

Quality Public Parks and Open Space Policy Fact Sheet

Overview

This Policy Fact Sheet Includes:

1. **Top 12 Facts** About Planning Public Parks and Open Spaces in transit villages and neighborhoods.
2. **How Much Park Space is Enough?** A survey of parks space in cities throughout the country and Bay Area.
3. **Components of Excellent Park Systems:** Inventory of park attributes that promote vibrant and successful parks.
4. **Design Elements of Successful Parks** – Refer to the [Handout](#) on Creating Quality Public Spaces.
5. **Examples of Park Dedication Requirements for New Development**
6. **Funding Solutions for Maintaining Parks**
7. **Dig A Little Deeper** – References to useful websites and reports.



1. Top 12 Facts and Figures on Parks, Open Space and Great Communities

- **Health and Physical Activity:** Nationwide only 25% of adults get the recommended amount of physical activity and 29% of adults are not physically active at all.¹
- **Rise in Obesity:** Between 1980 and 1999 the number of obese adults nearly doubled. Child and adolescent obesity more than doubled over the last 30 years.²
- **Obesity and Inactivity:** When people have nowhere to walk, they gain weight. Obesity is more common in unwalkable neighborhoods, but goes down when measures of walkability go up: dense housing, well-connected streets, and mixed land uses reduce the probability that residents will be obese.³

Public Health Benefits of Parks:

- **Proximity to Parks = Increased Activity:** According to the CDC, better access to spaces for physical activity resulted in 25% more people exercising 3+ days per week.⁴
- **Increased Activity=Better Health:** Increases in physical activity have numerous health benefits: reductions in premature mortality; prevention of chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and hypertension; and improvements in psychological well-being.⁵

Economic Benefits (Parks as an economic catalyst):

- **Increase Residential Property Values:** In Boulder, CO property values were 32% higher in properties within 3,200 feet of a greenway. This resulted in a increase of \$500,000 per year in additional property taxes, enough to cover the \$1.5 million purchase price of the greenbelt in three years.⁶
- **Business Retention and Attraction:** The green space surrounding Portland, Oregon, helped build its reputation as one of the country's most livable cities. Companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Intel, and Hyundai have been drawn to the region by the forests, orchards, and creeks on the outskirts of Portland's urban area.⁷

- **Tourism Benefits:** Chain of Lakes received 5.5 million visitors in 2001, making it Minnesota’s second-biggest attraction after the Mall of America.⁸ And San Antonio’s Riverwalk Park, created for \$425,000, has overtaken the Alamo as the most popular attraction for the city’s \$3.5 billion tourism industry.⁹

Environmental Benefits:

- **Trees and green space lessen ‘heat island’ effects** in urban areas, which lower energy demands and associated emissions during warm periods. Evaporation from a single large tree can produce the cooling effect of ten room-size air conditioners operating 24 hours a day.¹⁰
- **Trees remove air pollutants:** In an area with complete tree cover (such as forest groves within parks), trees can remove as much as 15% of the ozone, 14% of the sulfur dioxide, 13% of particulate matter, and 8% of the nitrogen oxide.¹¹

Social Benefits

- **Parks Reduce Juvenile Crime:** In Fort Myers, Florida, police documented a 28% drop in juvenile arrests after the city built a new youth recreation center and started a new recreational and academic program in 1990.¹²
- **Parks are Building Blocks of Community:** “In inner-city neighborhoods where common spaces are often barren no-man’s lands, the presence of trees and grass supports common space use and informal social contact among neighbors,” the study found. “In addition, vegetation and [neighborhood social ties] were significantly related to residents’ senses of safety and adjustment.”¹³

2. How Much Park and Open Space Do We Need?

There is no good single answer to this question. Standards vary widely and two conclusions stand out:

- Quality matters as much as quantity
- Maintenance and administration is crucial to ensure parks respond to the changing needs of the communities they serve.

Park space is often measured or specified as a certain number of acres per 1,000 population. The two tables below show actual acreage of parks in major U.S. cities and adopted citywide standards for a few Bay Area cities.

The following sections of this fact sheet give suggestions on how to make sure a Station Area Plan encourages high quality parks that are well maintained.

Existing Acres of Park or Open Space Per 1,000 People¹⁴

Portland	Seattle	Vancouver	San Francisco	Boston	Chicago
18.9	10.7	8.67	4.3	4.3	2.5

Adopted Park/Open Space Acreage Standards Per 1,000 People

National Rec. and Park Association	Santa Rosa	El Cerrito ¹⁵	Hayward	San Leandro ¹⁶
10	6	5	5	4.86

3. Components of Excellent Park Systems:

Although a Station Area Plan does not set out to create a Park system for an entire city, it could provide an opportunity to test and pilot new policies. Below is a summary of what elements are needed for well used and loved parks that facilitate community building, drawn from a report by the Trust for Public Land.¹⁷

A Clear Sense of Purpose

- Create a clear mandate for the purpose of parks. The mission statement of the Long Beach Department of Parks, Recreation and Marine: “We create community and enhance the quality of life in Long Beach through people, places, programs, and partnerships.” 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. This sets up the agency to care about how their facilities are used, not just maintained.
- **More and more park management agencies are expanding their roles from maintenance to include:**
 - economic development,
 - facilitating community problem-solving
 - promoting health and wellness
 - protecting of environmental resources.
- Require provision of annual reports on the success of parks. The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board has developed a stellar model for providing this type of reporting. To see an example go to: www.minneapolisparcs.org. The reports help the agency to track its progress. It also allows citizens to fully appreciate and advise on changes or adaptations to better suit the community.

