



TRUST FOR
PUBLIC
LAND®

The State of Park System Operations and Maintenance

**EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES AND
CHALLENGES TO CREATE BETTER PARKS**



Tree planting event, Cleveland, OH. © Photographer; COVER: Richmond High School students plant trees on the outskirts of Kennedy Park. © Terray Sylvester

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10-Minute Walk

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

This report builds on insights shared through the 2023–2024 Park Equity Communities of Practice Park Operations and Maintenance Track, which included 60 stakeholders from 30 cities. We thank them all for their insights, contributions, and time shared throughout this year-long training and peer learning program. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented here, as well as any errors, are those of the Trust for Public Land.

We also thank the organizations that supplied information via research, reporting, and one on one interviews including the following: Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation, Boston Parks and Recreation Department, Buffalo Olmsted Park Conservancy, Cincinnati Parks Department, Dallas Parks and Recreation, Minneapolis Park Board, Piedmont Park Conservancy (Atlanta), Plano Parks and Recreation (TX), San Francisco Recreation and Parks, Seattle Parks and Recreation, The Trail Conservancy (Austin), and Washington DC Department of Parks and Recreation.

Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk® program developed this report as part of the effort to help cities create parks that drive equitable, healthy and thriving communities. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented here, as well as any errors, are those of the Trust for Public Land.

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Publication date: March 2025

Executive Summary



Children help paint a bench at the volunteer work day at the Marva Bannerman Park Fitness Zone area in Miami, FL.
© Allana Wesley White

High quality, close-to-home parks and greenspaces are vital to community health, resilience, and social cohesion. But there is a significant disparity in who has access to parks, and not all parks are created equitably. Present-day inequities in park space and outdoor access are often the result of a long history of policy decisions, including redlining and racially restrictive covenants, that supported disinvestment of neighborhoods based largely on the racial makeup of residents. Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk® program cultivates the civic and community environments necessary to address these systemic challenges and to spur long-term investment in park equity. We partner with cities to identify, implement, and scale strategies that create equitable access to clean, safe, and well-maintained parks.

The maintenance of parks is essential to providing safe, usable, and aesthetically pleasing areas for residents and visitors. A 2016 study on inequities in access to urban parks found that low socioeconomic and ethnic minority people have access to fewer acres of parks, fewer acres of parks per person, and to parks with lower quality, maintenance, and safety than more privileged people.¹ For this reason, the 10-Minute Walk® program investigates the challenges, policies and standards in city governments and parks departments that ensure that all municipal parks are well maintained, inviting, and accessible.

¹ Rigolon A. A complex landscape of inequity in access to urban parks: A literature review. *Landsc Urban Plan.* 2016;153:160-169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2016.05.017>.

Through the Park Equity Communities of Practice, a year-long series of virtual convenings, we've explored the challenges and opportunities of city park system operations and maintenance alongside park practitioners across the country. That exploration has been supplemented with research into a select group of public and nonprofit park organizations to investigate best practices for park system operations and maintenance.

In this report, we identified challenges in park system operations and maintenance and will examine the following:

STATE OF THE FIELD: Expand upon the detailed information that Trust for Public Land (TPL), other professional associations, and academic researchers produce on park system operations and maintenance via extensive surveys, research, and reporting through annual publications like TPL City Park Facts, TPL ParkScore® Index, and the NRPA Annual Agency Performance Review.

FUNDING FOR PUBLIC PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES: Report on the range of public park system funding models, including public funding, private (nonprofit) funding, and in-kind donations, including services, supplies, and volunteering.

ALTERNATIVE MANAGEMENT ENTITIES: Highlight how partnerships can greatly improve the efficacy of park system operations and maintenance, at times raising enough funds to supplement city park budgets.

PARK SYSTEM OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE POLICIES: Identify promising actions and programs implemented by different agencies that have potential to improve park system operations and maintenance in other cities, including insights on policies, standards, and costs, offering examples and best practices from a range of public and nonprofit park and recreation agencies.

MEASURING AND REPORTING PERFORMANCE: Illustrate how cities are tracking and recording their park system operations and maintenance work through evaluations and assessments using both asset management systems and scoring systems.

The key takeaways from our research and interviews show a growing number of public park systems fully engaged in a more systematized approach to planning for, tracking, and evaluating their park system operations and maintenance practices. Their evolving practices provide paths forward for park stewardship in cities across the U.S.

Introduction



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In 2023–2024, Trust for Public Land’s 10-Minute Walk® program organized five sessions of the Park Equity Communities of Practice focused on the challenges of public park system operations and maintenance. Engaging with practitioners from cities across the United States, we heard that, while programming and capital improvements are critical, they generally get more attention than the day-to-day work that keeps parks going. The primary challenge for our public parks is funding for all aspects of park system operations and maintenance.

Through our research, interviews, and discussions during the Communities of Practice sessions, we’ve identified replicable and adaptable practices for park system operations and maintenance. This report will show how park and recreation agencies are tackling some of the biggest challenges related to operations and maintenance, including management models, funding sources, policies, and assessments and tracking. While this report will not be the last word on the subject, we hope that it’s the start of continued discussion about great examples, emerging best practices, and lessons learned in the field.

This research builds on decades of work done by local parks departments that send critical data and insights to Trust for Public Land, the National Recreation and Parks Association, Penn State University, and Texas A&M University. We now have over a decade of data on public park systems and how they are funded. This is in stark contrast to the late 1990s, when there was little knowledge of how local park systems were operated and maintained. Today through [ParkScore® Index](#), the national gold-standard comparison of park systems across the 100 most populous cities in the U.S., and [ParkServe®](#), our database that reveals park access levels for every urban city and town across the country and Puerto Rico, we have powerful tools to provide communities and decision makers with the information they need to help close the park equity gap.²

What are park system operations and maintenance in parks?

This report focuses on the day in, day out care of public spaces called “park system operations and maintenance,” usually referred to as “O&M.” This set of responsibilities ranges widely from daily tasks such as trash collection, servicing of restrooms, and general cleaning to the upkeep of the living elements of a park, ranging from trees and lawns to gardens and natural wild areas. The work in operations and maintenance never ends and can often be forgotten or overlooked as unimportant. This trend is consistent with broader societal challenges around the operations and maintenance and care of public assets like streets, housing, schools, or public transportation systems. On the whole, operations and maintenance are an underappreciated aspect of both public and private life.

Ground-truthing Approaches and Challenges to Park System Operations and Maintenance

In order to fully explore the challenges of park system operations and maintenance, we enlisted the help of a range of practitioners working for public park and recreation agencies and alternative management entities by:

- Developing a set of research questions that looked at organizational models, including partners for funding and management, funding sources and costs, policies, standards, practices, and reporting methods.
- Hosting a series of five virtual discussions, featuring expert speakers and case studies discussing maintenance standards and assessments, traditional and alternative funding models, maintenance policies and standards, and best practices for maintenance staff, capacity, and partnerships.

