# Parks and Community Power

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY

Community day on the land for trail clean up and marker installation at Bear Swamp Creek in New Jersey. © Elyse Leyenberge/ TPL Staff; COVER: © Laura Barisonzi

# Table of Contents

Parks are essential, multifaceted solutions to society's most pressing challenges, ranging from social isolation and the fragmentation of communities to the escalating effects of climate change. Parks connect people and build resilience as individuals, communities, and a nation. Yet, 1 in 3 people in the U.S., including 28 million children, don't have access to a park within a 10-minute walk of home, according to a Trust for Public Land analysis. Even where they exist, low income neighborhoods and neighborhoods with majority residents of color tend to have parks that are smaller, of lower quality, are less well-maintained, and have less programming compared with parks in higher-income neighborhoods or with majority white residents. Trust for Public Land (TPL) works hand-in-hand with communities and partners across the U.S. to close the park equity divide so that every U.S. resident has access to a quality park or greenspace within a 10-minute walk of home.

## The Park Equity Divide

Parks and green spaces are helping confront some of today's most pressing urban challenges. They offer places to play, exercise, unplug, and connect with others in our communities. Yet there is a significant disparity in who has access to available park space, and not all parks are created equitably.

Parks located in neighborhoods with majority residents of color are half the size of parks in predominantly white neighborhoods yet serve five times more people per acre, according to TPL data. Furthermore the quality of park spaces and surrounding conditions impact the extent to which communities can realize the social cohesion, improved health and wellbeing, and environmental resilience parks and green spaces support.

Our goal is to help close the park equity gap for the 100 million people—including 28 million children—who lack access to a close-to-home park or greenspace. Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk® program cultivates the civic and community environments necessary for long-term investment in park equity. We partner with cities to identify, implement, and scale strategies that create equitable access to high-quality parks. Our work includes:

- **Building capacity through peer learning and exchange.** Our forums provide a platform for city leaders, city staff, and partners to learn and connect with each other and subject matter experts. Our **Park Equity Communities of Practice** connect over 600 city stakeholders to identify and elevate leading-edge practices on crucial topics like maintenance, civic engagement, and private development.

- **Testing and accelerating action.** Through our **Park Equity Accelerator**, cities engage in year-long projects addressing root causes of inequities or leveraging high-impact opportunities for achieving park equity. We also support a wide range of parks-related needs for our 10-Minute Walk cities, ranging from data-driven decision-making to policy guidance and funding.

- **Identifying and sharing solutions.** Our research with cross-sector partners identifies promising policy solutions to close the park equity gap. From this work, we synthesize lessons learned and create actionable resources for policymakers, practitioners, and park advocates.

- **Partnering to scale impact.** Across our work, we collaborate with national and local partners to identify, test, and implement promising policies and practices. Together, we drive the park equity movement forward, scaling impact across communities.

# Park Equity Communities of Practice

Parks bring people together, but the leaders and practitioners who shape these spaces are often left siloed and disconnected from their peers. Since Fall 2021, the 10-Minute Walk® program has convened the Park Equity Communities of Practice to provide a national forum for information exchange and collaborative problem-solving across a range of high-impact issues in the field. To date, the Communities of Practice have brought together over 600 stakeholders including city officials, planners, and parks professionals from over 180 communities to participate in at least one of the eight tracks offered.

The Park Equity Communities of Practice provide:

• A diverse set of tracks each year that address pressing challenges identified by practitioners.

• A national network aimed at achieving local impact through expert presentations on best and cutting-edge practice and meaningful peer exchange.

• A platform to surface nationally-applicable lessons, inform new tools in real-time, and cultivate continued dialogue to foster action, iteration, and impact.

# Acknowledgements

# Executive Summary



Cook Park in the Vine City neighborhood of Atlanta, GA. © Alex Jackson

**P**arks serve as essential spaces where people from diverse backgrounds can come together, build connections, and strengthen their collective voice. Despite serving as public gathering places where community members can meet, collaborate, and become empowered, parks and green spaces are often overlooked as critical social infrastructure that promote cohesion and amplify community power.