On-Going Planning and Community Involvement Process

- Parks Master plans should be updated every 5 years. There should be periodic review of the Station Area Plan’s Implementation success, failures and modifications. This should happen with respect to all aspects of the plan.
- There should be a Parks and Recreation Commission or public advisory body that are the eyes and ears on the success of plan implementation.
- There should be systems in place that support the existence of Friends groups or Adopt a Park/Trail programs. The more people engage and become stewards of their parks, the more lively and loved they are.

Sufficient Assets in Land, Staffing and Equipment to Meet the System’s Goals

- Inventory the park resources available. Characterize by “natural” or “designed.” The Station Area Plan should provide a wealth of information about planned park or open space areas, enough to derive preliminary operating and maintenance costs that can be accounted for in calculating developer fees.
- A 2000 parks and recreation budget survey of the 55 largest cities, showed an average cost of \$80 per resident. This a benchmark figure for calculating an appropriate annual parks and recreation budget.

Equitable Access

- A good goal is to mandate a maximum of 5 minutes walking distance between people and parks within urban areas and a 5 minute bike ride in more spread out areas.
- Determine what percentage of people are located further than a quarter mile from 1 acre of park. Determine your community’s goal for serving these people. Determine what the plan will do to meet this.
- Either work with an existing disabled access advisory group or develop one for reviewing access to park facilities.
- Determine if there will be recreation program subsidies for community members to participate in classes offered at park sites or athletic leagues. This would apply to any type of classes from language, to computer skills, arts and fitness that are offered at a facility that

may be located within parks. As more and more park departments need to charge fees for their services consider how to maintain or raise the level of participation by all income levels. Make sure that creating fees doesn't deter lower income families from utilizing needed services.

User Satisfaction

- Mandate user surveys to monitor success of parks planning
- The Fort Worth Parks and Community Services reported that designing and conducting an 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.”

Safety from Crime and Physical Hazards

- The best protection from crime is a well-used, well-maintained park with facilities and programs that attract a cross-section of the neighborhood.
- Provide uniformed personnel
- Collect and report crime data regularly
- Well-run youth recreation programs decrease delinquency and vandalism. An 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.

Benefits for the City beyond the Boundaries of the Park

- Measure property values of properties adjacent to parks over time to create the evidence of a park serving as an economic engine to the city.

5. Examples of Park and Open Space Dedication Requirements for New Development

- Public Open Spaces can be funded by Park Dedications fees based on a per unit or per square foot fee of new development. The drawback of this funding strategy is that it places additional costs on new development which can create hardships for affordable housing.

Park Dedication Fees (per new home)		
	Single Family	Multi-Family
Santa Rosa	\$10,000	\$7,300
Hayward	\$11,953	\$9,653

Required Park Fees - San Francisco	
Rincon Hill - Residential	\$11/SF
Downtown Area - Commercial/Office	\$2/SF

Required Park Dedication – City of San Francisco	
Parkland as part of development	1 SF of Park per 90 SF of development*
OR	
In-lieu Fee	\$0.80 per 1 SF of required park dedication

* Applies to Residential Districts in SOMA, Service Light Industrial and Secondary Office (RED, RSD, SPD, SLR, SLI, SSO)

- Publicly available but privately owned and maintained open space. For example Yerba Buena Gardens in San Francisco is a result of a zoning requirement of onsite open space required per square foot of development. In this case the Metreon Mall development resulted in this park space. The disadvantage of this system is that programming park activities is purely up to the discretion of the owners.

6. Ways to Fund Parks Acquisition and Maintenance

Structure of Public Funding Mechanisms

The first step is to determine if the City will pursue a *pay-as-you-go* or *debt financing* approach.

- In the *pay-as-you-go* approach, improvements are only made once a sufficient amount of tax or fee revenue is gathered to fund the improvement. Pay-as-you-go is often appropriate for ongoing programs or policies but can be inefficient for large scale or costly infrastructure improvements.
- With the *debt financing* approach, the city borrows money by issuing bonds, and the city can make the improvement now while paying off the bond through tax or fee revenue. Debt financing can be applied through a Redevelopment Agency and paid for with tax increment revenue, or can be financed by creating an improvement district. Because assessment district financing structures are tax increment financing are based on property tax revenues, the resulting increased property values from the improvements reduces the risk associated with debt financing.

