TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND®

Adding Green

The Potential of Vacant Land to Bridge the Park Equity Gap

10-Minute Walk

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was created by Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk® program as part of the program's effort to help cities create parks that drive equitable, healthy, and thriving communities. Trust for Public Land is responsible for the findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report, as well as any errors.

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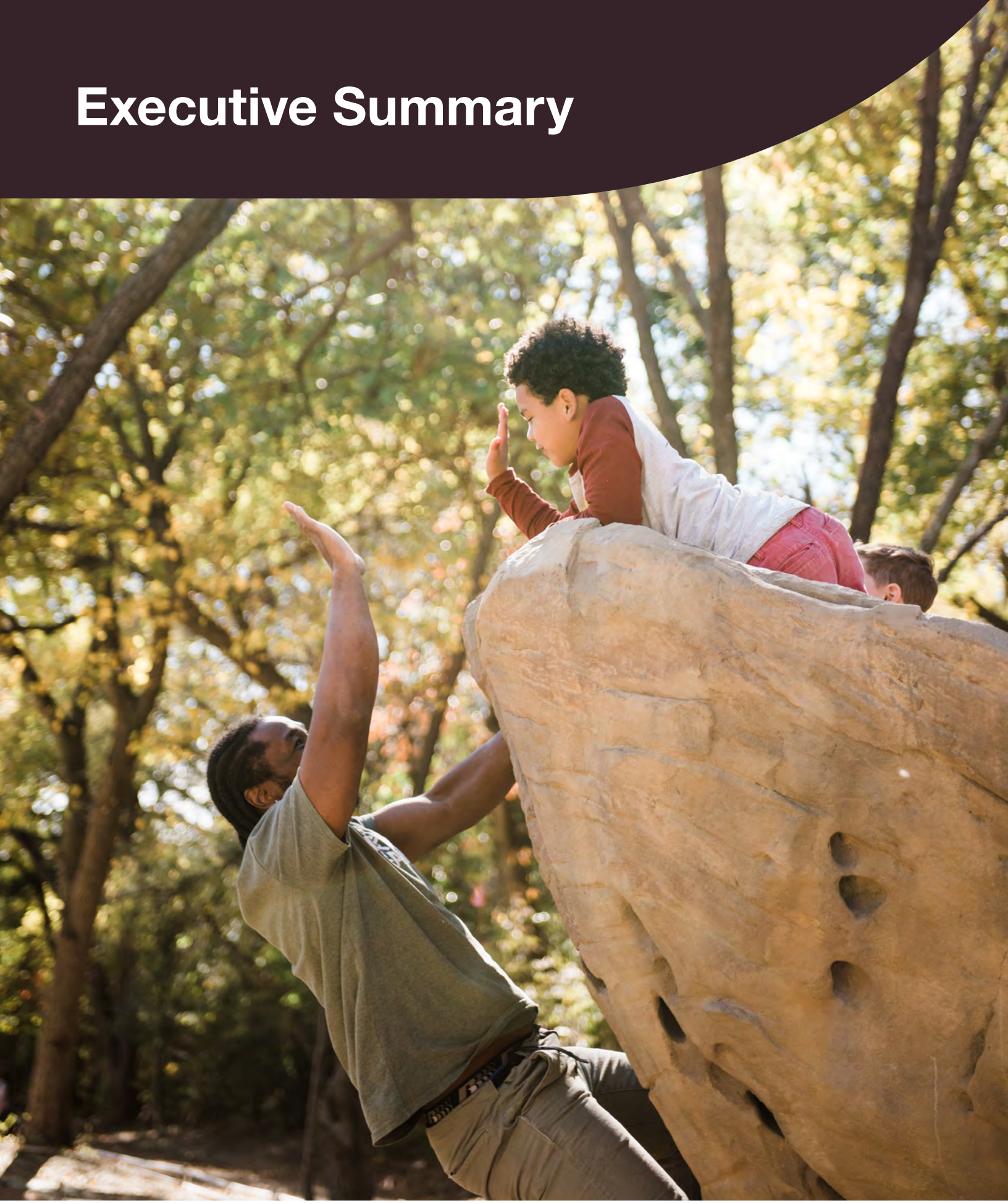
Executive Summary