Americans' sense of community is being sorely tested as people are divided by politics, economics, race, ethnicity, and ideology. Studies show that people are experiencing extreme levels of loneliness, polarization, and division, and half of American adults report feeling lonely. Despite these social and economic divides, parks remain neutral public gathering places where community members can meet, collaborate, and become empowered. Across the country, park leaders and advocates are actively fostering those connections and strengthening community power through a variety of approaches, programs, and partnerships.
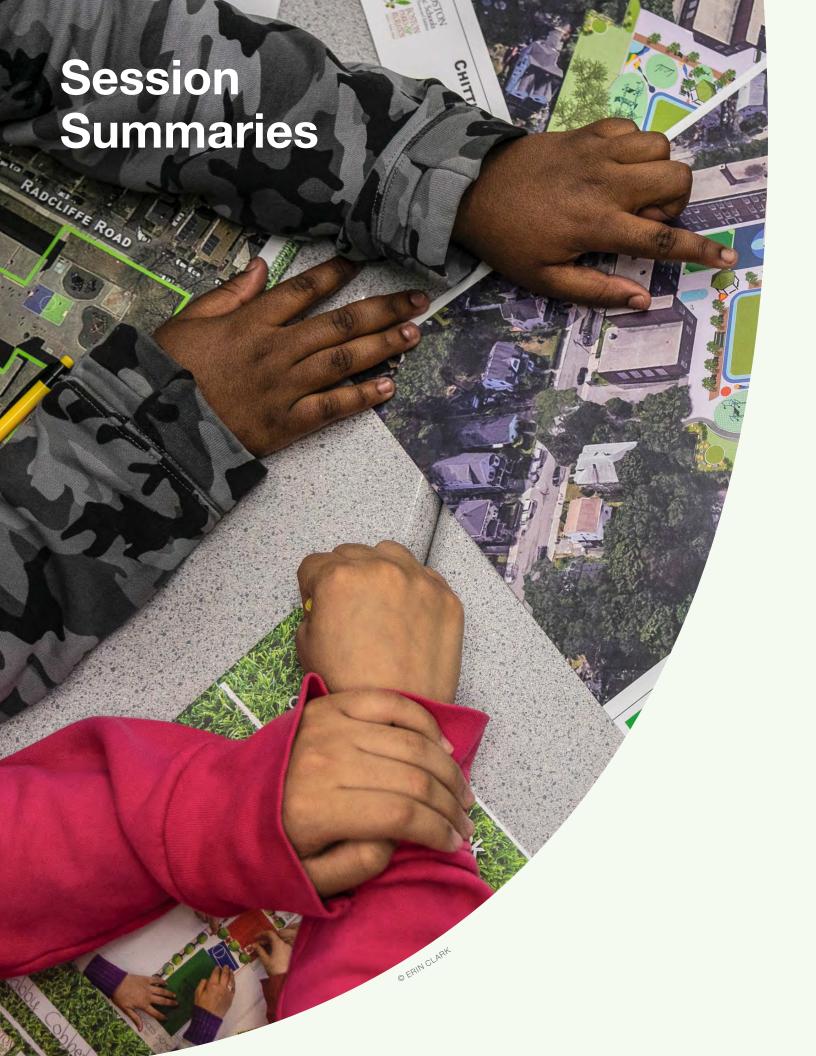
In Trust for Public Land's (TPL) 2024 release of ParkScore®, **The Power of Parks to Strengthen Community** report further defined the role of park agencies and advocates in ensuring that parks remain accessible and equitable. In this research, TPL identified how park agencies and advocates are already working towards strengthening communities and helping to bridge divides:

- According to TPL's analysis of park systems across the 100 most populous U.S. cities, residents of cities with the highest ParkScore rankings are more socially connected and engaged with their neighbors than residents who live in cities with lower-ranking park systems.

- In the top 25 ParkScore cities, there were on average 26 percent more social connections between low- and high-income individuals ("cross-group" relationships) than in lower-ranked cities. Also in those cities, people were 60 percent more likely to volunteer than those living in lower-ranked cities.

- About two-thirds of ParkScore cities are investing in community engagement by compensating residents for their input or hiring full-time community engagement staff. Park leaders are also hiring and training community organizers to create programs for green spaces to encourage social connection.

