



**TRUST FOR  
PUBLIC  
LAND™**



# Key Park Equity Policies

**TOWARD A 10-MINUTE WALK® PARK  
EQUITY POLICY FRAMEWORK**





# 10-Minute Walk



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# INTRODUCTION



# Local Policy and Park Equity



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**P**arks and greenspaces are helping confront some of today's most pressing societal challenges. They offer places to play,<sup>1</sup> exercise,<sup>2</sup> unplug,<sup>3</sup> connect with others in our communities,<sup>4</sup> and combat climate change.<sup>5</sup> While the benefits of high quality, close-to-home parks and greenspaces are vital to community health, resilience, and sense of social cohesion, there is a significant disparity in who has access to available park space, and not all parks are created equitably.<sup>6,7,8</sup> In fact, 100 million people in the U.S., including 28 million children, do not have access to a close to home park or greenspace.<sup>9</sup> Low income neighborhoods, as well as systemically under resourced racial and ethnic minority populations, have access to significantly less park space than residents of high-wealth neighborhoods.

Present-day inequities in park space and outdoor access are often the result of a long history of inequitable policy decisions, including redlining and racially restrictive covenants, that supported disinvestment of neighborhoods based largely on the racial makeup of residents. The legacy of racism, lack of representation in decision-making, collective memory and personal experiences, and complex social and historical contexts also contribute to many aspects of this park equity divide.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

One of the key ways to address the root causes of these population-level disparities in access to quality parks and greenspaces is through local policy; that is, the laws and regulations that guide practice.<sup>13,14</sup> By enacting policies

that will reverse historical trends and drive more equitable outcomes, local leaders and officials can demonstrate their commitment to equitable park access for the entire community.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, parks and recreation officials and city leaders have begun to establish and enact important and innovative policy approaches to increase equitable access to parks and greenspaces, such as shared use agreements to use greenspace at schools after hours and innovative funding initiatives.

However, the field lacks thorough documentation of the range of policy-based strategies and mechanisms available to advance park equity, and where and how they're being deployed. This lack of information hinders cities from effectively planning and implementing policy changes, and therefore limits the widespread use of strategies required to address park equity gaps. This Framework begins to address these knowledge gaps by identifying and defining the key categories of policy that influence local park investments, and in turn, the distribution of high-quality, accessible parks.

## **About the 10-Minute Walk® Program's Local Park Equity Policy Research**

The landscape of local policies that influence park investments, and in turn, the distribution of high-quality, accessible parks is complex and not well documented, making it challenging for local leaders, city staff, parks advocates, and other park equity allies to assess local policy conditions and develop alternative models. **Conducting research that addresses these knowledge gaps is a key strategy of TPL's 10-Minute Walk Program in its work to accelerate the scaled adoption of policies with high-potential to close park equity gaps.**

This Framework provides an overview of the key categories of policy that influence park equity—whether by the creation of new parks and improvement of existing ones, how people access parks, or the public processes by which these decisions are made.

This research informs a standardized list of policies and key descriptive criteria that will be used to identify, catalog, and track data on park policies. Currently, the research team is assessing the policy environment in a diverse sample of U.S. cities. Tools, models, and new information, including around U.S. park equity policy trends and innovative work, will also be available at [10minutewalk.org](https://10minutewalk.org).

# A Framework of Key Park Equity Policies



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In order to address these knowledge gaps, Trust for Public Land (TPL) is investing in research to support field-wide knowledge building and inform local decision makers as they work to achieve park equity via policy change. In the summer of 2022, TPL's *10-Minute Walk*® Program launched a partnership with a multidisciplinary research team at the College of Charleston to better understand the full range of local policy mechanisms available to improve park access and quality.

As an initial, foundational step in this work, the research team has identified eight main categories of policy that influence access to quality parks and greenspace in communities. These categories have been developed through systematic review of literature including academic articles, research reports, city plans and reports, city legislation, and case studies available online. This report introduces the categories, and provides working definitions and real-world examples illustrating each category.

It is worth noting that this applied research is layered and nuanced. Municipal policy is often influenced by multiple levels of government, which can include county, state, and federal policy. Many of the policies within this Framework also implicate numerous departments within local governments, which are organized and function differently across communities.

