



## PLANNING FOR FAMILY-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES: ISSUE BRIEF

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W. SIBLEY HALL CORNELL UNIVERSITY ITHACA, NY 14853-6701

WEBSITE: <http://economicdevelopment.cce.cornell.edu>

A COLLABORATION WITH THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION (APA)

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# Expanding Lifestyle Amenities for Families: Parks and Recreation

By Kathleen Hoover

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## WHY PARKS?

One of the ways in which planners can create family-friendly communities is through the development of accessible parks, open space and recreation for families within their communities. These investments are generally valued by practicing planners and there is great openness in the profession towards implementation of family-centered zoning ordinances with respect to parks and open space.

The APA's City Parks Forum recently published a series of briefing papers on the justification for city parks. These papers help re-frame the notion of greenspace from simply a place to enjoy leisure activity to a tool for enhancing the family-friendliness of a particular community, owing to parks' benefits to childhood development, neighborhood safety, public health, and public arts and cultural events.

### Childhood Development

*City parks offer children the benefits of direct experience with nature — the motivation to explore, discover, and learn about the natural world. Parks also engage children in informal, experiential learning through play and shared experiences with peers, laying the foundation for effective formal education.*

Parks, natural environments, and other green spaces are essential for providing alternative, hands-on learning environments and creative opportunities for children because many children do not learn effectively when limited to the four walls of classrooms. In addition, many children are motivated to learn when they can make their own discoveries outdoors. Thus, additional, hands-on learning environments should be promoted to match varied learning styles. Parks located in urban neighborhoods can offer every child the possibility of healthy physical activity if networks of child-friendly, safe and

accessible pathways are in place to connect homes with park space (Moore, 2003). Finally, access to parks and open spaces aids children in developing an early appreciation for the natural environment and environmental stewardship.

### Neighborhood Safety

*Green residential spaces are gathering places where neighbors form social ties that produce stronger, safer neighborhoods.*

Green spaces are settings for frequent, informal interaction among neighbors that nurture the formation of neighborhood social ties. Consequently, when ties are strong, people feel empowered to help and protect each other. Researchers from the University of Illinois found that residents who live near outdoor greenery tend to be more familiar with their nearby neighbors, leading to increased socialization and greater feelings of community and safety than residents who lacked nearby green spaces. In addition, they found that the conspicuous presence of people outdoors contributes to safety and discourages criminal activity because increased surveillance means threatening behavior is more likely to be observed (University of Illinois, 2003).



*Madison Meadow Community Garden, Lombard, Illinois*

## **Public Health**

*Parks provide opportunities for physical activity that helps to increase fitness and reduce obesity. Moreover, cities have the unique ability to offer various types of parks to give community members a wide range of health benefits.*

Parks can provide measurable health benefits to their users, from providing direct contact with nature and a cleaner environment to opportunities for physical activity and social interaction.

Parks differ in the health benefits they offer. A neighborhood park may function as a venue for social interaction, physical activity, and nature contact. Larger parks may offer these same benefits, as well as the cooling and cleaning of urban air and protection of source water. In addition, people from a wide range of age, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups can use park facilities to engage in their different traditions in physical activity and attitudes towards natural settings.

A primary focus of city planners should also be to provide environments where all community members can be physically active. The latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey estimates that 15% of children 6 to 19 years old are overweight or obese. Among 2 to 5 year olds, 1 in 10 is overweight or obese (Ogden et al 2002). Obesity is a problem which scientists attribute to two factors: more calories consumed, and fewer calories burned. These factors are only deepened by the auto-oriented development of our nation's cities and suburbs in which open space may be difficult to access. Play Across Boston, a project of the Harvard Prevention Research Center, concluded that in addition to organized league sports, it was important to provide open recreation opportunities that allow youth to try different sports and non-athletes to be active (Gortmaker, 2002).

Finally, for residents who are economically disadvantaged, parks are an affordable means to healthy activities. Community gardens, for example, not only foster social interaction, but also actively engage youth in early learning of health and nutrition. For these reasons, it is critical that parks provide a variety of functions to serve the health needs of different groups (Frumkin and Eysenbach, 2002).