2 ParkScore® Index and ParkServe® have surveyed and cataloged ~80% of the population of the U.S. and their walking distance (one-half mile or 10 minutes) to a park.

- Interviewing park and recreation agencies and nonprofits from 11 cities to explore the topics related to challenges in funding operations and maintenance, staff retention, planning for operations and maintenance for new and revitalized facilities, the changing roles that partnerships play, the refining of maintenance standards, and how goal setting for maintenance standards and measuring success against those standards are evolving processes.
- Researching a sample of city park systems to compare the best practices and challenges that we learned about in interviews and our online discussions.

Report Objectives

This report aims to foster a deeper understanding of best practices in park system operations and maintenance for park practitioners and advocates. Through our research, interviews, and Communities of Practice workshops, we identified the following common themes and challenges:

FUNDING AND STAFFING FOR PUBLIC PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES: Regular operations and maintenance is typically the biggest expense for public park and recreation agencies, when compared to funds dedicated to capital and programming. Within this expense, staffing is the biggest cost and also greatest challenge. In a strong hiring economy, met with the high cost of living and wave of retirements among senior staff, retaining staffing is one of the most critical issues for agencies.

GROWING PRESENCE OF ALTERNATIVE MANAGEMENT ENTITIES: Nonprofit partners can make a substantial difference in supplementing underfunded park system operations and maintenance budgets. The use of partnerships to support operations and maintenance varies by city and partner institution. While the bulk of cities have partnerships with park nonprofits and park friends groups, partnerships with universities, healthcare organizations and business improvement districts (BIDs) are growing in number. All partnerships can positively impact operations and maintenance.

TOOLS TO SET PRIORITIES FOR PARK SYSTEM OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE POLICIES: An increasing number of city park systems have a strong and growing sense of the number of amenities and improvements in their parks, as well as their general conditions through inspection and tracking systems. A field-wide best practice is to implement a centralized asset management system, which gives agencies the ability to better diagnose maintenance challenges and anticipate capital needs.

STANDARDS FOR PARK SYSTEM OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE SERVICE LEVELS AND PERFORMANCE: More city park systems have reworked their list of priority parks for maintenance and operations based on increased usage of specific parks, age and condition of amenities, community input, and a comprehensive assessment of the needs of all parks, large and small, across their systems. Prioritization of operations and maintenance standards and practices varies by park system but continues to grow in sophistication, based on the above mentioned inputs, but also on available resources.

Funding for Public Park and Recreation Agencies



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Key Insights

Regular park system operations and maintenance is the biggest expense for public park and recreation agencies.

- The majority of park investments is from public agencies: 93% in the fiscal year 2023.
- City park and recreation agencies typically make up less than 2 percent of a city's budget.
- Within the park system operations and maintenance budget, 54% of operating budgets are for personnel (or staff) expenditures.
- Most elected officials see parks as a “nice to have” versus an essential city service.

Traditional Models

Public park agencies have operating and capital budgets. An operating budget includes park maintenance, programming, staffing and administration, engagement, among other activities. According to ParkScore® Index 2024 and [NRPA's 2024 Annual Agency Performance Review](#), an operating budget is typically one-third to one-half of a total parks budget, in which staff costs make up about 49 percent, while tools and supplies consume another 25 percent.

In the 2024 City Park Facts, TPL found that **approximately 93 percent of all public parks investment, including operations and maintenance, is spent by public sources**. Nearly all operating funds for public park and recreation agencies comes from a city's general fund, which funds a variety of a majority of city departments. Usually, any fees collected by agencies for parking, facility or event rentals, summer or vacation camps, or any other programming also go into the general fund. Additional funding may come from a property tax, sales tax, and other special assessments (such as a business improvement district) levied by local governments.

For capital projects, public park systems often draw on revenue from general revenue bonds, impact fees, and parkland dedication fees. These funds are restricted to capital improvements, such as land acquisition and park improvements, and cannot be used for programming, operations, or maintenance.

As a result, during the annual city budgeting cycles, public park and recreation agencies must compete for operations and maintenance funding with all other departments that receive revenue from the general fund. This includes everything from public safety (fire, police, EMS, public hospitals) to education to libraries, transportation, public works, and public health departments. Funds that come from public bond elections, sales tax dedications or via impact fees are restricted for use in capital projects and are carefully managed to ensure that they are spent accordingly. The competition for general fund dollars is tough and every city must face it every year. Since the early 2000s, a greater percentage of city budgets has been devoted to education and public safety, as well as the many fixed costs (retirement plans, debt, etc.) that cities pay. Most city park departments struggle to get to 1 percent of an annual city's budget.³

3 NRPA: <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2017/october/what-drives-public-officials-budget-priorities/>.

The remaining 7 percent of investment, according to 2024 City Park Facts, comes from nonprofit partnerships, primarily park foundations and conservancies.⁴ **Less than 2 percent of nonprofit contributions comes from volunteer hours, pro-bono professional services, and the donations of supplies.**

The already limited support for parks and recreation tends to become more challenging when economic fortunes dip. Studies from NRPA and Penn State University have shown that historically parks, libraries, and public health are historically among the first budgets to be cut during economic downturns and the last to be restored when economic trends improve.⁵

A big reason for the struggle for funding is because park systems are seen by political leaders in most cities as a “nice to have” versus an essential service^{6,7}. Although the pandemic introduced completely new ways to look at parks and open spaces, the many known benefits of parks were not enough to prevent current cuts to their maintenance. This has been borne out in studies conducted by NRPA in conjunction with Penn State University in the past seven years.⁸

Parks and the Lingering Effects of the Pandemic

Investment from park nonprofits has risen from 6–7 percent since 2015, when TPL started to track this data as part of its annual ParkScore® Index. This increase may be despite, or perhaps because of, the COVID-19 pandemic, which put parks and other public spaces into focus in the eyes of many people across the United States. While some cities saw drops in downtown park visitation, neighborhood parks, trail systems, and natural areas saw huge increases in visitation.⁹ Public park and recreation agencies took on additional work during the pandemic as well including running day-care for city workers’ children, emergency food distribution, running shelters for the unhoused, and later opening facilities for vaccine distribution.¹⁰ Though city parks and recreation departments and associated park nonprofits proved to be adept at shifting resources to accommodate pressing needs, including emergency shelter, food distribution, and educating park users about distancing and hygiene, budgets did not increase to support these additional activities.

Other Sources of Public Funding

Given the challenges of traditional funding models, there are several alternatives that public park and recreation agencies are using to obtain increases in funding.

First, specific sources of earned income can be set aside for specific improvements. Sales from food and drink concessions or recreation equipment concessions can be dedicated to specific park or feature improvements. For

4 2024 City Park Facts: <https://www.tpl.org/city-park-facts>.

5 Studies performed by Penn State University and the National Recreation and Parks Association, example: <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2018/february/the-great-recessions-profound-impact-on-parks-and-recreation/>.