- According to the **Center for Active Design**, people who live near parks are more likely to be satisfied with their local government. In two dozen U.S. communities, those living near popular public parks reported 29 percent greater satisfaction with their parks and recreation departments, 14 percent greater satisfaction with their police, and 13 percent greater satisfaction with their mayor, compared with people not living near parks.

To better understand how community power is built and sustained in parks, Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk® program launched a Communities of Practice track focused on **Community Power: Civic Engagement for a Healthy Democracy**. This series dug into strategies and tactics that enable parks and programming to build social cohesion by providing a common ground where local relationships can develop intentionally and organically. Specifically, participants learned how parks function as more than just areas for recreation; they are integral to the fabric of civic life, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging public engagement. Over a series of five sessions, participants explored the following topics:

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| **NOVEMBER 9** | Power Mapping: How can parks play a role in nurturing a healthy democracy? |
| **JANUARY 18** | Participatory Planning: How can parks transform community vision into reality? |
| **MARCH 14** | Community Expertise: How can park agencies meaningfully compensate community members for their knowledge and work? |
| **MAY 9** | Park Stewardship: How can park organizations strengthen the capacity of friends of groups and their community? |
| **JULY 11** | Social Resilience: How can parks and programming strengthen social ties? |

Through this series, park practitioners and advocates from across the country discussed how parks are not just passive green spaces but active players in the development of strong, empowered communities. These sessions underscored the importance of viewing parks as vital components of a city's social infrastructure, and how intentional design, programming, and relationship building can help to create more just and vibrant communities. In the following report, you will find a summary of each of the session topics, six critical actions that enable park agencies and community partners to foster community power, and recommendations to implement this work locally.

# Session
# Summaries

Children smile next to seedlings in the greenhouse at the dedication of Canal Community Garden in San Rafael, CA. © Jamie Hopper

O ver the course of a year, this Community of Practice–**Community Power: Civic Engagement for a Healthy Democracy**–hosted a series of five virtual workshops that brought together 60 participants from 30 cities. Each workshop included presentations and case studies highlighting the role of parks in building community power across the United States, as well as activities and discussions designed to support participants in applying their learnings to their own contexts. Included below are summaries of each session's topic and feature presentations.

1. **Power Mapping: How can parks play a role in nurturing a healthy democracy?**

   Parks and greenspaces are often under-appreciated for their potential to drive community power. In the opening session, TPL defined community power as "the ability of people facing similar circumstances to develop, sustain, and grow an organized base of people who act together through democratic structures to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions, and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability with decision makers that change systems." Through small group discussions, participants explored how community power is defined in their local contexts and completed a Power Mapping exercise to identify how power is distributed in their communities and which groups hold decision-making authority in their cities.

2. **Participatory Planning: How can parks transform community vision into reality?**

   This session focused on key principles and best practices for participatory design. Special attention was paid to tailoring engagement goals for different phases of project development, as well as tactical support for integrating community participation into park planning efforts. The **Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)** presented on how participatory design can be executed with a range of capacities and levels of expertise, and how it can also offer opportunities to engage communities in civic processes beyond the original project.

3. **Community Expertise: How can you authentically compensate community members for their knowledge and work?**

   In this session, speakers explored a variety of approaches to—and benefits of—compensating community members for their local expertise and their time. Three speakers from parks organizations across the country presented their unique methods of compensation and shared how this work can earn trust and build community power.

   The **Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge (BREC)** presented on the stipends they're able to provide to community members for serving on their Community Advisory Committee, which collects resident input on the parish's systemwide Master Plan. Unable to provide direct stipends, **Raleigh Parks and Recreation** shared a creative solution for providing compensation to engaged community members: gift cards. The gift card program not only allows Raleigh Parks and Recreation to cultivate community and participant engagement in their recreation and programming, but it also helps to collect data on the programs of greatest interest to community members by tracking where and how people are using gift cards. Lastly, **Seattle Parks Foundation** highlighted their tiered compensation model for qualifying neighborhood partners, which provides a range of payments, and a range of associated requirements, based on the level of engagement and community expertise offered.