# Policy Categories

01

Parks Needs Assessment



02

Community Engagement Policies



03

Public Finance Policies



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Maintenance Policies



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Shared Use Policies



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Externalities & Anti-Displacement Policies



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Land Use Policies





# POLICY CATEGORIES



# 01

# Parks Needs Assessment

A common term in many disciplines, including organizational management, public health, and psychology, a “needs assessment” refers to the systematic collection of data, or information, with an aim of identifying the current status and needs of an individual or organization.<sup>16</sup> Related to increasing access to parks and greenspace for a city, a park needs assessment consists of documentation of the existing park facilities in a specified location, with an emphasis on identifying gaps in the location of parks, types of parks, and/or park amenities that are needed in the community. Some cities or parks and recreation agencies have completed park needs assessments as standalone studies or processes that produce a report, while others include the park needs assessment as part of a larger master, or strategic, parks and recreation plan.



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Completing a parks needs assessment is a foundational data-driven step towards identifying solutions specifically aimed at increasing park access in a city. Many cities complete park needs assessments to inform their park planning processes; however, methodology and variables that are examined varies across contexts. For example, some cities utilize surveys, while others rely primarily on geographic information systems (GIS) mapping, and assessments include a wide range of park access metrics, including city area, age, income, and race/ethnicity. Through literature review, only a few cities indicated that the park needs assessment was completed as required by policy.

As one example, Salt Lake City, Utah completed a detailed needs assessment for the city’s public lands in 2019.<sup>17</sup> Completed by a consulting company, the city’s needs assessment focused on three goals, including 1) evaluate existing parks, open space lands, and amenities, 2) analyze demographics to determine future needs, and 3) solicit input from the community. After completing an inventory for various types of public lands (e.g., community parks, neighborhood parks, natural lands), consultants examined the amount of park acreage per person for parks, and mileage per person for trails and bike routes. Additionally, consultants used a combination of metrics (population, density, income, percent of youth, percent of seniors, areas of potential growth, and high need areas) to map the highest need areas for future parks and greenspace. Ultimately, this parks needs assessment provides local decision makers with detailed data on the current status of park access as well as public perceptions of the local parks system needed in order to inform need-based project planning and prioritization.<sup>17</sup>

# 02

## Community Engagement Policies

Community engagement, for purposes of this Framework, is defined as gathering information and perspectives from community members in order to inform overall park system planning and/or individual park project planning.<sup>18</sup> Engaging the community in parks and recreation planning, development, and programming is essential to ensure that the greenspace needs of a community are met.<sup>19,20</sup>

While many parks and recreation agencies include public engagement as part of their best practices, not all cities require (or are required to pursue) public input via policy. In some cases, a city requires public input for all capital projects across the city. In other cases, the parks and recreation department may have a policy requiring input for parks specific projects within the city. Department-specific policy may also be dictated by city-wide policy.

As one example, the research team identified a public input policy in Raleigh, North Carolina. Adopted in 2012 and updated in 2014, this “public participation policy for park planning” outlines the public participation principles, the processes covered by the policy, people affected by the policy, the actions and responsibilities of the public participation, and the notifications and public comment required.<sup>21</sup> In addition, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge (BREC) recently created and passed a Community Engagement Policy. This policy was created with involvement from volunteer community leaders and public input, and aims to increase transparency and efficacy of BREC’s work in service of the community.<sup>22</sup>



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# 03

## Public Finance Policies

**P**ublic finance policies detail the courses or principles of action that a government has adopted in order to manage public funds. Most park and recreation agencies rely heavily on tax dollars to deliver their services to the public, so how public officials view parks and recreation is an important indicator in the level of funding that a Parks Department will receive. While a resounding 83 percent of local government officials agree that park and recreation services are worth the amount of tax dollars expended on them each year, only a third of officials claim their local governments place a high priority on funding these services.<sup>23</sup> This category includes several policy-driven revenue streams that can help cities increase their parks and recreation departments' budgets and make progress toward local park access and equity goals.