6 Boston University Initiative on Cities: 2020 Menino Survey of Mayors Report on Urban Parks and the Public Realm – <https://www.bu.edu/ioc/2021/03/31/2020-menino-survey-parks/>.

7 NRPA – Local Government Officials’ Perceptions of Parks and Recreation – <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/local-government-officials-perceptions-of-parks-and-recreation/>.

8 NRPA: <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2018/february/the-great-recessions-profound-impact-on-parks-and-recreation/>.

9 NRPA: <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2021/december/the-value-of-play-playgrounds-and-parks-during-the-pandemic/>.

10 TPL Parks and an Equitable Recovery: <https://www.tpl.org/parks-and-an-equitable-recovery-parkscore-report>.

example, food and drink revenues can be used for enhanced maintenance of areas where those concessions are located. Examples include seating, tables, shade, lighting, restrooms, and parking.

Revenues from recreation equipment, including the rental of canoes, kayaks, stand-up paddleboards, scooters, and bicycles can be put toward the addition of bike racks, docks and improved water access, fishing piers, rehabilitation of shorelines, or more general park amenities like seating, tables, shade, lighting, restrooms, and parking.

Usually, all forms of concession revenue collected by city parks departments go back into the general fund. However, taking a page from nonprofit park partnerships, some cities have allowed concessions in specific parks to be held and allocated for either maintenance or improvement projects in that park. Usually, such approval must come from the mayor and city council, depending on the specific structure of local government.

In addition, more parks are shifting parking lots to an on-demand fee system based on real-time capacity and demand. When users pay parking fees through these mobile apps or smart meters, a percentage of their fee goes toward park maintenance while their balance goes toward the costs of providing the parking apps and meters. This mirrors paid parking systems in popular shopping districts in cities and for mass transit. A system like this has been in use in Zilker Park in Austin TX, where a percentage of the revenue is reserved for operations and maintenance costs for roads, sidewalks, and parking spaces.

Another opportunity to carve out operations and maintenance funding is evident in a growing number of public golf courses. Beginning in the early 2000s, hundreds of private golf courses closed in cities across the U.S. due to an oversupply of courses and higher than expected operations and maintenance costs.¹¹ Public golf courses saw pressures ease a bit due to private closures, but expenses, especially ongoing care, continued to rise.

Golf facilities got an early boost in the summer of 2020, when they were amongst the first public park facilities to reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² Golf courses have continued to see an uptick in usage since then thanks to an increase in demand spread amongst fewer courses.

To cover the never-shrinking costs of operations and maintenance, as well as capital repair, a growing number of city park systems, like [Austin](#) and [San Diego](#), have converted their golf courses into what is called a “municipal enterprise fund.” In essence, the entity, once established by the Mayor or city council, becomes a stand-alone profit and loss center. This means that a golf course must bring in enough revenue to cover costs to break even. Similar funds for city-owned parking districts or public convention centers have existed for many years.

While there has been good progress in some cities towards making golf courses self-sustaining, most public golf courses still rely on additional public funds, especially for deferred capital improvement and rehabilitation costs, to break even. However, they are seeing increased usage and associated growth in revenue. Cities, such as Austin, now offer an [annual membership](#)¹³ with reduced rates for green fees and golf cart rentals. Costs vary from standard (\$1,200 per year) to gold (\$2,400 per year) with separate junior and summer memberships. Non-resident costs are slightly higher. Buffalo Olmsted Park Conservancy noted that their golf courses are their biggest source of earned revenue.

11 NRPA: <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2020/july/implications-of-the-rise-and-decline-of-golf/>.

12 CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/03/us/golf-surges-during-the-pandemic-wtrnd/index.html>.

13 Austin isn't alone, even the public golf course in my Boston suburban city has weekday (Mon–Thu) and weekend (Fri–Sun) golf memberships at our public course.

Alternative Management Entities



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Key Insights

Nonprofit partners can make a substantial difference in supplementing underfunded park operations and maintenance budgets.

- 230 park nonprofits raised and invested \$806 million in fiscal year 2023 in the 100 largest U.S. cities according to TPL's ParkScore® Index.
- The three most common nonprofits are park conservancies, business improvement districts (BIDs) and a combination BID/conservancy model.

The bulk of funding for public park systems is public money. However, a small but growing group of nonprofit organizations are increasingly partnering with public park and recreation agencies to help with programming, operations, and capital improvements. In the 100 largest cities in the U.S., 230 park nonprofits raised \$801 million—or 7 percent of parks budgets—in the most recent fiscal year.¹⁴ That funding from nonprofits is making a huge difference in cities that have historically had smaller park budgets.

To illustrate this point, Table 1 shows the 15 cities with the highest overall park spending per capita according to the City Park Facts for fiscal year 2023, along with their local park nonprofit spending. Only 5 out of the 15 cities listed have similarly high-ranking nonprofit funding.

Table 1: Cities with Highest Spending Per Capita (including monetized volunteers)

| City | Total Spending per capita | Total Spending Rank per capita | Nonprofit Spending per capita | Nonprofit Spending Rank per capita |
|---------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Irvine | \$1,213 | 1 | — | — |
| San Francisco | \$678 | 2 | \$21 | 15 |
| Washington DC | \$539 | 3 | \$28 | 13 |
| Seattle | \$423 | 4 | \$20 | 12 |
| Minneapolis | \$334 | 5 | \$8 | 31 |
| Arlington, VA | \$290 | 5 | — | — |
| Portland, OR | \$278 | 7 | \$1 | 45 |
| Toledo | \$269 | 8 | \$2 | 41 |
| Atlanta | \$267 | 9 | \$64 | 2 |
| St. Paul | \$255 | 10 | \$1 | 38 |
| Denver | \$230 | 15 | \$4 | 29 |
| New York | \$228 | 12 | \$30 | 11 |
| Kansas City | \$228 | 13 | >\$1 | 52 |
| Boise | \$223 | 14 | — | — |
| St Petersburg | \$222 | 15 | — | — |

Source: 2024 City Park Facts

14 2024 City Park Facts: <https://www.tpl.org/city-park-facts>.



Newark, NJ. © Nana Taimour

Table 2 shows the top 15 cities by nonprofit spending for fiscal year 2023. While a lot of the nonprofit funding is for capital projects, many cities, like Houston, Atlanta, Boston, Austin, and Detroit have strong partnerships that operate and maintain a range of parks daily.