## **Arts and Cultural Events**

*Cities today use parks for a wide range of artistic events and activities.*

Parks are an important setting for arts and cultural programs, including public art displays, concerts, dance, theater and movies, and are a vital place for

the cultural expression of a community and a city. Also, parks — especially indoor recreation centers located within parks — provide an excellent location for arts education activities (Rivel, 2002).

While this is certainly not an exhaustive list of reasons why parks and recreation opportunities are essential for a community seeking to embrace the needs of its families, it provides an important framework for understanding the value of investing in this area.



*“Vanishing View” Public Art, Miramar, Florida*

## **FUNDING**

There is good news when it comes to public support for park funding: over the last decade, voters have overwhelmingly supported additional spending for parks and open space conservation. Since 1998, more than 750 measures have gone before voters across the country, with a successful passage rate of 80% and nearly \$30 billion in new park and conservation funding has been created (Blaha, 2005).

Unfortunately, when government budgets are tighter, park and open space funding often finds itself on the chopping block, as it may be considered nonessential or a luxury item. Other types of infrastructure, on the other hand, are thought of as a necessity, not an amenity, and are therefore less likely to be cut.

Given the many benefits that parks and open space provide for community members, communities might be well-served to re-frame parks as “green infrastructure” so that they are viewed as a basic necessity to be planned and developed as an integrated system (Benedict and McMahon, 2003). Other successful ways that communities have been able to support park funding include impact fees, Tax Increment Financing (TIF), co-location with schools, corporate and philanthropic partnerships or Open Space funds that re-allocate a portion of the real estate tax.

## Toolkit

Cities can enhance the family-friendliness of their Parks & Recreation Departments through a variety of means. A review of selected cities, towns and villages throughout the country has shown a number of parks and recreation initiatives that have succeeded in accomplishing this goal. The following are suggestions compiled from the efforts of the communities of Alexandria, VA; Ave Maria, FL; Denver, CO; East Lansing, MI; Lombard, IL; Miramar, FL; and Rockwall, TX:

### Parks and Open Space

- Develop your community's strategic plan for parks, recreation and open space
- Assess current parks/open spaces to for their effectiveness in relating to their target audience, and evaluate how accessible they are to residential areas in terms of walkability and other forms of transportation
- Require new residential development to provide open space and playgrounds
- Explore new types of parks, for example, dog runs, wetland parks, pocket parks, water spray parks, or butterfly gardens
- Co-locate fitness and exercise trails with existing parks, athletic fields or school playgrounds
- Develop a series of pamphlets or other advertising for walkable and bikeable daytime outings throughout your city
- Create or collaborate with a local land trust
- Plan parks for citizens with special needs and disabilities

### Childcare

- Offer high quality infant care, toddler care, pre-k or Mother's day playgroups
- Provide afterschool programs for grades (K-5)
- Organize teen programs from 3-6pm (socializing, mentoring, athletics, academics, arts, lifeskills, etc.)
- Facilitate summer day camps as well as shorter mini-camps for spring break or teacher planning days
- Encourage teens to be staff members of programs or camps for younger students

### Arts

- Participate in a public arts consortium with surrounding municipalities
- Sponsor local artists to have rotating exhibits in public places
- Develop a summer concert, film, theater or dance series in the park
- Organize a summer fine arts camp for youth

### **Elder programs**

- Bridge childcare and elder events through intergenerational programming
- Administer high-quality elder day care
- Provide community transportation for older adults
- Host social events and organized outings/field trips for older adults
- Offer life skills classes such as drivers' education for older adults, cooking and gardening classes, CPR/First Aid, foreign languages, genealogy, etc.

### **Athletics**

- Develop and maintain a variety of athletic complexes, including basketball courts, swimming pools, tennis courts, baseball/softball fields
- Administer sports programming for all ages, including youth sports and community adult leagues
- Partner with local benevolent organizations to coordinate after school sports leagues
- Allow (and collect revenue from) the leasing of sports fields to local groups such as school sports and bands, private sports leagues, etc.

### **Other**

- Organize a local Farmers' market
- Develop a Teen Council of local middle- and high-school students to give input on what their needs are for the community
- Provide a transit hub near commercial centers with bicycle storage and changing rooms to facilitate public transportation and bicycle commuting.
- Plant a community garden and rent plots to residents

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