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One public finance policy option is a dedicated public revenue source, which is public money derived from a particular revenue source for the specific purpose of funding Park and Recreation Departments and/or specific park and greenspace projects. This can come in the form of an ordinance approved by the local governing body, or more often through a ballot proposition (a general term for a measure that appears on a voter ballot). A proposition might request voter approval for a bond (a type of debt security issued by local government and often used for large-scale capital projects), or a tax levy.<sup>24</sup> For example, in 2022, Fort Worth, Texas residents voted on and approved Proposition B, which will work within existing property tax rates to provide the Park and Recreation Department with nearly \$124 million for upcoming projects throughout the city.<sup>25</sup> And in 2023, voters in Colorado Springs, Colorado, approved to extend the Trails, Open Space and Parks (TOPS) sales tax. The .10 percent tax is projected to raise \$9.5 million over twenty years, and will support acquisition and stewardship of new trails, parks, and open spaces in order to keep pace with development in one of Colorado’s fastest-growing communities.<sup>26,27</sup>

Another public finance policy covered in this section is impact fees. Impact fees are payments required by local governments on new development for the purpose of providing or expanding capital facilities, such as parks and trails, to serve the new development. Policy language around impact fees can be written with varying levels of rigor and may or may not specifically list the city’s Parks and Recreation Department as the designated collector and user of said funds. The City of Miami, Florida has a park impact fee ordinance that includes key definitions and clear parameters that specify funding requirements and outline the administration of the policy.<sup>28</sup>



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# 04

## Maintenance Policies

**P**ark maintenance includes upkeep activities performed to ensure public parks are clean, safe, and operational. It involves pruning trees, mowing grass, clearing garbage, as well as installing and repairing park structures and equipment. The maintenance of parks is essential to providing safe, usable, and aesthetically pleasing areas for residents and visitors.<sup>29,30</sup> A 2017 study on inequities in park maintenance across the United States found that low-socioeconomic and ethnic minority people have access to parks with lower maintenance levels, more physical hazards, and more crime safety issues.<sup>7</sup> This section of the Framework focuses on policies enacted by city governments and parks departments to ensure that all municipal parks are well maintained, inviting, and accessible.

This category includes requirements to have a plan for maintaining and improving all existing parks within the city on a regular basis. The Parks and Recreation Department for the City of Detroit adopted their Improvement Plan in 2017 with the goal of, “Creating quality public space that is accessible to all Detroiters and can help to improve Detroit’s efforts to become a more sustainable, healthy, and economically robust city.”<sup>31</sup> This plan contains the most up to date catalog of all existing parks and their current condition, and extensive mapping showing gaps in park service. Each park in the system was discussed, subsequently ranked and prioritized based on need of improvement.

The second consideration includes broader policies related to the maintenance and/or improvement of existing parks and greenspace. For example, the City of Detroit also has a parks maintenance policy within their city’s comprehensive plan to, “Protect and maintain existing parks and other public spaces along the riverfront.”<sup>32</sup> Routine maintenance, upgrades, and improvements to existing parks plays an important role in whether or not they are accessible and promote use among local residents.



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# 05

## Shared Use Policies



BEFORE



AFTER

Community schoolyard project in New York City. © TPL

The fifth policy category in the park access policy Framework is shared use agreements or policies. Also referred to as “joint use” or “community use”, these policies occur when government entities, private, and/or nonprofit organizations agree to broaden access to their facilities for community use.<sup>33</sup> Some shared-use agreements exist between parks and recreation departments and schools or school systems that allow the public to use outdoor spaces on school grounds outside of school hours. Further, some school districts and individual schools choose to allow public access to their schoolyards unilaterally through their own policy. In addition to school-based shared use agreements, cities are pursuing policies with other non-traditional entities—from water utilities to faith communities. Existing research on shared use agreements has addressed some of the practical concerns with this model, including how costs and responsibilities such as liability and maintenance of facilities should be managed between partnering entities.<sup>34,35,36</sup>

As one example, in 2022, Seattle Public Schools updated a formal joint use agreement with the City of Seattle Parks and Recreation Division. This policy outlines the 1) purpose and benefits, 2) leases and agreements between the two parties, 3) the schedule and key dates, and 4) the financial management of the policy.<sup>37</sup> This updated agreement also includes a comparison to the previous agreement and explicit language for equity-focused elements of the joint use agreement.

# 06

## Land Use Policies

The Environmental Protection Agency defines land use as “human use of land,” representing the economic and cultural activities (e.g., agricultural, residential, industrial, mining, and recreational uses) that are practiced at a given place.<sup>38</sup> Land use and zoning laws and policies guide how land will be developed or redeveloped in a city. Often, these laws or guidelines are located in a city’s comprehensive or master planning document, while other policies are identified specifically through zoning policies in the city’s code of ordinances.<sup>39</sup> The Framework focuses on development and land use requirements and incentives, including a specific parkland dedication policy, as well as policies focused on converting other land uses into parks and greenspaces.



