

Sustainable Parks and Open Space



Background

Definition

Open space includes critical areas, recreation and cultural sites, agricultural lands, and urban reserves. Parks and open space provide recreational opportunities and preserve ecological functions and promote biodiversity. Parks and open space promote community and environmental health and wellbeing. In addition to identifying and protecting parks and open spaces, jurisdictions should also consider maintenance, stewardship and design for functionality.

Health, equity and sustainability considerations

According to [The City Project](#), communities of color living in poverty with no access to a car suffer first and worst in terms of access to green space and opportunities for physical activity. Health and quality of life disparities often follow the same pattern as green access disparities. While there is an abundance of green space in the central Puget Sound region, not all residents enjoy equal access to these resources, and accessible green spaces may not be adequately maintained.

Parks and open spaces provide spaces for activity, including walking and running trails, sports fields, and play structures for children, free of charge. These spaces can help residents to lead more active lifestyles and meet the Center for Disease Prevention and Control's (CDC) [Physical Activity Guidelines](#), and help to improve overall health and fitness, and reduce the risk of many chronic diseases. Parks are also key sources of community cohesion. Studies show that the institutions and places that make up this web of human relationships can make a neighborhood stronger, safer, and more successful.

Numerous studies have consistently shown that parks and open space have a positive impact on nearby residential property values. The evidence reveals that most people are willing to pay more for a home close to a nice park. Economists call this phenomenon "hedonic value."

Parks and unpaved open spaces reduce stormwater management costs by capturing precipitation and/or slowing its runoff. Large permeable surface areas allow precipitation to infiltrate and recharge the groundwater. Also, vegetation provides considerable surface area that intercepts and stores rainwater, allowing some to evaporate before it ever reaches the ground.

In Seattle, park use led to almost
\$65,000,000 in health cost
savings.

While parks are free to use, economists can calculate a "Direct Use" value based on peoples' willingness to pay. The direct use value represents the savings to residents by not having to pay a market rate for similar experiences in commercial venues. The Trust for Public Land's [The Economic Benefits of Seattle's Parks and Recreation System](#) (March

2011) calculated the direct use for parks and recreation service in the City of Seattle to be over \$450,000,000 in 2010.

Additionally, the Trust for Public Land estimates that nearly 200,000 Seattle residents engaged actively enough in parks to cut their health costs. The health benefits of parks can also be measured as the collective economic savings that residents realize by their active use of parks. The key data input for determining medical cost savings is the number of park users indulging in a sufficient amount of physical activity to make a difference.

Program and Policy Examples

Program examples

Parks come in a range of sizes and, depending on how they are designed, can accommodate a variety of uses and programming, including:

- Community revitalization
- Community engagement
- Economic development
- Create safer neighborhoods
- Green infrastructure
- Help children learn
- Improve public health
- Arts and cultural programs
- Promote tourism
- Smart growth
- Climate change management

The American Planning Association's [City Parks Forum Briefing Papers](#) (2014) provide more information and best practices for all of the programs and needs listed above.

How is it used locally?

The Growth Management Act requires comprehensive plans to include a parks and recreation element ([RCW 36.70A.070\(8\)](#)). Although this element is not mandatory until adequate funding is available, many jurisdictions have adopted a parks and recreation element as part of their comprehensive plan. [WAC 365-196-440](#) provides guidance on the preparation of the parks and recreation element.

The 2011 Comprehensive Park Plan for the City of Normandy Park ([Ordinance No. 870](#)) sets forth a comprehensive assessment of the city's existing parks and how it plans to meet current and future needs. The plan outlines the city's current recreational and park needs and a thorough inventory of existing parks and facilities. It includes a set of objectives and policies that all work towards the goal to "develop a system of parks, walking trails and recreational facilities that are financially sustainable, meet public recreation needs, and incorporate and enhance the natural environment." The plan also includes a capital improvement program.

The 2012, the City of Burien [Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan](#) (PROS Plan) provides guidance to the city in its management and development of park properties and recreation programs. The plan makes the City of Burien eligible for state and federal grants. The plan is updated every six years.

In 2011, the City of Renton adopted the [Parks, Recreation, and Natural Areas Plan](#) as a component of their comprehensive plan. The plan sets forth two goals: providing the opportunity for the community to connect to, participate in, support and encourage a healthy environment and active lifestyle; and supporting city spaces where an integrated trails/road network becomes a realistic transportation alternative. A noteworthy aspect of the plan is the focus on sustainability: Policy P-5: “Ensure long-term economic and environmental sustainability in system planning, design, operation, maintenance and decision making.”

Implementation

Opportunities for funding

[The Washington Recreation and Conservation Funding Board](#) administers nine grants ranging from a Recreational Trails Program to a Boating Facilities Program. The Board also provides [Manual 2: Planning Policies and Guidelines](#) (2014), a how-to manual for developing a park plan. Local jurisdictions seeking funding from this agency are required to have a plan that is consistent with these guidelines.

The National Park System doesn't just provide recreation in far-away places. Cities and communities can apply to their Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program for [outdoor recreation funding](#).

Local jurisdictions can implement policies to generate long-term funding internally. A metropolitan park district (MPD) is a junior taxing district that has two regular property tax levies available—one of 50 cents per thousand dollars assessed valuation (AV) and one of 25 cents. They are considered as one levy for the purposes of the levy limits in [chapter 84.55 RCW](#), which sets limits on the amount by which a levy can be increased.

Seattle Parks and Recreation Parks [Legacy Citizens' Advisory Committee Final Report](#) (March 2014) looked at different funding options, including the potential use of a metropolitan parks district or a property tax levy. It also examined how the city allocated these funds for keeping facilities open, maintenance, and acquisition of new land and development of new facilities.

Considerations for local implementation

While parks may be regularly distributed in a community, differences in maintenance and programming affect how people will use and perceive parks and open space. Poorly funded maintenance budgets and inappropriate uses by a small number of people can make it hard for those who live near a park or open space to reap the full benefits.

The King County Equity Impact Review (EIR) tool is both a process and a tool to identify, evaluate, and communicate the potential impact—both positive and negative—of a policy or program on people, with a particular focus on communities of color, low income communities, and limited English proficient (LEP) communities. The tool may be helpful in identifying and addressing areas with limited access to parks and open spaces, or areas with poor park maintenance.



Challenges to implementation

In recent years, parks and open spaces have faced a funding crisis. With the financial resources available to local governments in decline, there has been significant competition among different public services for tax funds. Parks and open spaces have often lost this funding competition, meaning parks have far less tax support than they used to.

Resources

The American Planning Association's [City Parks Forum Briefing Papers](#) (2013)

The City Project's [Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities: Green Access and Equity for the Southern California Region](#) (2012)

MSRC's [Park Planning, Design, and Open Space](#) (2014)

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department's Healthy Community Planning Toolbox—Policy Intervention Tools: [Physical Activity](#), [Safety and Injury](#), [Placemaking](#) (2013)

Washington State Department of Commerce's [Development Planning for Parks, Recreation, and Open Space in Your Community](#) (2005)