



# INVESTING IN EQUITABLE URBAN PARK SYSTEMS

Case Studies + Recommendations





## INTRODUCTION

City Parks Alliance is leading a national initiative to research, curate, and disseminate innovative strategies and models for funding parks and green infrastructure in low-income communities.

The seven case studies included in this document showcase cities that are leading the way in using data-driven approaches to ensure more equitable distribution of funding. These case studies are available on [City Parks Alliance's website](#) along with other supporting materials.

As a foundation to this work on funding and equity, City Parks Alliance commissioned Urban Institute to lead research about funding models and their equity considerations in U.S. cities of various sizes. The resulting report, [\*Investing in Equitable Urban Park Systems: Emerging Strategies and Tools\*](#), was published in July 2019. It explores twenty funding models and their equity considerations in cities of various sizes across the country. Beyond new sources of funding, the research turned up a number of strategies that utilize an equity lens to shape funding decisions. City Parks Alliance has also partnered with Groundwork USA to identify a framework to help communities use these strategies successfully, to be released in 2020.

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# OVERVIEW

Despite the enormous economic, physical, mental, and environmental benefits that parks provide, public funding for parks—especially in distressed communities where their multiple benefits are most needed—is limited and not keeping up with demand.

Historic disinvestment has left many low-income communities and communities of color without access to quality parks and recreation opportunities and with park assets in need of significant upgrades.

To ensure more equitable funding approaches and to address the backlog created by historic disinvestment, a number of cities are beginning to establish data-driven equity criteria to guide park investment. Through thoughtful data analysis, combined with proactive community engagement, these cities are assessing community needs and interests and using that assessment to design new parks and improve and program existing parks.

City Parks Alliance surveyed six cities and one urban county that have established equity criteria and are now using that criteria to prioritize their capital, operating, and programming investments. These include:

- Detroit
- Minneapolis
- New York City
- Philadelphia
- Pittsburgh
- San Francisco
- LA County

Our survey examined conditions that spurred action on equitable funding strategies, leadership that drove an equity approach, equity criteria and data sources, policies enacted, tracking and evaluation, and replicability by other cities.



*Minneapolis, MN, 10/23/2018: Central Gym Park's new playground and other improvements were funded by the 20-Year Neighborhood Park Plan, prioritized for NPP20 funds due to equity criteria that contributed to its ranking of 3 out of more than 100 ranked parks.*



*San Francisco, CA: Free Zumba class at Palega Playground, an equity zone park.*

# CASE STUDIES

## Cities Leading the Way

A number of cities have begun to establish data-driven equity criteria to guide park investment in order to ensure more equitable funding and to address the backlog created by historic disinvestment. Here are seven examples of municipalities leading the way, followed by five recommended practices for replication.



Minneapolis, MN, 5/31/2019: The re-opening of Peavey Park, which was prioritized for NPP20 funds due to equity criteria that contributed to its ranking of 9 out of more than 100 ranked parks.

## FRAMEWORK FOR AN EQUITABLE FUTURE

### New York City

Mayor Bill de Blasio was elected in 2013 on a platform to promote greater equity. In 2014, NYC Parks released the *Framework for an Equitable Future* which included the Community Parks Initiative, a multi-faceted program to invest in under-resourced public parks in the city's densely populated and growing neighborhoods with higher-than-average concentrations of poverty. NYC Parks staff analyzed capital investment data from the past 20 years and worked to establish long-term community partnerships that generate stewards to sustain the ongoing care and investment in the city's parkland.



New York, NY, September 2017: Sol Lain Playground re-opens, the sixth CPI site to open after undergoing complete reconstruction funded by Mayor Bill de Blasio with a \$3.6 million allocation. Photo Credit: NYC Parks.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH DEPARTMENT AND 20-YR NEIGHBORHOOD PARK PLAN

### Minneapolis

In 2011, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) created the Community Outreach Department to lead efforts to better meet the needs of under-served communities. Between 2011 and 2016, MPRB began work on 17 initiatives to connect with and serve the diverse neighborhoods in Minneapolis. MPRB then spent six years educating all sectors on their research findings.