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The first land use policy in this category focuses on development requirements and incentives for permanent greenspace in new developments. For example, Lexington, Kentucky recently amended the Open Space Regulation in its Zoning Ordinance (2023) to incorporate design standards and incentivize green infrastructure best practices in greenspaces required in new developments.<sup>40</sup> Within this policy category, parkland dedication represents a requirement imposed on site application plans that requires a dedication of land intended for public parks or greenspace, or a payment of a fee intended for public acquisition of land or development of park facilities. In 2021, the City of Colorado Springs adopted a parkland dedication ordinance.<sup>41</sup> Administered by multiple departments in the city government, the policy outlines its overall purpose, the options and requirements for parkland dedication, and the fee structure if selecting that option over land deduction.

This category also includes policies focused on converting or adapting existing land that is not being used for green space, such as vacant land, brownfields, and decommissioned infrastructure, into parks and open space.<sup>42</sup> For example, in the City of Detroit, the Master Plan of Policies states that the city will “work with communities to convert vacant properties into neighborhood parks and natural habitat areas.”<sup>32</sup>



**M**any neighborhoods in cities throughout the country have incomplete and disconnected streets that lack adequate sidewalks, pedestrian crossings and signals, paved shoulders or bicycle lanes, and sufficient lighting. These inadequacies make walking or bicycling to the park an unattractive choice. Even when a park is available within a 10-minute walk of home, having a safe, accessible pathway connecting residents to the park can play a critical role in the overall accessibility of parks by local residents.<sup>43</sup> While connectivity policies are often aimed at broader mobility patterns and implemented by city transportation departments, this Framework includes them with the intent of better understanding how connectivity policies support park access in cities.

One policy option in the connectivity section of the Framework is an Active Transportation Plan. Active transportation includes walking, bicycling, wheelchair use, and all non-motorized means of travel for transportation and recreation. An active transportation plan provides a shared vision for active transportation priorities and a comprehensive framework for implementation among many sectors of city government. According to the National Recreation and Park Association, park and recreation agencies play an integral role in active transportation and are a critical part of strategies targeted at increasing active transportation modes.<sup>44</sup> The City of Albany, New York has adopted a comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plan (2021) that includes prioritizing bicycle and pedestrian networks as viable transportation options, as well as incentivizing elected officials and leaders to take responsibility for biking and walking as part of the transportation system.<sup>45</sup>



Another policy option in this section is a Complete Streets Policy. Complete Streets is an approach to planning, designing and building streets that enables safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities. This approach also emphasizes the needs of those who have experienced systemic underinvestment, or those whose needs have not been met through a traditional transportation approach, such as older adults, people living with disabilities, people who don't have access to vehicles, and Black, Native, and Hispanic or Latino/a/x communities.<sup>46</sup> According to Smart Growth America, over 1,300 cities throughout the United States have adopted Complete Streets Policies. By expanding multi-modal options and improving the safety and quality of the pedestrian experience, adoption and implementation of a Complete Streets policy can improve local park access and encourage more equitable park use.<sup>46</sup>

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# Externalities & Anti-Displacement Policies



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**W**hile working to combat the inequities in parkland distribution in cities across the United States, it is important to consider the externalities that can arise for some neighborhood residents when new parks are built.<sup>47,48</sup> Externalities—or the “side effects” of activities—are often unintentional consequences of investments, and can present as positive or negative impacts. For example, park projects can increase surrounding property values. When it comes to either enhancing positive benefits or working to avoid negative consequences, policy can be an important tool. To help ensure benefits accrue equitably, through land value capture tools, local governments can recover increased land value that accrue to private landowners with development of public infrastructure, such as parks, and reinvest those proceeds for public benefit.

With the availability and affordability of housing representing a significant and widespread need in many cities today, one negative park-related externality of current concern is the potential for displacement—a process involving increases in housing prices and the influx of new, wealthier and residents in low-income communities of color.<sup>49</sup> While there are a number of anti-displacement strategies available to combat displacement that originate outside of parks and recreation departments in cities, this Framework includes policies that address anti-displacement broadly, with the aim to build and refine knowledge around how these policies can support and advance local park access and equity.