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Across the United States, more than 100 million people—including 28 million children—do not have access to a park within a 10-minute walk of home.[1] Cities are struggling with a multitude of issues from a lack of available land for green spaces while holding a large amount of vacant land. The reclamation and greening of vacant lots, which can be catalyzed by local governments, community development organizations, land banks, and other partners, can lead to more equitable park access. To better understand how cities can convert vacant land to parks and green space to bridge the park access gap, Trust for Public Land™ embarked on a research project to explore successful projects that have converted vacant land to parkland and to understand how to scale the impact of those efforts.

Through a field scan consisting of a review of 70 parks or community green spaces (e.g., community gardens) and interviews with representatives from 10 projects, Trust for Public Land identified and recommends six critical steps cities can take to convert vacant land to parks and green spaces:

1	**Bring harmful, vacant land under public ownership.**
2	**Prioritize strategic, multi-benefit opportunities.**
3	**Consider permanent green space as the best use case.**
4	**Assemble multisector stakeholders along the project pipeline.**
5	**Establish sustained funding.**
6	**Engage residents in equitable stewardship.**

Foundational to all these takeaways is the critical and necessary involvement of residents and community members throughout every stage of project planning, implementation, and stewardship efforts.

Introduction

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Trust for Public Land (TPL®) believes access to nature is a fundamental human need, essential to our health and well-being. Parks and green spaces are an important tool in mitigating the effects of climate change and provide powerful spaces for building social interconnectedness and community cohesion.[2,3,4,5,6] Parks also improve quality of life and the vitality of cities. They contribute to economic growth, helping cities to attract and retain workers, and foster residents' sense of attachment to the places they live.[7,8,9] Importantly, parks represent physical expressions of our values, our cultures, and equity in our built environments.

Despite increasing recognition and evidence of these wide-ranging benefits, across U.S. cities, a park equity divide persists. One hundred million people, including 28 million children, do not have access to a park within a 10-minute walk of home. In the 100 most populated U.S. cities, neighborhoods where most residents identify as Black, Hispanic, Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Asian American and Pacific Islander have access to an average of 44 percent less park acreage than predominantly white neighborhoods. A similar inequity exists for low-income neighborhoods.[10]

Many of these same neighborhoods that lack an adequate supply of quality parks and vibrant, safe green space also have a sizable inventory of underutilized, vacant land. Vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated (VAD) properties, both those with structures and vacant land, pose significant costs to public health and safety, property values, individual wealth, and community stability. The calculable economic costs of these problem properties have been documented in various cities across the country. A 2016 study in Toledo, Ohio, found that VAD properties cost the city $3.8 million per year in direct costs, including police and fire department resources, and $2.7 million per year in lost tax revenues. VAD properties also have significant impacts on neighboring property values; these impacts not only diminish individuals' equity in their homes and ability to generate wealth but also limit the revenue local governments can generate from

property taxes that can be used for important public purposes. That same Toledo study found VAD properties caused losses of $98.7 million in property values and $2.68 million in tax revenues from adjacent properties whose values were diminished by the presence of the vacant properties. Similarly, in Atlanta, Georgia, VAD properties caused a loss in property values between $55 million and $153 million, which translates into lost property tax revenues of $1 million to $2.7 million annually.[11] In Cleveland, Ohio, properties within 500 feet of a vacant, tax-delinquent, and foreclosed property lost 9.4 percent of their value.[12]

The harmful effects of VAD properties are not going away. In fact, the portfolio of vacant land that has accrued over decades of demolition and disinvestment appears to be *growing*. In a survey by Center for Community Progress, nearly two-thirds of organizations with inventories of vacant properties reported that their inventory of vacant lots had been increasing over the past two years.[13] These organizations—consisting of land banks, government agencies, and nonprofit and community organizations—acknowledge that the vacant properties in their ownership are difficult and costly to maintain. For many cities across the country, however, vacant land can present an opportunity to close park equity gaps.