Table 2: Cities with Highest Nonprofit Spending Per Capita

| City | Total Park Spending | Total Nonprofit Spending | Rank, Total Nonprofit Spending | Nonprofit Spending, per capita |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| New York | \$1.98 B | \$262.7 M | 1 | \$30 |
| Houston | \$302.9 M | \$115.4 M | 2 | \$50 |
| Dallas | \$201.1 M | \$49.4 M | 3 | \$38 |
| Philadelphia | \$174.4 M | \$40.9 M | 4 | \$25 |
| Atlanta | \$138.4 M | \$35.6 M | 5 | \$64 |
| Memphis | \$121.9 M | \$32.4 M | 6 | \$52 |
| Boston | \$118.2 M | \$32.5 M | 7 | \$44 |
| Austin | \$204.7 M | \$28.8 M | 8 | \$28 |
| Detroit | \$54.5 M | \$22.2 M | 9 | \$34 |
| St. Louis | \$40.6 M | \$21.3 M | 10 | \$72 |
| San Francisco | \$598.5 M | \$20.1 M | 11 | \$21 |
| Washington DC | \$376.8 M | \$20 M | 12 | \$28 |
| Seattle | \$337.6 M | \$15.4 M | 13 | \$20 |
| Tulsa | \$28.5 M | \$12.6 M | 14 | \$30 |
| Buffalo | \$28.9 M | \$11.2 M | 15 | \$39 |

Source: 2024 City Park Facts

While nonprofit funding is not a cure for underfunded park systems, it can be a key supplement.

There are six different types of nonprofit parks partnerships operating in U.S. cities, with the first three being more common and the second three less common:

The most common:

- A **park conservancy or park foundation** (*This is the most common, naming is the sole difference.*)
 - Can be focused citywide or on a specific park or district containing parks. Often they support an array of formal or informal “friends of” groups.
 - Raises private funds from individuals, grant-making organizations, and/or from earned income.
 - Offers programming, facilitates volunteerism, and may support advocacy.
 - Park conservancies and foundations may include formalized “friends of” groups working in specific public parks. “Friends of” groups can grow into standard alone park conservancies.
- A **business improvement district (BID)**
 - Established by city legislation for a specific district.
 - Property tax or sales tax surcharge collected by the local government and allocated to the organization.
 - Focuses on enhanced maintenance of a district, small capital improvements, and programming.
- A **combination** of a BID and parks conservancy/foundation
 - Can use income from both nonprofit and BID, subject to restrictions.
 - Often has separate boards of directors and IRS codes, but shares staff and resources.

The less common include:

- A **community development corporation (CDC)** (e.g., New York City, Boston, Washington DC, many others)
- A **park development corporation** (e.g., New York City)
- A **public benefit corporation** (e.g., New York City, Tulsa, others)
- A **combination of several of the above**, such as a BID, parks conservancy, public benefit corporation or other institution.

Non-traditional park partnerships work in collaboration with public agencies in most cases. While a few of the most well-known nonprofit park agencies, such as Central Park Conservancy, by and large manage entire parks, this is the exception to the rule. Most park-specific nonprofits work as partners to public park agencies, with each organization tackling specific aspects of operating the park in a collaborative way. This path remains a great opportunity for many city park systems.

Park System Operations and Maintenance Policies



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Key Insights

An increasing number of city park systems have a strong and growing sense of the number of amenities and improvements in their parks and their general condition through inspection and tracking systems.

- A strong asset management system is a field-wide best practice.
- Operations and maintenance standards are created and revised by public park and recreation agencies and adjusted based on amenities, seasonal needs, and specific amenity requirements.
- Usage, as well as age and condition of park amenities, community input, and balancing the needs of the entire park system, are drivers in prioritizing regular maintenance.

Public park maintenance policies are adopted by local elected officials and found in local plans and ordinances. These policies typically call for a public park and recreation agency to maintain a detailed inventory of park assets and amenities and a transparent plan for prioritizing improvements to keep parks clean, safe, and operating efficiently. Additionally, if there are protected natural resources present, these policies may direct the park and recreation agency to safeguard them and protect them from harm as part of regular upkeep. Maintenance policies are typically accompanied by park system operations and maintenance plans and procedures which establish standards and rules for city agencies tasked with managing parks and open spaces, ensuring these areas effectively serve the community over the long term.

We found in our research that public park system operations and maintenance plans are driven by a range of factors, including increased usage of specific parks, age and condition of park amenities, community input, and always working to balance the needs of all parks, both small and large, across a given public park system. Further, adherence to safety standards for park amenities, equipment, and features, drawing on local, state, and federal regulations, with a specific emphasis on compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and accepted standards for safety inspections and regular testing, underpins all plans. For example, the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA)¹⁵ and individual state recreation and park associations provide standards, training, certification, and ongoing research to their member organizations for regular inspections of play equipment, spraygrounds, and swimming pools. Local and state regulations guide the testing of water in spraygrounds and swimming pools.

Then, there are maintenance standards laid out by the individual public park and recreation agencies that determine the scope of care required and guide everything from frequency of visits, to trash removal, and irrigation of lawns and planted areas.

Asset management, conditions, and tracking. One of the biggest challenges facing public park and recreation agencies is sufficient knowledge of “the state of good repair” of their parks. Operations and maintenance staff are increasingly conducting regular visits and recording observed issues to help their agencies understand and track the condition of parks and their assets and amenities. Through the use of phone- and tablet-based applications, park staff working in operations and maintenance, planning, and specialized departments like forestry, can submit updates on the condition of an individual tree, drinking fountain, or playscape to a centralized asset management system. This is a major change that has been gradually adopted by public park and recreation agencies over the past decade and has given them the ability to better determine upcoming capital needs, as well as potentially big maintenance issues. Boston,

15 NRPA Certifications programs, including certification, operator, and professional accreditation programs are here: <https://www.nrpa.org/certification/>.

Plano, Seattle, Minneapolis, and San Francisco are among the cities with detailed park asset management systems who are using such data to rework operations and maintenance plans.

The impact of these asset management systems on park forestry is a prime example. One park may have a number of mature trees of the same age or same species, which may increase the vulnerability of that park’s canopy to drought or excessive rainfall—fueled by climate change—or its susceptibility to an invasive species, like the spotted lanternfly. Asset management systems can help identify what and where future work, like soil improvements, tree removal, or tree treatment, is needed to support a healthy canopy.

Park system operations and maintenance standards. Standards can be defined as how often a given task or set of tasks is performed. Table 3, below, highlights the common approaches or levels to operations and maintenance care below. We also provide expanded descriptions of each standard.

Table 3: Common levels of park system operations and maintenance.

| Type | Includes | Frequency | Staff Requirements |
|--|--|--|--|
| Primary upkeep | Trash removal, general cleaning, note issues | Daily | O&M Staff |
| Mowing, Trimming | Mowing of lawns, trimming and clean-up of lawns and planting beds | Weekly, increasingly every 10 to 14 days | O&M Staff or Dedicated Crew |
| Seasonal Tasks | Mulching, leaf removal, snow and ice treatment and removal, as applicable / Other startup / shutdown tasks for aquatics, restrooms | Seasonally, as needed or in the case of severe weather | O&M staff or gardeners handle landscape tasks, plumbers / electricians handle aquatics and restroom tasks. |
| Trees / Arboriculture | Tree planting, trimming, removal, treatments | As needed | Arborists, Trained tree care technicians |
| Equipment / Amenities Safety Inspections | Playscapes, spray grounds, swimming pools | Varies from seasonally to weekly, depending on state and local regulations | Play equipment safety inspectors, aquatics specialists |
| Emergency Response | Clean up following severe storms, drought, fire, etc. | As needed due to circumstances | Generally, all hands on deck situation |

The primary standard for operations and maintenance staff is for the daily servicing of a park, which focuses on trash removal, general cleaning including restrooms, tables and chairs, paths and sidewalks, and inspection for any issues that need to be addressed by specialists, such as a fallen tree, a broken pipe, or malfunctioning irrigation. Daily service is seen as the gold standard for park operations and maintenance, with the goal that all parks should be visited every day to ensure the basics are handled.