Project for Public Spaces, a national organization, maintains extensive information on a variety of park and open space funding tools, providing specific community examples implementing the various tools as well as pros and cons of various sources.

http://www.pps.org/parks_plazas_squares/info/funding/pubfunding/

Types of Funding

The following information comes from Financing Local Parks Vol. 1: Increasing Public Investment in Parks and Open Space, by Kim Hopper for the Trust for Public Land, 1998

(http://www.tpl.org/tier2_rp2.cfm?folder_id=825)

- **Property Tax** – Although unpopular, they are a stable source of funding in economic downturns, particularly compared to sales taxes.
- **Special Assessment Districts** – There are a variety of specific Assessment Districts with their own set of rules for establishing them.

Lighting and Landscape Assessment District - The Landscaping and Lighting Act of 1972 (Streets and Highway Code section 22500) enables assessments to be imposed in order to finance:

- Acquisition of land for parks, recreation, and open space
- Installation or construction of planting and landscaping, street lighting facilities, ornamental structures, and park and recreational improvements (including playground equipment, restrooms and lighting)
- Maintenance and servicing any of the above

Maintenance Assessment District - Maintenance Assessment Districts (MADs) are authorized in the “Landscape and Lighting Act of 1972.” MADs usually fund:

- Maintenance services, construction and installation.
- Open space and mini-parks
- Street medians and street lighting,
- Security

- Flood control and drainage.
- **Real Estate Transfer Tax** – It can be applied to sellers or buyers, often with an exemption for sales prices up to some minimum level, to protect lower income families.
- **Impact Fees** – A commonly used tool applied by Bay Area cities. The advantage is that voter approval is not required for establishing these fees. The drawback, similar to park dedication fees, places additional costs on new development, which can lead to hardships for affordable housing. Consider making exemptions for new low and very-low income affordable housing.
- **General Obligation Bonds** – These are loans taken out by a city or county against the value of the taxable property in the locality. These require a 2/3rd majority. Their main advantage is that they allow for the immediate purchase of land.
- **Revenue Bonds** – These create an opportunity for bonding of specific revenues, making it more palatable for voters when they are voted on because the revenue source and expenditure is spelled out. These bonds are not constrained by debt ceilings like general obligation bonds. In addition, voter approval is rarely required since the government is not obligated to repay the debt if the revenue stream does not flow as predicted. On the downside, revenue bonds are typically more expensive to repay than general obligation bonds.
- **User Fee Financing** – These are fees collected from park facility users. This strategy works better with new communities rather existing urban communities where people are accustomed to free parks and recreation services. Over the years however, one vein of parks fees that have proven very valuable are vehicle parking related fees. In Boston, Post Office Square, a \$30 million project is being entirely financed by the parking garage which is being constructed beneath it. See Parking Assessment District for more information. It is important to include *workrecreation* provisions that allow low income residents to enjoy services in exchange for labor instead of fees.
- **Tax Increment Financing** – These funds come from established Redevelopment Areas that freeze property tax revenue at a “base year” and divert any additional tax revenue each year into a separate pool of money used to finance the improvements. These funds are attractive because they are not a new cost to property owners or businesses. The disadvantage is frequently added stress on the General Fund, which otherwise would have received the increased tax revenue as property values increase. Additionally they are only applicable to capital improvements.
- **Adopt-A-Park Programs** – Many communities are leveraging community groups and volunteer service to tackle maintenance problems. The benefit of these programs is that they create a strong sense of community stewardship while providing recognition to local groups in the form of signs or placards located at the parks. The details of these types of programs have already been worked out by communities throughout the country and can be easily adapted for local use. Typical questions of how these programs are set up including questions of liability to minimum time commitments needed to make the program work are answered in a variety of communities. Contact Ann Cheng (510-740-3150x316 or ann@transcoalition.org) for this list with contact names and example programs.
- **Parking Assessment Districts**- The Parking District Law of 1943 (Streets and Highways Code section 31500) authorizes a city or county to finance the following acts:
 - Acquisition of land for parking facilities (including the power of eminent domain)
 - Improvement and construction of parking lots and facilities

- Issuance of bonds
- Employee salaries

These can be customized to address access to adjacent parks or beautifying streetscapes along parks that are also within the boundaries of the parking district.

- **Business Improvement Districts (BID's)**- Although these are developed for the benefit of a business district, often times the success of a district is dependant upon the condition of the surrounding public realm including squares, pocket parks or even sidewalks. In addition to creating a funding mechanism for businesses to pool their resources for jointly needed services such as marketing campaigns. BID's are also often used to enhance public improvement and beautification projects in partnership with the city. Activities, programs and improvements range from farmers' markets to business promotions to installing street lighting and removing graffiti. Since a BID fee is a benefit assessment and not a tax, BIDs can consistently enact programs and activities without relying on public funding.

7. Dig a Little Deeper

http://www.tpl.org/tier2_rp2.cfm?folder_id=825

Financing Local Parks Vol. 1: Increasing Public Investment in Parks and Open Space, by Kim Hopper for the Trust for Public Land, 1998

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http://www.tpl.org/download_excellent_parks.cfm

The Excellent City Park System. The Trust for Public Land. By Peter Harnik. 2003.

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