In 2022, Trust for Public Land sought to better understand the ways cities are converting vacant land to parks, and specifically what types of long-term stewardship and maintenance funding have enabled these conversions to be successful. Leveraging the national network of local governments and land banks through support from the Center for Community Progress, TPL recognized an opportunity to increase park equity through the permanent, community-driven redevelopment of vacant lots into parks and green spaces. TPL embarked on a research effort to investigate the potential of converting vacant land to park use as a systemic solution to jointly address park inequities and the harms imposed by widespread vacancy, which disproportionately impacts Black and Brown neighborhoods.

Project Overview and Methodology

TPL and Community Progress developed two key research questions aimed at building field knowledge about strategies to overcome common challenges:

- What policies "unlock" privately held and publicly held vacant land that can enable conversion to park use?
- What are strategies for managing and financing long-term conversion of vacant land to parks use?

To answer these questions, we undertook a field scan of park projects originating from vacant lots, with particular focus on (1) whether these were attached to systemic, citywide efforts to address vacant land, improve park access, or both; and (2) the sources of financing that enabled and sustained these projects. The field scan consisted of an internet-based review of 70 parks or community green spaces (e.g., community gardens) and interviews with representatives (nonprofit personnel, land bank staff, and city staff) from 10 projects included in the scan to gain further insight and nuance. We developed case studies from a number of the one-on-one interviews to help illustrate the range of project origins, goals, and unique challenges and to underscore common trends found across projects. The study largely focused on communities with high vacancy rates, high poverty rates, and high concentrations of populations of color. A literature review provided the foundation for our study, ensuring that our inquiry was focused on areas not already robustly addressed in previous studies.

EXAMPLE:

Increasing Park Access Through Vacant Lot Conversion in Ohio

After the 2008 foreclosure crisis, a group of elected officials, community development practitioners, and lawyers met to address the real estate foreclosure crisis in Ohio, which paved the way to the passage of Senate Bill 353/ House Bill 602 in the Ohio State Legislature. This legislation, also known as the Land Bank Bill, allowed for the creation of County Land Reutilization Corporations (CLRCs) in Ohio. Through the Land Bank Bill, CLRCs were given special and traditional corporate powers to organize at the county level, with new operating budgets independent from municipal budgets that did not require raising taxes. The Land Bank Bill addressed many of the challenges of the state's traditional land bank model to establish county land banks as an effective tool for stabilizing and developing neighborhoods.[14]

Converting vacant lots into parks is a promising option to help close the park equity gap. A 2023 geospatial analysis of the potential impact of vacant land conversion on park access found that conversion could increase the state's 10-minute walk access by 24.7 percent.

Findings

When tax-generating new development is prioritized, it is difficult to advance the systemic leveraging of vacant land to address park access. Most often, decision-makers charged with finding solutions to address vacant and unmaintained land focus on strategies that center new infrastructure development. Repurposing these properties for new permanent green spaces that bring community benefits with them is not a priority. When these conversions do take place, they are at the parcel level, rather than being part of a systemic, intentional vacant land stewardship strategy to address vacancy and create new park spaces, with the green improvements that accompany them.

The nascency of strategies and policies to permanently convert vacant lots to green space was evident at Community Progress's Reclaiming Vacant Properties conference in Chicago, Illinois, in September 2022. In a workshop at the conference, TPL and Community Progress introduced the concept for this study by asking participants—who included leaders from local government, land banks, and nonprofits focused on green spaces and urban revitalization—about whether their cities were undertaking any systemic efforts to address park access gaps and vacant land issues in tandem. During that discussion, the consensus was that the cities represented were not taking a systemic approach to leveraging vacant land for increasing park access and that more data and resources were needed to support advocacy for this effort.

Our national research did uncover examples of cities that have leveraged vacant land to increase park access, but these efforts seemed to take place on a parcel-by-parcel basis and were not part of a systemic approach. While these projects had significant positive impacts in their communities, there remains a need to better understand successful strategies for long-term transformation and maintenance of parks developed on vacant land.