In 2016, MPRB and the City of Minneapolis enacted concurrent 20-Year Neighborhood Park Plan ordinances to achieve a shared goal of closing a neighborhood parks funding gap. An important element of the ordinances was a commitment to ensure that data-driven racial and economic equity criteria were used in determining the distribution of funds to its 160 neighborhood parks during the period of the plan.



New York, NY, June 2017: The newly refurbished Van Alst Playground in Astoria, Queens, was the first playground to be refurbished under the Community Parks Initiative. The project was funded with \$3.5 million allocated by Mayor de Blasio through the Community Parks Initiative, and the playground reopened to the community. Photo Credit: NYC Parks.

# CASE STUDIES

## Cities Leading the Way

### PARK NEEDS ASSESSMENT

#### LA County

In order to build support for a new park tax-based measure (Measure A), LA County conducted a county-wide park needs assessment of 3,000 parks in 2015. The county engaged local communities in public meetings about the state of their community parks. This public engagement led to Measure A passing in 2016. The new tax-based parks measure is expected to bring in \$94 million annually and specifically states the need to provide more funds to areas in high need. Measure A uses the needs assessment to guide park funding.



Los Angeles County, CA: The creation of Deforest Wetlands Park was funded by the City of Long Beach, the Open Space District, and by the State of California River Parkway Grant. This park provides water quality improvements, recreational amenities, a river parkway, and helps mitigate flooding.



San Francisco, CA: Tiny Tots Swim Class at Hamilton Pool, in an equity zone, and the only pool citywide with a slide!

### CAL ENVIRO-SCREEN 3.0

#### San Francisco

In 2016, San Francisco voters approved Proposition B, a park revenue measure that included a requirement to develop an equity analysis. The driving force to pass Proposition B was San Francisco Parks Alliance, with full support from San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (SFRPD), and endorsements from park advocates, environmental organizations, and children/family supporters. To define “low-income and disadvantaged communities,” SFRPD adopted use of a statewide open data set called CalEnviroScreen3.0, provided by the California EPA.

### PARKS & REC IMPROVEMENT PLAN

#### Detroit

The Detroit Mayor Michael Duggan was elected in 2013 and ran on a campaign that “every neighborhood has a future.” In 2015, the City of Detroit Park Planning Team was created to develop an equitable vision. The Park Planning Team drafted the first parks and recreation improvement plan using collected equity data. The first phase of the improvement plan included 40 neighborhood parks. In order to create efficiencies in park capital renovations, the park planners work closely with a team of in-house landscape architects on park redesign.



Detroit, MI, 4/18/2017: Ribbon cutting for Szafranec Park Renovation - funded by the Neighborhood 40 Parks Initiative.

# CASE STUDIES

## Cities Leading the Way

### PITTSBURGH PARKS FOR ALL

#### Pittsburgh

In 2018, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and the City of Pittsburgh committed to the goal of bringing all parks in all city neighborhoods up to a high level of quality by developing a data-driven methodology coupled with residents' input and priorities on maintenance, rehabilitation, capital improvements, and programming. After collecting the data and receiving feedback from 10,000 residents, the conservancy and the city created the Parks Plan, a park equitable investment plan. As a result of this extensive public engagement, voters then passed a parks tax referendum in 2019 that is expected to generate \$10 million annually and will provide the baseline funding to implement the Parks Plan.



Pittsburgh, PA: One of the many participants of the Let's Go Fishing program that provides fishing skills training and opportunities at Lake Carnegie in Highland Park from June through September each year. Photo by Renee Rosensteel.



Philadelphia, PA, July 2019: Council President Darrell Clarke and Parks & Recreation celebrate the opening of a brand new \$1.4 million playground and outdoor play space at Fishtown Recreation Center. The project was funded by Rebuild, Council President Clarke, Trust for Public Land, and DCNR.