The second set of standards is around mowing, trimming, and any clean-up for parks with lawn or turf areas. Historically, mowing has been done once a week (every seven days) and, given that most parks have lawn areas, most parks saw that weekly visit. Mowing frequencies are increasingly moving from every seven days to every ten to fourteen days, depending on rate of lawn growth, environmental factors (wet or dry growing seasons), and specific

park lawn usage. Mowing is increasingly being performed by dedicated mowing crews rather than by daily service staff. We should also note that dedicated athletic fields often have specific needs and require more frequent attention for irrigation systems, fertilization, field markings, and detailed mowing.

A third standard covers more seasonal tasks, such as mulching trees and planted areas, leaf clean-up and removal, and snow and ice treatment and removal. Other seasonal start-up and shutdown tasks include swimming pool, sprayground, drinking fountain, and restroom maintenance. These tasks are handled by a combination of operations and maintenance staff working with more specialized staff, including arborists, horticulturists, plumbers, and inspectors, depending on the tasks at hand. Tasks in this category are driven by need or work order, so the performance goals depend on demand and availability of qualified staff to tackle them.

A fourth standard focuses on the care of trees in parks and along city streets (trees located in the public rights-of-way). Given the specialized nature of the work and the training and equipment required, dedicated crews of certified arborists keep track of tree inventories and make assessments for planting, pruning, and removal. It is often the case that there are more trees to be planted, pruned, or removed than staff to quickly address such tasks, so community requests, regular inspections, and safety hazards are all factors in prioritizing when specific issues are addressed.

A fifth set of standards encompasses ongoing safety inspections of play equipment, swimming pools, and spraygrounds. Playground inspections occur based on local and state rules, ranging from monthly to quarterly. Pool and sprayground testing takes place frequently during the operating season, ranging from several times a week to weekly. As mentioned earlier, individuals certified to perform playground safety inspections and pool or sprayground inspections must perform them as required by both department standards, as well as public health and safety guidelines. Performance goals for safety inspections are driven by those specific schedules.



Captain Leonard Destin Park, FL. © TPL Staff

A sixth standard is emergency response, which has grown more important as climate change continues to have both small and large effects on public parks. The ability to respond quickly to and handle trees downed by severe storms, flood debris and damage, or conversely, tree and landscape loss due to severe drought or sudden changes in weather patterns, is always a challenge, even for well-funded park and recreation agencies. When disasters occur, the response is generally “all hands on deck,” with staff in a wide variety of roles being called in to tackle priority items. Increasingly, public park and recreation agencies are counting on their nonprofit partners, as well as trained park volunteers, to help out in emergency situations.

Gauging changes in park usage is important in determining operations and maintenance service levels. Uses shift due to a range of factors, including increased density of surrounding housing units, increased usage in specific amenities (sport courts, playgrounds, spraygrounds, or playing fields) and increased wear in specific areas of the park (picnic areas, lawn areas, or playgrounds). While park and recreation agencies have traditionally used indicators like the number of trash bags collected daily, additional efforts, such as surveys by park staff (manual counts at spraygrounds, playscapes or picnic areas), automated counters at key park entry points or along popular trails, or use of anonymized cell phone data to track visitation trends, are increasingly contributing to a better understanding of park usage and its implications for operations and maintenance.

All of this information, whether shared by operations and maintenance staff in daily updates or collected via technology, is fed into specific plans for frequency of specific types of park service. Since few public parks have dedicated operations and maintenance staff, the prioritization of maintenance tasks based on usage and need is critical. Dallas, Plano, Atlanta, San Francisco, Seattle are among the cities we researched that have detailed policies and standards for prioritizing maintenance based on the type of park and a range of the factors we mentioned earlier. (See Figure 1 below for examples from Atlanta and Dallas.) Many of the operations and maintenance tasks listed are performed by individual staff who service five or more parks in a given workday.

Figure 1: Service Levels from Atlanta and Dallas

The Office of Parks Maintenance Operations teams currently mow each scheduled/assigned park on a 10-Day cutting frequency. This ensures that all park areas are maintained at least twice within a month period. Litter is scheduled for pick up at least once a week to a maximum of 7 days per week, depending on park usage and litter volume. Trash removal is also scheduled at least one time per week up to 7 days per week based on collection trends. Our Regional Parks: Piedmont Park and Grant Park are scheduled for trash removal twice daily.

Service by Level:

Class A- (includes all Ball Fields)

- Mowing Cycle-5 Days
- Trim-each visit
- Edge-each visit
- Litter-5-7 days
- Trash Removal- 5-7 days (Twice daily Piedmont and Grant Park)
- Aerialy-Once during season
- Fertilization- 1 time per year in needed area(s)
- Liming-1 time per year in needed area(s)
- Weed eradication- 4 times per year (2 pre-emergent, 2 post emergent)
- Playground Maintenance-Inspect and level out safety surfacing on each visit.

Class B-(Standards as defined in 2011 and revised in 2012)

- Mowing Cycle -10 Day (EXCEPT: no mow zones, nature preserves /other natural areas, and ball fields)
- Trim-each visit
- Edge-each visit
- Litter-2-4 days
- Aerialy-Once during season
- Fertilization- 1 time per year in needed area(s)
- Liming-1 time per year in needed area(s)
- Weed eradication- 4 times per year (2 pre-emergent, 2 post emergent)
- Playground Maintenance-Inspect and level out safety surfacing on each visit.

Class C- Nature Preserves and Other defined Natural areas.

- Trim-each visit
- Edge-each visit
- Litter-1 day per week
- Trash removal-1 day per week
- Playground Maintenance-Inspect and level out safety surfacing on each visit.