4. **Park Stewardship: How can park organizations strengthen the capacity of friends of groups and their community?**

   This session highlighted the efficacy of city-led investment in partnerships and outreach to strengthen the capacity of friends of groups and, in turn, their communities. Participants heard from **Baltimore Parks & Recreation**, whose G.R.O.W. Program is building capacity among friends of groups and strengthening a network of parks advocates. Following their presentation, **Friends of Herring Run Parks**, a participant and community partner in the G.R.O.W. Program, shared how this network advances capacity building for local park groups.

5. **Social Resilience: How can parks and programming strengthen social ties?**

   The final session explored the role of parks-led programming in fostering social resilience. In particular, this session focused on the multiple benefits of leveraging park resources to provide social connections to aging populations. Participants learned about **Arlington Parks and Recreation's Social 60+ Cafe**, a federally funded effort to provide nutrition, activity, and social connection for local seniors. Participants also discussed the importance of partnerships and programming in cultivating resilience among a diverse array of communities.

# Six Pillars of Community Power

Glendale Park, TX. © Jason Flowers

Over the course of the year-long series, discussions between expert speakers and participating practitioners elevated six critical actions that enable parks and park agencies to foster social capital, equitable power-building, and civic engagement:

1. **Define community power locally.** Community power refers to "a community's ability to use democratic processes to develop, sustain, and perpetuate an organized base to achieve their self-determined vision, regardless of identity or status." Community power can look different in different communities—it may manifest in a high level of effective political engagement, active civic participation such as park stewardship groups, strong turnout to public meetings, community-led programs, and community-organized initiatives such as park cleanup days. Before tapping into community power, it is critical that groups establish a collective understanding of what it means in their respective contexts. Attributes to look out for include all residents feeling heard, not just the loudest voices; the community feeling empowered to voice opinions and needs, and having strong channels to voice them through; solidarity existing between residents; community driving processes, outcomes, and governance; and residents benefiting directly from this work.

> **Community power refers to "a community's ability to use democratic processes to develop, sustain, and perpetuate an organized base to achieve their self-determined vision, regardless of identity or status."**

**Explore Further:** IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

2. **Recognize that communities already have the power.** It is increasingly necessary for citizens and neighbors to take care of each other and their community assets. Government and private sector institutions continue to relegate responsibility for service provision to individuals and nonprofits, and parks are no exception. With declining park budgets and limited capacity, groups like city agencies should strive to share their power and authority with trusted partners to maximize their impact. Park practitioners have the opportunity to lift up the power of existing and new grassroots organizations by creating tools, resources, access, and platforms for community leadership and participation.

   **Explore Further: Dick & Rick: A Visual Primer for Social Impact Design**

3. **Start from a place of genuine relationship-building.** The greatest source of potential for parks to build community power resides in their ability to be activated, stewarded, and to facilitate community engagement. However, this activation is only possible when residents feel connected to their local park spaces. To ensure community members feel empowered to engage in public spaces, take time to build relationships and partnerships before a project or program begins. Invest in researching, understanding, and responding to community needs—this investment can not only help agencies make more informed decisions in general, but it also helps to facilitate stronger relationships with local leaders.

