Reflections from Trust for Public Land's Park Equity Accelerators

Policy and Systems-Change for Building Park Equity

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Systems-Change for Park Equity

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Over 100 million people across the country – including 28 million children – do not have access to a high-quality park within a 10-minute walk of their home. The park equity divide is defined by a lack of high-quality, safe to access, and well-programmed and maintained parks across the country, largely following trends of policy and planning decisions that have disproportionately harmed communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. This gap is pervasive across the country, but it's exacerbated in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, where parks tend to be smaller, are relied on to serve more people, and are historically under-resourced. [1] [2]

Policy and systems change can play an important role in closing this divide. Systems change aims to, "[Shift] the conditions that hold a problem in place."[3] Solutions that can accelerate and achieve change at scale are essential to providing benefits to millions of U.S. residents. These interventions can help cities to increase their parks portfolio, more sufficiently and equitably fund parks systems, and center communities in decision-making about

local parks. However, cities lack a clear road map charting out the approaches they can deploy in order to advance their park equity goals.

 The Trust for Public Land's (TPL) 10-Minute Walk Program (10MW) has established the Park Equity Accelerator (PEA) in order to address this challenge. Currently, six cities are participating in the PEA, each working over the course of a year to address a specific park equity issue.

- Chattanooga, TN: Formalizing resident engagement in parks decision-making processes.

- Cleveland, OH: Measuring park quality and advancing the development of parks and greenspace via vacant lots.

- Fort Worth, TX: Leveraging non-traditional spaces to close the park equity divide.

- Lexington, KY: Integrating community members into policymaking decisions and improving the quality of greenspace through development policy.

- Los Angeles, CA: Addressing the negative effects of major park developments, including gentrification and displacement.

- Scranton, PA: Increasing resident connection and sense of belonging in parks.

These issues extend beyond these six cities; they represent challenges and barriers to action that are shared among many U.S. cities and towns. Through the PEA, TPL partners with cities and community-based organizations to find a local solution that can also provide a national model or best practice.

In March 2023, TPL convened the six inaugural PEA cities in New York City for a two-day workshop. Over 30 attendees gathered from cities across the country to exchange promising policy and practice models for building park equity, understand leading-edge park models, and build a network of park equity leaders across the country.

This summary shares key learnings and insights from the workshop, including:

- Defining and advancing park equity

- Policies for building park equity

- Case studies of park planning, development, and management models

Defining and Advancing Park Equity

D uring the meeting, attendees banded together to discuss the meaning of park equity, what's needed to build park equity locally, and how to build the park equity field. Participants – all park equity practitioners – collaborated in a set of breakout sessions to answer two questions:

1) What good practices exist for building park equity?

2) What resources could help to bring park equity to scale in cities across the country?

Attendees shared insights that move towards answering these questions.

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Practitioners need a clearer shared definition of park equity.

- Many city practitioners and community members are working towards improving park access and quality within their local contexts. But this informal network lacks a shared understanding and definition of what "park equity" means. The absence of this shared understanding makes it more difficult to identify and share common trends, barriers, and solutions.

- Park equity requires more than equal access to physical space. It also requires equal access to decision-making power about parks, and it will require transferring power to those who have been historically marginalized and under-served.

There's a set of enabling conditions in cities that can help to build a park system that can accelerate equity.

- Cities need access to dedicated, diversified, and sustained financial resources for parks – including dedicated departments and roles.

- Strong partnerships and communications at all levels within and across cities can help to ensure that the necessary stakeholders are ready to act on all aspects of park equity.

- Cities need to have land available for park development and think creatively about land use decisions.

Park equity can't be achieved without community members front-and-center.

- True and inclusive partnership with community members requires compensating collaborators for their work.

- Leaders with power have a responsibility to advocate for parks, build trust, and democratize decision-making.

There's a set of common needs among park equity practitioners to improve their practice.

- Practitioners need to have standardized, replicable procedures in place for park development, maintenance, programming, and community engagement. But this standardization must be balanced with finding opportunities for flexibility to try new, innovative practices.

- Park equity requires buy-in from a wide range of city agencies and community stakeholders. Staff need to be able to effectively work across a number of different types of groups and navigate bureaucratic tensions.

Cities have a common set of questions that must be answered before park equity can be achieved across the country.

1. How can park equity practitioners ensure that decision-makers prioritize parks, and how can they communicate the full value of parks to the public?

2. What are the different approaches, trade-offs, and considerations that need to be balanced for achieving park equity, and how can parks play a role in helping a city to reach its broader equity goals?