Revised 12-2020

Service Level 1

High traffic and highly visible sites such as downtown parks, plazas in retail areas, and parks featuring recreation centers.

| Maintenance Task | Frequency |
|---|--|
| General Park Quality Inspection | Park Inspection completed monthly |
| Basketball Courts | Service Bi-weekly minimum: inspect all components |
| Sweep/blow | As needed |
| Striping | Restripe as needed |
| Backboard and Pole Maintenance or Replacement | Replace/repair as needed |
| Net Maintenance or Replacement | Replace/repair as needed |
| Drinking Fountains | Inspect monthly |
| Visual inspection for vandalism, leaks/drainage issues | Monthly |
| Clean (Remove debris, wipe) | Monthly |
| Grills | |
| Clean | 5 times per week as funded by contractor |
| Irrigation | |
| Park turf: supplementing water weekly on a case by case basis with specialized exceptions evaluated for special projects or plantings | Year round as needed |
| Inspections: assessing functionality and schedule repairs accordingly | Quarterly |
| Landscape Bed Maintenance | |
| Perennial Trim Back | Annually between January and March after hard freeze |
| Shrub Trimming | As needed to maintain size and shape |
| Weed | Bi-weekly – March 1 - November 30 |
| Mulch (specify type) | 1 application/year at 2" - 4" in depth |
| Leaf Mulching and Removal | |
| Leaf removal/mulching | As needed – November 1 – February 15 |
| Litter | |
| Ground litter removal | 5 times per week as funded. |
| Empty trash cans/replace liners | 5 times per week as funded. |
| Recycling | 3 times per week as funded. To be kept separate from general litter and disposed of using recycling dumpsters. |
| Illegal Dumping | as needed |

Promoting safety in public parks is a major focus of maintenance. Given that public parks are frequented by a wide range of people from the very young to seniors, having parks that are clean and safe, with properly operating amenities, is essential. While daily service focuses on trash pickup, general cleaning, and reporting any issues requiring specific repairs, operations and maintenance staff also regularly interact with the public, especially those who are frequent users of a park. Often, members of the public are eyes and ears for changes, both positive and negative, and can develop working relationships with operations and maintenance staff. If a swing is broken, a drinking fountain is clogged, or a recent storm brought down tree limbs or an entire tree, staff will often try to fix the problem or report it for resolution by department specialists. In addition to operations and maintenance staff reporting issues and interacting with the public, the organizations we interviewed spoke to the importance of regular inspections and maintenance for playscapes, spray grounds, swimming pools, and other athletic facilities, such as sport courts and playing fields, for maintaining safe and quality parks.

Inspecting, maintaining, and repairing any of these facilities requires certification (with NRPA as the primary certifying body) as well as skilled plumbers, electricians, carpenters, masons, and other skilled individuals. Generally, playground inspections range from monthly to quarterly, while pool/spray ground inspections occur weekly and water testing can occur several times a week during the season. At times, skilled tradespersons are few and in great demand, and public park and recreation agencies must supplement their in-house staff or staff from other public agencies, with professional contractors.

Public safety and enforcement. The enforcement of park rules and local laws is a separate issue from operations and maintenance and is often handled by city police, supplemented through support by city park rangers and, at times, augmented by private security. Lack of use of a park is often the biggest challenge to public safety, leading to encampments of unhoused communities or the potential for crime, usually the buying and selling of illegal substances, as the prime challenges. In the case of public safety, while both operations and maintenance staff and frequent visitors to the park can report on issues and concerns, park rangers, who are specifically trained to address a number of challenging situations, are increasingly serving as the primary responders. Neighbors who work with park and recreation agency staff to form “friends of” groups are a key resource for preventing unwanted behaviors as they often find low cost ways to provide amenities and programming to increase visitation.

Measuring and Reporting Performance



Key Insights

Park and recreation agencies shift and adapt their priority schemes based on various indicators to assess park qualities, such as daily operations, park use, amenities, and community input.


- Performance goals vary according to season, priorities and staffing levels.
- Specialized staff work on specific aspects of maintenance, for example the forestry team is responsible for all trees in parks and on city streets.
- Daily service, consisting of cleaning and trash removal, is the gold standard, but it is subject to adequate funding, staffing, and training.
- Reporting against service level goals varies amongst public park and recreation agencies.
- Increasingly park and recreation agencies are budgeting for future improvements through formulas for calculating potential operations and maintenance costs, like to be built facilities. These generate a “total cost of ownership” figure that is added to the proposed operations budget for the next fiscal year.

Park System Operations and Maintenance: Goals and Reporting

Using the set of standards for operations and maintenance, most public and nonprofit park and recreation agencies set performance goals for each set of standards for each of their parks. Goals, primarily focused around season, staffing, and need, vary based on the specifics of a given park, what expertise is required, and how frequent the need is. In most cases, agencies report against those goals internally, in annual reports, and in annual budget submissions. An example of response time goals from Atlanta is in Figure 2.

The key to success in performance goals against standards is flexibility and the ability to adjust goals based on current challenges facing a park and recreation agency. Challenges include the span of control, staffing, and budget for a given agency. Most of the agencies we interviewed and researched had adjusted standards for larger parks versus smaller parks, with performance goals based on the factors mentioned previously, including frequency of usage, the age and condition of park amenities, presence of protected features (historic, environmentally sensitive), and the overall needs of the park system.

Figure 2:



City of Atlanta Parks and Recreation – Office of Parks | Monthly Performance Goals

| Office / Category | Metric | Target |
|---|------------------------------------|--------|
| [Parks] Preventative Maintenance Completed on Schedule | Mulching + Mowing (In-Season) | 90% |
| | Mulching + Mowing (Off-Season) | 50% |
| | Garbage Cans Serviced (In-Season) | 100% |
| | Garbage Cans Serviced (Off-Season) | 100% |
| | Trimming + Blowing (In-Season) | 90% |
| | Trimming + Blowing (Off-Season) | 50% |
| | Litter + Limb Removal (In-Season) | 85% |
| | Litter + Limb Removal (Off-Season) | 85% |
| Parks Operations Combined WO Completed within SLA | Arborists | 85% |
| | Forestry | 88% |
| Skilled Services Combined WO Completed within SLA | Electrical | 90% |
| | HVAC & Roofing | 90% |
| | Plumbing | 90% |
| | Carpentry + Other | 90% |

Staffing and Training. As one might guess, the key challenges to maintaining daily service levels is having enough dedicated, trained staff to do the work and ensuring a stable funding base so agencies can keep staffing levels in place. Most public and nonprofit park and recreation agencies are continually understaffed, primarily due to lower pay scales, competition from private sector jobs, and other requirements, including commercial driver's license requirements, seasonal-only positions (generally during the summer months), residency requirements, or other specific skill requirements. This applies to both staff with specific training and certifications as well as the daily service staff.

Several public park and recreation agencies have developed training or certification programs to get younger city residents the skills that they need to join park maintenance teams. Training through "green jobs" or other city-funded job training programs can result in staff earning commercial driver's licenses, equipment certifications, or forestry training and certification. A workforce development program of this kind has allowed Boston to retain and/or place seasonal staff in full-time positions inside the Parks Department or in other city departments.

District-Based Management. All public and nonprofit park and recreation agencies researched have a district-based system, which divides a given city park system into sections, each with a supervisor or district manager and specific staff focused on handling daily and recurring duties within that given district. Each district manager assigns staff to tackle both daily and recurring service based on the operations and maintenance policies and targeted service levels defined by the parks department overall. In the case of nearly all public park and recreation agencies, a work-order system is used to generate requests for specific actions. Functions including forestry, safety inspection, plumbing, and electrical are consolidated and assigned to projects via the agency's work-order system.