   **Explore Further: The Common Ground Framework**

4. **Value community members' time and expertise.** Community members invest and often sacrifice time and resources to participate in government processes. Acknowledge their investment by not only taking their contributions seriously, but by providing benefits, incentives, and direct financial compensation. This exchange is a critical component of fostering meaningful, equitable relationships and directly supporting community groups and organizations.
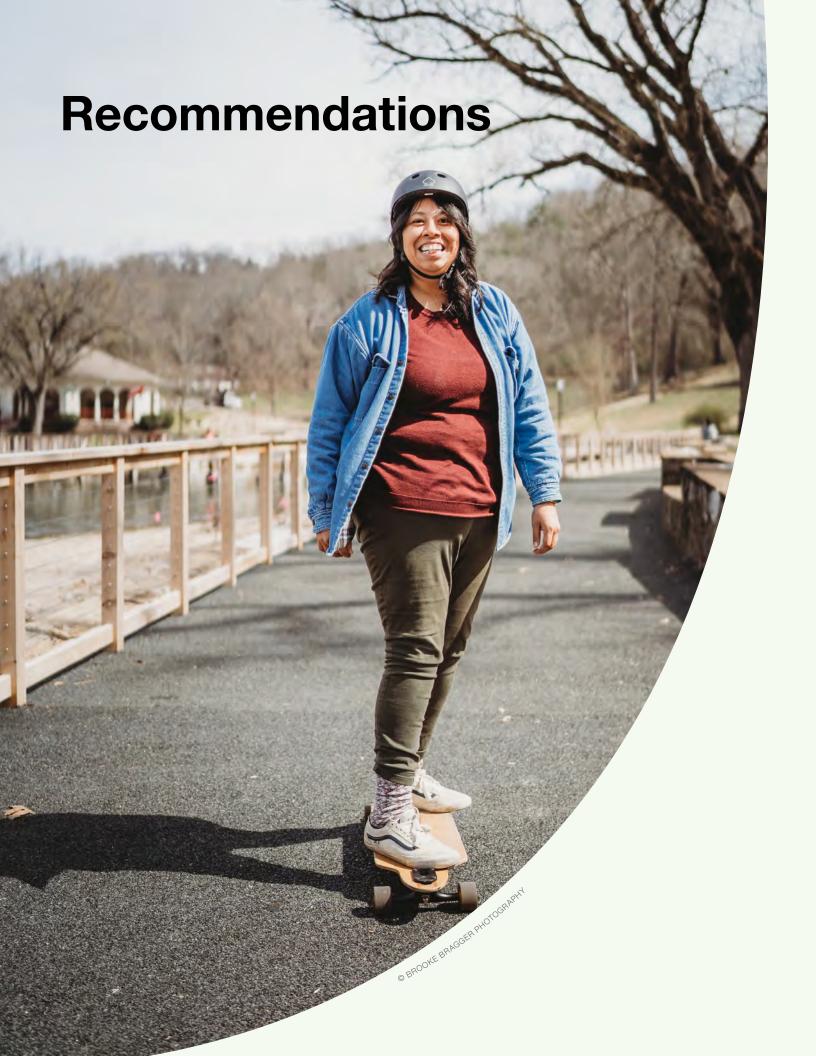
   **Explore Further: Community Compensation Guidelines | Washington Office of Equity**

5. **The City should be a partner, not an authoritative figure.** Relationships between agencies and communities should be bi-directional. Community members and groups often have the on-the-ground connections and flexibility to do things that city agencies cannot, while at the same time, municipal agencies can offer opportunities for direct input and access to decision-making power to communities. Given the mutual benefits community members and city agencies are able to provide each other, it's important that these two groups view each other as partners and supporters, with opportunities to collaborate to strengthen each other's work.

   **Explore Further: Baltimore Friends of Parks Manual**

6. **"Friends of" groups are vital community assets.** Perhaps there is no better illustration of parks-based community power than park stewardship groups, commonly referred to as "friends of" groups. That said, it is important to acknowledge that "friends of" groups, both formal and informal, cannot function as a replacement for city agencies and should not be tasked with taking on their responsibilities. When stewardship groups are managed and supported in an equitable way, they are able to complement the ongoing work of their local city agency by helping to augment city services and providing a level of hyper-local care and activation that city agencies cannot always offer.

   **Explore Further: Bloom's 2023 Park Friends' Group Handbook, Memphis, TN**

# Recommendations

Building on the six pillars of community power elevated through this Community of Practice track, the information below highlights the tactics, practices, and guiding questions participants shared throughout the series. These recommendations can be used to support parks practitioners as they work to build community power in their cities.

# Define Community Power

## STRATEGIES

- Understand and track the breakdown and influence of your city's stakeholder mix. Identify the most influential players and evaluate how local community voices stack up against other groups, such as elected officials and other sectors.

- Acknowledge that while the priorities of the community may not always align with those of parks departments and conservancies, knowing what the community's priorities are is a key step to untapping community power. Common themes among community priorities discussed by this cohort include:
  - Physical safety in and around parks, including connectivity issues and crime prevention, as well as psychological safety.
  - Access, both physical and mental.
  - Representation of diverse cultures and experiences in parks.
  - Ensuring parks agencies and organizations have the necessary internal resources and capacity.

