (ROI). In addition to providing traditional recreation benefits, parks and other elements of the public realm are expected to generate higher property values, improved water quality, reduced crime, and other societal benefits.

Many communities in the United States are already capitalizing on their parks and recreation systems to generate greater benefits, including Atlanta, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle, Denver, and Portland, Oregon. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, for example, leads a citywide

Public Realm Team that works collaboratively across divisions, departments, and agencies to generate a comprehensive set of community-wide benefits from every park project in the city; parks and recreation staff note that traditional government silos are “a luxury we can no longer afford.” Benefits have included improved water quality, increased social equity, better mental and physical health, mitigation of climate change impacts, economic development, and better youth education and development. The department’s commissioner, Mitch Silver, says that New York is a “deal-making city” that collaborates with other agencies to respond to residents’ needs and emerging trends on every parks project.