Managing Public Input and Repairs. Nearly all cities have moved to a 311 system that can capture input from residents via phone, web, or app. In most cases, this is tied into the public park and recreation agency's job assignment system. A challenge voiced by several cities is the fact that multiple requests can come in about a single issue, for example, both Boston and Washington DC identified that additional work must be done to check for possible duplicate 311 records before ensuring a request is resolved and can be closed. Again, public input is transferred into requests in the park and recreation agency's work-order system.

Reporting and Assessments against Operations and Maintenance Standards and Performance Goals. As mentioned earlier, public park and recreation agencies regularly report internally against their performance goals. This is especially important during the annual city budget cycle, when the opportunity to increase budgets and staff comes up. Public park and recreation agencies also produce annual reports of their most recently completed fiscal year, providing a narrative on capital projects, programming, operations, and maintenance activities. Boston, Minneapolis, Plano, San Francisco, and Seattle all have a good handle on how well they are doing against their performance goals and report both internally and externally.¹⁶ This is despite the challenges that all city park systems report in terms of funding shortfalls, staffing shortages, and increasingly unpredictable weather that disrupts park activities and infrastructure, causing a range of emergency responses.

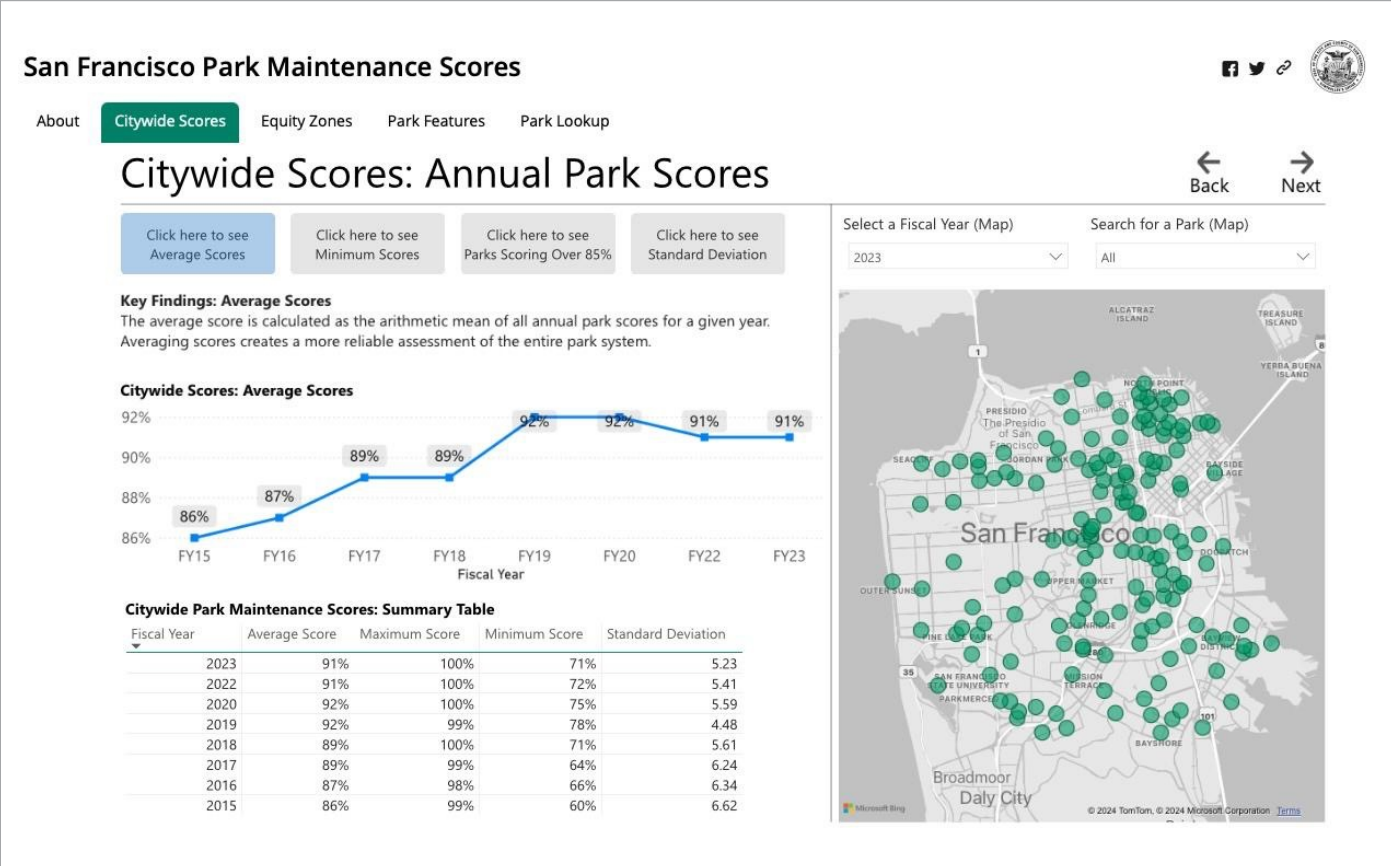
San Francisco has one of the most extensive operations and maintenance assessments of any city park system. First piloted by a neighborhood parks nonprofit, the City auditor's office now has an agreed-upon set of standards, varying by park, that they assess in-person quarterly using the City Controller's office staff equipped with custom phone-based applications (See Figure 3, below).¹⁷ Based on the now years-long set of reports, San Francisco Recreation and

16 Example of San Francisco's reporting: <https://sfgov.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=04937b03318a44ae81d90c240de4e3d1>.

17 City of San Francisco Recreation and Park, City Controllers' office: park maintenance scores: <https://www.sf.gov/resource/2023/park-maintenance-scores>.

Parks has taken steps to revise their park maintenance and operations standards by prioritizing parks in historically underserved areas for regular operations and maintenance.

Figure 3: Annual Park Maintenance Scores in San Francisco.



Above: San Francisco's Annual Park Maintenance Scores
Source: <https://sfgov.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=04937b03318a44ae81d90c240de4e3d1>

Park System Operations and Maintenance Costs

The median for operations and maintenance spending across all parks and recreation facilities is \$8,260 per acre.¹⁸ The top quartile is \$18,491 per acre and the bottom quartile is \$3,564—a wide gap, but understandable given the size and scope of park systems in large cities versus smaller ones, the number of people that visit the parks, the cost of staff and supplies, and the range of amenities cared for, and their ongoing costs. For example, spraygrounds and swimming pools are more expensive to operate and maintain than playgrounds, ballfields, or sport courts.