- Understand that working with local government is a very American concept. Do not presume everyone has the skills or technical knowledge necessary to participate in civic processes, and recognize that some participants may not know they are welcome to speak for themselves or that their feedback will be taken seriously.

- Use the existing network to define community power by giving authority to community leadership committees and cross-sector partnerships to ensure development plans are equitable.

- Approach community engagement with curiosity and an open mind to create dialogue and lift up residents as the experts. This approach builds trust, where the "Decide, Announce & Defend" approach that city agencies may employ can turn people away from engaging with local governments, leaving little room to recover trust.

- Create more opportunities to collaborate with the community when they reach out to you, rather than the other way around. When the community views you as a resource, it shows they trust you.

## KEY QUESTIONS TO *DEFINE COMMUNITY POWER*:

- Does power mean that community is included in processes and/or outcomes, or that community leads these processes and outcomes?

- Who gets to decide what "community" means, and how will you co-create that definition?

- How will you foster dialogue and power in areas with less community permanence?

- How will you engage hard-to-reach communities?

- How will you navigate a deep lack of trust in city government?

- How will you manage competing or, at times, conflicting community needs and desires?

- What role do parks departments play in managing and collaborating with other sectors that end up impacting the local community (e.g., real estate development, local businesses)?

# Recognize & Build Community Power

## STRATEGIES

- Facilitate broad participation in engagement and programming opportunities by providing multilingual offerings in printed and online materials, as well as in-person events; leveraging tech (or not) to reach a broader audience when appropriate; and using both frequent and varied methods of communication. Ask people where, when, and how the best ways to meet are. Meet communities where they are instead of expecting community members to come to the city agency.

- Acknowledge that most residents do not have a design or planning background. Bridge the gap between conceptual ideas and tangible outputs by providing visual tools and using plain language that demystify confusing processes. Understand that working with local government is a very American concept. Do not presume everyone has the skills or technical knowledge necessary to participate in civic processes, and recognize that some participants may not know they are welcome to speak for themselves or that their feedback will be taken seriously.

- Ensure communication is proactive and validating, even when there is disagreement. Follow up with stakeholders regularly and do not leave questions unaddressed, even if there is not a resolution yet. Go back to the community after conversations to show how progress has been made based on their input, even if it is small.

- Embrace creativity when carrying out community engagement. Take advantage of parks' "fun" reputation to build trust and experiment with non-traditional methods of outreach and engagement.

- Employ multi-pronged efforts to meet people where they are. Try hosting pop-ups or bringing talking boards and picture boards to events that are already happening.

- Strive to always reach communities that you have not connected with yet. Identify existing community leaders and build genuine relationships and trust. Not every interaction should be transactional or outcome-oriented. Show up outside of project-specific events or meetings, even if it is not in your primary language, to get to know people. When you are in community settings (park renovation site, schools, cafes, etc.) spend time just getting to know the community without an agenda. The goal should be to listen and learn, not immediate action.

## KEY QUESTIONS TO *BUILD COMMUNITY POWER*:

- How will you facilitate the transfer of power and control from government agencies to the community? What does that look like in your work?

- How will you make the case to leadership to move beyond accepted practices for community engagement and towards participatory design? What metrics, tools, or resources do you need?

- How will you prevent the same voices from dominating the community input and civic process, and look for opportunities to broaden participation to include other perspectives?

- How will you balance a focus on quantitative data with the need to engage community members through more qualitative and open-ended discussions?

- How will you manage expectations from both leaders and community members throughout the project?

# Value Community Power

**STRATEGIES**

- Explore what options are available to provide funds or other types of compensation. Most agencies are limited in their ability to institutionalize a direct compensation process and very few resources exist to help agency staff move their departments in this direction. Start working around the red tape by cultivating internal buy-in, especially from HR and legal teams.

- Understand what the community's needs and values are, then explore what your agency is able to accomplish. Try to meet the needs to the best of your ability and set clear expectations on what the agency can and cannot do.

- Communicate and set expectations for compensation with community members to ensure an equitable and transparent process. Where possible, a spectrum of compensation options based on the role and amount of work they're doing. Experiment with a tiered model, which may allow agencies and organizations to be more nimble and more easily engage voices that have not been historically included in the process, to establish a clear, transparent criteria for compensation. In some cases, agencies may establish contracts that outline clear parameters for compensated engagement.