3. What is the right "level" of standardization within city practices?

4. What are the optimal approaches for achieving park equity in different circumstances, across different city sizes, growth patterns, and more?

Policies for Building Park Equity

Policy was an area of focus for this workshop. As part of the workshop, Dr. Morgan Hughey, Assistant Professor of Health and Human Performance at the College of Charleston, shared research she is leading in partnership with Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk Program. This research partnership focuses on defining a framework of policies being used today in cities to improve park equity and has produced a first-of-its-kind "10-Minute Walk Park Equity Policy Checklist." This Checklist serves as a standardized list of policies that influence park investments, and as a foundation for forthcoming policy resources creation, direct assistance, and advocacy. The research team is currently using this Checklist to assess whether 25 U.S. cities (including the 6 PEA cities) are implementing – or not implementing – those policies. The Checklist consists of:

POLICY CATEGORIES	
1	**PARKS NEEDS ASSESSMENT:** Documentation of existing parks in a city, with an emphasis on identifying gaps in the location of parks, types of parks, and/or park amenities that are needed in the community.
2	**LAND USE POLICY:** Land use and zoning policies guide how land will be developed or redeveloped in a city.
3	**CONNECTIVITY POLICY:** Land use and zoning policies guide how land will be developed or redeveloped in a city.
4	**PUBLIC FINANCE POLICY:** Policies that detail the courses or principles of action that a government has adopted in order to fund the city departments and/or park projects.
5	**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY:** Policies guiding how cities gather information and perspectives from community members in order to inform overall park system planning and/or individual park project planning.
6	**SHARED USE AGREEMENT:** Policies guiding how cities gather information and perspectives from community members in order to inform overall park system planning and/or individual park project planning.
7	**MAINTENANCE POLICY:** Policies guiding how cities gather information and perspectives from community members in order to inform overall park system planning and/or individual park project planning.
8	**ANTI-DISPLACEMENT POLICY:** Policies guiding how cities gather information and perspectives from community members in order to inform overall park system planning and/or individual park project planning.

A report that shares more information about these policies is available at: https://10minutewalk.org/10-minute-walk-key-policies-report/

Case Studies of Park Planning, Development, and Management Models

Attendees participated in live case studies at four parks across New York City that represent leading-edge models for park planning, development, and management:

- New York City's Community Parks Initiative: Joseph C. Sauer Park

- Waterfront park re-developed with support from public-private partnership: Pier 57

- Community schoolyard: P.S. 19 Asher Levy

- Infrastructure re-use: The High Line

New York City's Community Parks Initiative: Joseph C. Sauer Park

Joseph C. Sauer Park is a park owned and operated by the Department of Parks & Recreation in Manhattan's East Village. In 2020, the park received a comprehensive renovation through New York City's Community Parks Initiative (CPI). New York City launched CPI in 2014 to re-invest in parks that had been historically underinvested, and support communities through parks equity. Through CPI, the Department of Parks & Recreation identified parks that had received less than $250,000 of capital investment in the previous 20 years, and conducted further prioritization based on an analysis of park conditions and neighborhood socioeconomic data. CPI invested over $318 million into local parks across New York City, primarily through mayoral funds.

Joseph C. Sauer Park received over $4 million in capital investment. The Department of Parks & Recreation conducted extensive community engagement with local residents to ensure their priorities were reflected in the updated park design. As the design process progressed, parks staff continued to meet with residents to show how their input was being integrated into project design. Community input ensured that, as the park was re-imagined, assets the community cherished were preserved, including a set of pergolas. The full-scale park renovation added play areas, synthetic turf, a splashpad, seating, new lighting, and water connections for the neighboring community gardens.

During the site visit, conversation centered around balancing community priorities for the park, as well as background on the Community Parks Initiative.

Waterfront park re-developed with support from public-private partnership: Pier 57

Pier 57 is a historic industrial pier within Hudson River Park in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. The Pier – which officially opened to the public in April 2023 – is home to a public food hall, several publicly-available community spaces, and a rooftop park. Google is the master sub-tenant. Pier 57 is part of Hudson River Park, a four-mile park along Manhattan's west side that was established as part of a state law that aimed to re-connect New Yorkers to the Hudson River and provide environmental protection.