When looking at park systems serving populations of more than 250,000 residents, the median for operations and maintenance spending is \$4,421 per acre, with the upper quartile at \$10,609 and the lower quartile at \$2,046. Interestingly, all amounts are higher in cities of less than 250,000 (see the 2024 NRPA Annual Performance Review report for additional details).

¹⁸ All park spending information in this section from the 2024 NRPA Annual Performance Review report: <https://www.nrpa.org/siteassets/research/2024-agency-performance-review.pdf>.



TPL tree-planting event at Midway Peace Park in St. Paul, MN. © Caroline Yang

Generally, 46% of full-time staff in public park and recreation agencies is dedicated to operations and maintenance. This is consistent with the numbers that we have been able to obtain from our research.

The expenses that make up operations and maintenance are approximately 54% personnel costs, 38% operations costs (equipment, supplies, fuel, plants, mulch, trash bags), 6% expenses for capital costs not covered in a capital improvement plan (CIP) (equipment fees, etc.), and 2% other.¹⁹ Note that this doesn't include programming, which is often separate, but can include events and volunteer program efforts.

Table 4, below, shows these key figures at a glance:

| | |
|---|------------------|
| O&M spending median | \$8,260 per acre |
| O&M spending media, for cities with 250,000 or more residents | \$4,421 per acre |
| Percentage of operating expenditures | 46% |
| Top O&M expense | Staffing at 54% |
| O&M operations costs (equipment, supplies) | 38% |

Source: 2024 NRPA Annual Performance Review, pp 19–22.

19 2024 NRPA Annual Performance Review, same as above.

We compared the expenses of each of the park and recreation agencies interviewed, along with parks and acreage information and current ParkScore® Index rank, as shown in Table 5 below.²⁰

Table 5: Comparing Expenses of Interviewed Park and Recreation Agencies.

| | Spending per Resident (Overall) | Total O&M and Administra- tion | General Fund | Earned Income | Parks/ Acreage | O&M Staff (if available) | ParkScore® Index Rank (2024) |
|---|--|--|--|---|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| San Francisco | \$546 | \$265 M* | Plus other fund accounts | General Fund | 220 / 6164 | | 7 |
| Seattle | \$376 | \$159.6 M | Park District (separate tax structure) | General Fund | 106 / 6,480 | | 6 |
| Washington DC | \$345 | \$106.4 M* | 100% | General Fund | 501 / 9,296 | | 1 |
| Minneapolis | \$318 | \$64.8 M | Park District (separate tax structure) | Retained by Park District as part of budgeting | 173 / 5078 | | 2 |
| Atlanta | \$249 | \$63.3 M* | Most funding, some from Park Improvement fund | General Fund | 395 / 5,530 | 200 | 25 |
| Austin | \$198 | \$76.7 M | 100% | General Fund | 336 / 19,069 | | 44 |
| Boston | \$175 | \$16.27 M* | 100% | General Fund | 331 / 5,160 | 75 | 14 |
| Plano | \$181 | \$22.9 M | 100% | General Fund | 88 / 4,588 | | 16 |
| Cincinnati | \$190 | \$42 M | \$10.5 M, \$3.8 M (forestry fee) | General Fund | 284 / 8,057 | | 8 |
| Dallas | \$140 | \$101.4 M | 100% | General Fund | 410 / 20,835 | | 38 |
| Buffalo Olmsted | N/A | \$13.2 M (for entire city) | None (separate) | Retained for budget (primarily golf, rentals) | 6 parks, 7 parkways, 8 circles / 850 | 20 | 41 |
| Piedmont PC (Atlanta) | N/A | \$1.39 M | None (separate) | Retained for budgeting | 1 / 189 | | 25 |
| Trail Conservancy (Austin) | N/A | \$2.1 M (Plus \$1 M from city parks) | None (separate) | Retained for budgeting | 336 / 19,069 (citywide) | 3 | 41 |

* For Washington DC, Boston, Atlanta and San Francisco, the total park system operations, maintenance and administration totals are only for the public parks agency and do not include nonprofit partnerships.

Sources: 2024 City Park Facts, 2024 NRPA Annual Agency Performance Review, fiscal year 2023 reported data from individual city budget reports, annual city park agency reports, and interviews with organizations and city park and recreation departments and agencies.

20 This data is pulled from Trust for Public Land's 2024 City Park Facts. Few cities report specific operations and maintenance staff numbers. Most of this information was gathered from individual interviews with specific city park and recreation departments and agencies, specifically Boston and Atlanta.

Conclusion

Operations and maintenance of our public parks is a never-ending challenge. The field lacks thorough documentation of the range of policies, strategies, and mechanisms to improve park operations and maintenance, and where and how they are being implemented to advance park equity specifically. This shortfall of information hinders cities from effectively funding and improving park operations and maintenance planning, and therefore limits the widespread use of strategies required to address park equity gaps.

Through this report, we begin to address knowledge gaps to influence local park operations and maintenance planning, and in turn, foster the creation of high quality parks and green spaces. To conclude, we have the following recommendations for park practitioners and advocates to advance park equity through park operations and maintenance:

- **Recommendation 1 – Funding.** A growing number of park and recreation agencies are budgeting operations and maintenance for future parks and using additional methods to grow revenue to fund growing operations. Given that half a city park and recreation agency's budget is operations and maintenance staff, looking for ways to grow revenue is key. City park and recreation agencies should work in partnership with park advocates (including park conservancies, citywide parks nonprofits, and business improvement districts) to advocate for and grow funding methods through annual budget processes and local legislation.
- **Recommendation 2 – Alternative Management Entities.** Developing partnerships with nonprofits opens up new collaboration for increased advocacy, additional funding, and supplemental operations and maintenance resources. On average, 7 percent of funding for city park systems comes from alternative management entities, which can be critical in growing cities or during economic downturns.
- **Recommendation 3 – Unique operations and maintenance policies and standards.** Most of the city park and recreation agencies we researched and interviewed have developed a set of standards for different aspects of park operations and maintenance, factoring in a range of options, including park usage, amenities present, and wear and tear. Each agency is unique, look to develop yours.
- **Recommendation 4 – Publicly accessible data and information on the status of your park system's operations and maintenance.** Performance goals and measurement varies amongst park and recreation agencies, with many doing internal reporting, public reporting via annual reports, and a few doing full public audits. Reporting and providing statistics on how your department is doing increases visibility and trust and helps with budgeting efforts and public support.

Park system operations and maintenance has already been and continues to be a challenge for every U.S. city. Through research, virtual discussions, and interviews, we have learned about some of the best practices that city park systems have adopted to continue to both support and grow their park systems. Whether it's through innovative budgeting and funding, partnering with alternative management entities that can supply advocacy, funding and additional resources, developing and measuring against operations and maintenance standards for a range of regular, seasonal, and as needed maintenance, and developing goals for those standards and measuring themselves against them, public park and recreation agencies continue to respond to the never ending challenges of providing, maintaining, and operating public spaces. That said, there are proven ways in which public park and recreation agencies are continuing to push forward.



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