- When working in neighborhoods with a lack of resources and/or a history of disinvestment and neglect, recognize that those community members may need funds more urgently than your typical consultants or other contract workers. Prioritize fast and efficient payment to reduce wait time and ensure that community members receive funds in a timely manner.

- Think beyond monetary payment for participation and consider support services that may reduce barriers to connecting with community members: transportation reimbursement, childcare, food, varied program times, translation, ADA accessibility, and skill-building trainings, etc.

- Do not just ask for input and expertise—offer professional development, trainings, and learning opportunities for engaged community members. Provide clear economic pathways, according to prevailing wages, for people who want to get more involved in their parks.

- Back your process with policy to ensure consistency and accountability. Where they exist, statewide stipend policies may provide guidelines and/or accountability for compensating community engagement.

- Engaging residents through a foundation or community partner offers an alternative input mechanism for connecting with and/or compensating individuals who are resistant or unable to engage directly with the City.

**KEY QUESTIONS TO *VALUE COMMUNITY POWER*:**

- How will you communicate the value of community participation to stakeholders?

- What policies or systems will you need in order to create a more transparent, equitable compensation model?

- How will you measure and track the benefits and impact of community compensation?

- Beyond payment, how will you recognize and compensate the value of resident participation?

# Partner for Community Power

## STRATEGIES

- Bring friends groups together to maximize how information and resources are shared. Provide a networking space for groups to learn from and connect with each other.

- Create a tiered system to address the different needs of different groups. Established conservancies and nonprofits might be ready for different kinds of partnership than budding informal neighborhood groups. Allow for growth through a progressive system of achievement.

- Establish a clear understanding of the "ceiling" and "floor" of what an agency can provide to stewardship groups, as well as what gaps agencies and friends of groups can help fill for one another.

- Keep processes for becoming a park partner and/or steward simple, relatively easy, and as minimally restrictive as possible.

- Define the "enabling conditions'' that support an equitable community stewardship network. Enabling conditions may include a vision, investment, political will, and support from leadership; dedicated capacity for community engagement and outreach; and positive relationships with friends groups, as well as their willingness to collaborate.

- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for both the city agency and the partner. These expectations should include measurable outcomes and accountability for both parties.

- Be able to demonstrate the benefits of partnerships to stakeholders—measure and report on the number of projects, engagement, volunteer hours and value, events held, funds raised, and more.

- Engage local stewardship groups regarding park design and decision-making from the start of a project in order to foster the sense of ownership necessary for long-term stewardship..

- City agencies should focus on internal engagement as much as external engagement. For example, share learnings from community engagement efforts across divisions.

- Consider providing fiscal sponsorship, rather than requiring nonprofit status of partners, which may significantly lower barriers to participation and stewardship.

- Consider working with elected officials and/or other city agencies to help reach more communities. Garnering political will is critical to moving work forward.

## KEY QUESTIONS TO *BUILD PARTNERSHIPS FOR COMMUNITY POWER*:

- How will you make the case to invest city resources into capacity building for friends of groups, especially to leaders who may not understand the value or be bought in?

- How will you manage the frequent turnover often associated with friends groups?

- Formal partnerships with cities often have high barriers to participation, including insurance requirements, nonprofit status requirements, and limiting agreements. How can cities lower these barriers for friends groups and community stewards?

# Resources for the Community of Practice

Interested in learning more about building community power and creating healthier, more resilient communities through parks? Check out our resources below.

## Trust for Public Land

We create parks and protect public land where they're needed most so that everyone will have access to the benefits and joys of the outdoors for generations to come.

## The 10-Minute Walk® Program

The 10-Minute Walk Program helps cities expand access and green spaces for everyone.

## The Land and People Lab

The Land and People Lab is TPL's "think and do" tank that advances TPL's work through the power of evidence.

## Community of Practice Sessions and Recordings

Find and download resources by track.

## Common Ground Framework

The Common Ground Framework offers an evidence-based community engagement model, along with more than 50 recommended strategies for planning, programming, and design activities that are proven to help communities thrive.

# TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND®

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

**tpl.org**