One anti-displacement policy option is rent control or rent stabilization policies, which are policies that cap the amount that landlords and management companies can increase the price of a residence each year. These policies can mitigate displacement by protecting residents from significant rent increases that they are unable to afford. Currently, Washington D.C. and six states, California, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and Oregon have cities with adopted rent control or rent stabilization policies. Thirty-seven states throughout the U.S. have laws explicitly banning municipalities from adopting rent control or stabilization policies, at this time.<sup>50</sup>



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Another policy option in this section is a Right-of-First-Refusal (ROFR) policy, also known as a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase policy. An ROFR is a policy that states that renters, tenants, or tenant groups have the first chance to purchase a property if the owner is seeking to sell it. According to the Center for American Progress, this right is typically provided to qualified nonprofit organizations with the intent to keep current tenants housed and to prevent disruption of residents. Washington D.C. enacted the first tenant-opportunity-to-purchase law in 1980, and a study showed that it preserved nearly 1,400 units of affordable housing from 2003 to 2013.<sup>50</sup>

A third option in this section is inclusionary zoning policies, which are municipal ordinances that require a given share of new construction to be affordable by people with low to moderate incomes. Inclusionary zoning policies can be especially beneficial where new housing developments include construction of new parks, as they guarantee that people from all socioeconomic backgrounds will have easy access to the park.

Local hiring policies are the last option in this section of the Framework. Local and targeted hiring policies require or incentivize businesses that receive public resources to hire workers living in a particular geographic area or from specific populations, such as women or people of color, within the community. These types of policies can increase the number of residents who retain high-quality jobs related to public investments and projects, such as parks. San Francisco, California, for example, enacted a local hiring policy for all Public Works or Improvement projects over \$400,000. The policy also stipulates that a minimum of 20 percent of work hours are to be performed by San Francisco residents, with 10% being disadvantaged workers.<sup>51</sup>

# CONCLUSION





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**T**hrough policy change aimed at advancing park equity, local leaders can make meaningful progress on their commitments to equitable, resilient, and healthy communities. Policy change ensures that commitment will be institutionalized, with a legacy lasting long after an elected official's tenure, and with impacts reaching far beyond a single park project. This Framework and wider park equity policy research project is intended to serve as a tool for local decision-makers to assess local strengths and celebrate successes. Where policy is found to be lacking or out-of-step with local goals and priorities, this Framework can help policy makers identify options and forge a roadmap for adopting policy and practices to more equitably build, maintain, and program quality parks.

This Framework also has practical applications for residents and grassroots efforts focused on park equity—a crucial component to successful policy adoption. Many local groups are already tuned to the need for systemic approaches to closing equity gaps, and the key role of policy within those strategies. This research is intended to add momentum to those efforts. For communities where systems thinking around park equity is new and uncharted territory, this work can help inspire and catalyze more policy-focused community organizing.

And further, this body of work is intended to serve as a field-wide resource about policies that influence park access. Rigorous investigation into policy impacts and how policy can be better leveraged to accelerate the advancement of local park equity goals is needed and ongoing.

Currently, project partners are validating and refining this Framework by applying it across a diverse sample of 25 cities around the U.S. Additionally, the team is synthesizing data gathered to inform a “state of the field” of park equity policy today. This next step will provide the field with a more comprehensive view of common trends, innovative practices, and where deepened investment in local policy change is needed to close park equity gaps. The *10-Minute Walk*® Program aims to continue resource creation and action to help support implementation—and to move the needle on equitable park access for communities across the U.S.



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Trust for Public Land is a national nonprofit that works to connect everyone to the benefits and joys of the outdoors.

[tpl.org](http://tpl.org)



## 10-Minute Walk

The 10-Minute Walk Program, a Trust for Public Land award-winning national program, is engaging city leaders to close the park equity divide so that every resident has access to a quality park or green space within a 10-minute walk of home.

[10minutewalk.org](http://10minutewalk.org)



The Joseph P. Riley Jr. Center for Livable Communities is an interdisciplinary initiative of the College of Charleston whose mission is to leverage the intellectual resources of the College to support the economic and cultural vibrancy of the City of Charleston and other communities throughout South Carolina, the United States, and around the world.

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