### REBUILDING COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

#### Philadelphia

In 2017, Philadelphia's City Council passed Rebuilding Community Infrastructure (Rebuild), an endeavor set forth by Mayor Jim Kenney that aims to invest hundreds of millions of dollars to revitalize neighborhood parks, recreation centers, playgrounds, and libraries across the city. The bulk of Rebuild's financing will arrive via bonds that are made possible by revenue from the Philadelphia Beverage Tax, a tax on the distribution of sweetened beverages. Rebuild sites are prioritized based on the physical condition of sites and how they align with Rebuild's values of promoting equity and encouraging economic growth. During the planning process, poverty, crime and health data are used to provide each site with a score.



Philadelphia, PA, July 2019: New spray ground at Fishtown Recreation Center.



Philadelphia, PA, July 2019: New play equipment at Fishtown Recreation Center.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

City Parks Alliance identified five common elements among the cities studied that are critical to developing, implementing, and evaluating a data-driven equitable investment park strategy.

## 1 Leverage leadership from one or more sectors.

Strong leadership is instrumental for making the case for developing and implementing an equitable approach. The leaders that drove the implementation of equitable investments differed in each of the municipalities. In some cities the park and recreation agency drove the change; in others the mayor led the way—even campaigning on the issue of park equity. In a number of places, the foundation and nonprofit sectors were the catalysts.

## 2 Define equity goals, and collect data to support those goals.

Data collection and analysis must be reliable, consistent, and transparent, guided by agreed upon equity goals. Each city defined its equity goal and criteria and used data to identify investments needed to meet their goals. Although the cities might have had different goals and criteria, there were many overlaps in the types and source of data used, including poverty, crime, health statistics, youth population, park access, unemployment, past capital and maintenance investment, and access to parks.

## 3 Educate and engage the community on equity data.

Educating all levels of government, citizens, non-profits, foundations, and the private sector on data findings is important for building buy-in and commitment to implementation. Extensive outreach and engagement with local communities is essential to ensure the data aligns with the reality on the ground and that the process builds ownership of the results within the community.

## 4 Establish and sustain equitable funding practices.

To help ensure that equitable funding practices were implemented and sustained, cities incorporated different strategies for permanence, ranging from ordinances, voter-approved measures, strategic plans, and internal reorganization.

## 5 Institute consistent tracking and evaluation procedures.

Tracking any new funding initiatives with some sort of oversight committee that is required to produce an audit, reports, or study results helps to ensure consistent implementation over time.



New York, NY: The Sol Lain Playground design was based on feedback gathered directly from the community at public input sessions. New features for older kids include a high-school-size basketball court, as well as a multi-purpose play area with two basketball backstops, painted lines for tag football, and a mini-running track. Photo Credit: NYC Parks.



Detroit, MI, 4/18/2017: Ribbon cutting for Szafraniec Park Renovation - funded by the Neighborhood 40 Parks Initiative.

Each city that City Parks Alliance studied had a tracking plan in place to ensure implementation and effectiveness, but most were conducted internally. New York was unique in its NYC Parks and CUNY School of Public Health partnership that studied the impact of the Community Parks Initiative (CPI) park reconstructions on community health metrics, including physical activity, park usership, and social cohesion. The Physical Activity and Redesigned Community Spaces (PARCS) study is currently underway and is engaging thousands of New Yorkers over the next several years to measure CPI's impact. NYC Parks and CUNY expect to release the results of that study in 2022.

## ADDITIONAL EQUITABLE FUNDING RESOURCES

This City Parks Alliance review of park investment strategies is designed to be a resource for cities committed to ensuring equitable access to quality parks and recreational opportunities, highlighting approaches taken by cities on the cutting edge of equitable park work. Full case studies on each of the seven cities are available on [City Parks Alliance's website](#). We have also partnered with Groundwork USA to identify community pre-conditions for using equitable funding strategies successfully, to be released in 2020. Both resources complement *Investing in Equitable Urban Park Systems: Emerging Funding Strategies and Tools*, published in July 2019 by the Urban Institute in partnership with City Parks Alliance.