The park is operated by Hudson River Park Trust, which has long-term leases with New York City and the State of New York. The Trust is a financially self-sufficient quasi-governmental agency overseen by a Board of Directors appointed by city and state leaders. The Trust's work with Pier 57 stretches back 15 years to 2008, when the Trust first issued an RFP for the pier's re-development. The Trust generates revenue through rent, concessions, fees, as well as grants and donations to its partner at Hudson River Park Friends. Through its enabling legislation, the Trust is uniquely charged to work across the patchwork of city- and state-owned properties that stretch across its domain of the Hudson River to ensure public access while remaining financially self-sufficient.

During the site visit, conversations focused on how cities can work across multiple levels of government to establish park space, creative approaches to funding parks, and the need for persistence and long-term planning when executing complex re-use projects.

Community schoolyard: P.S. 19 Asher Levy

P.S. 19 Asher Levy is an elementary school in Manhattan's East Village. Through Trust for Public Land's New York City Playgrounds program, Asher Levy received over $1 million in funding for transformation into a community schoolyard, with improved amenities and open to the neighborhood outside of school hours. It is one of over 200 community schoolyards in New York. TPL's research has found that if all schoolyards across the country were transformed and open to the public, 80 million people would have access to a new park within a 10-minute walk of home.

Community members, including students, parents, teachers, and other East Village neighbors contributed to the design of P.S. 19. They prioritized adding a synthetic turf field, play areas, and garden area with an outdoor classroom, among other amenities. The schoolyard is also providing critical climate resilience to the neighborhood by capturing hundreds of thousands of gallons of stormwater runoff each year through green stormwater infrastructure. In New York City, the initial capital investment in schoolyards is typically made by the City, and maintenance is managed by each school's custodial staff, who receive extra funding for maintaining the enhanced playground. The custodial staff are also responsible for opening the schoolyard each day. Private funds are raised for design and the costs of TPL staff.

During the site visit, conversations focused on the role of the participatory design process that went into the schoolyard's design, schoolyard maintenance, and the importance of community buy-in for schoolyard projects.

Infrastructure re-use project: The High Line

The High Line is a historic rail track in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. After nearly 50 years of use, freight operations on the High Line ceased in the 1980s. Two neighborhood residents founded the Friends of the High Line in 1999 to advocate for the site to be re-opened as a public park. After several years of community organizing and advocacy, in 2006 New York City government re-zoned the neighborhood surrounding the High Line and established the Special West Chelsea District as part of a broader revitalization effort. This re-zoning allowed for greater density in the neighborhood in exchange for including affordable housing units. It also allowed for property owners adjacent to the High Line to transfer the right to develop their property to other areas of the District in order to preserve light and open space around the High Line. Three years later, the first section of the High Line opened to the public. Today, the High Line receives millions of visitors annually. It continues to be maintained, operated, and programmed by the Friends of the High Line. The Friends group is entirely self-funded and raises almost the entirety of the High Line's annual budget. The High Line has been lauded for its design and for its stimulation of billions of dollars in urban development. The development in the neighborhood surrounding the High Line has also been critiqued as a symbol of the "green gentrification" that can be an unintended consequence of park development.

During the site visit, conversations focused on the role of community members in driving large-scale infrastructure re-use projects, managing unanticipated consequences of large-scale park development, and the trade-offs of being a first-of-its-kind park type.

Conclusion

Policy and systems-change can play an important role in promoting park equity. But too often, cities don't have the resources, data, or support they need to move the needle. The Park Equity Accelerator program is designed to help cities implement policies and practices that can close the park equity gap across the country and provide national models that can be shared from community-to-community. This inaugural meeting of the Park Equity Accelerator cohort provided an important platform for cities to share what's working – and what barriers exist – to promote park equity. Cities need to continue to have opportunities to exchange learnings, best practices, and proven approaches for improving park equity. The insights generated from this meeting will play a key role in helping 10-Minute Walk understand what issues to prioritize. Moving forward, 10-Minute Walk will continue to be a resource for cities by gathering the evidence-base and policy roadmap of how cities can build park equity; leading trainings, educational forums, and capacity-building; and providing tailored, in-depth technical assistance.

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[1] Trust for Public Land. Parks and an Equitable Recovery. Trust for Public Land. May 27, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2023. https://www.tpl.org/parks-and-an-equitable-recovery-parkscore-report

[2] Eldridge M, Burrowes K, Spauster P. Investing in Equitable Urban Park Systems. Urban Institute. 2019. Accessed March 30, 2023.

[3] Kania J, Kramer M, Senge P. The Waters of Systems Change. FSG. 2018. Accessed June 6, 2023. https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/