Sustained funding is a primary barrier in converting vacant land to a green, community-serving use. Interviews with field practitioners revealed critical needs for sustained funding, particularly to maintain and sustain converted vacant land for use as parks and other community-serving green spaces.

Parks departments are often unwilling and unable to take vacant land into their inventories because of a lack of resources and funding to remediate and maintain these properties; many cities struggle to maintain their existing parks due to

funding shortfalls. Because parks departments depend heavily on local public funds, the same factors that depress city budgets overall figure into park funding challenges.[15] It has proved particularly difficult to adequately resource the maintenance and operations of park systems, with national deferred maintenance needs totaling more than $65 billion by the National Recreation and Park Association's estimate.[16,17] Public finance measures such as sales and property taxes, fees collected from developer exactions, and state and federal grant programs have traditionally tended to be restricted to capital expenditures, leaving significant shortfalls in parks department budgets when it comes to maintenance and operation.[18] Concerningly, the consequences of inadequate public funding for park maintenance most often burden low-income communities of color.[19]

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Cities with abundant vacant land that might like to advance park equity by converting vacant lots to parks are uniquely challenged. Most communities with high rates of vacant properties have underlying fiscal challenges. These strained governments may be reluctant to take on the additional financial burden and risk of vacant lot ownership and conversion. When local leaders are challenged with trying to balance municipal budgets, they typically look to minimize tax increases and protect certain departments, such as the police and fire departments, from any cuts. This tendency could lead to extremely strained budgets in other local government departments. According to Community Progress, many communities struggling with vacancy self-report a lack of capacity in departments such as code enforcement, public works, and parks. Research shows that, generally, local public officials recognize parks as a valuable asset in their cities; however, local leaders do not readily connect parks to their top-tier concerns. As a result, parks are not well positioned in the competition over limited city funds and are vulnerable to budget cuts, with public officials reporting that parks and recreation funding tend to be cut more severely than other government services.[20]

These compounded challenges, from lack of funding to maintenance shortfalls, and a desire for tax-producing reuse projects combine to stymie efforts to scale up conversion of vacant land to parkland or to reimagine a large vacant land portfolio as an asset that could be acquired and activated to resolve the park equity divide and build healthier, more resilient neighborhoods. The significant fiscal challenge in communities with high levels of vacancy leads to a second contributing barrier for converting vacant land to permanent parks and green space: Leaders overwhelmingly prioritize uses that will be tax-producing. Proposals to invest in reuse options that might improve community health, safety, and vitality often lose out to the promise of ribbon-cutting developments that will generate tax revenue down the road.

Recommendations

As the field continues to explore how to create systems that enable the conversion of vacant land to parks and public green spaces, we can look to the cities and community partners that have been successful in this work at the project level. Below we offer six steps that are necessary for successful conversions of vacant land to parks and public green space.

1 Bring harmful, vacant land under public ownership.

Vacant land that is publicly held, either by a local government or a land bank, can offer greater opportunities for converting harmful properties to new public green spaces or parks. To get properties into public ownership, it is important for those interested in converting vacant lots to parks and public green spaces to understand the local and state laws that govern how public entities can acquire, hold, and dispose of problem properties. Key stakeholders that play a significant role in these public processes include departments (either at the city or county level) responsible for addressing nuisances or unsafe conditions at vacant lots, enforcing delinquent property taxes and code lines, and holding and disposing of vacant land, such as land banks.

In many cities with large inventories of vacant lots, those parcels causing the most harm to neighbors and neighborhoods are often privately owned, often by an LLC or an individual who has walked away from the property. Many times, the property was once the location of a house or other structure that was demolished years earlier. To acquire these properties and transition to new, responsible ownership for public benefit, a public enforcement action may be needed. Property tax or code line foreclosure is often the primary way for local governments to acquire vacant lots, which can then be transferred to an entity such as a land bank that will steward the lot to productive reuse in line with community priorities.

Based on interviews with project leaders from our case studies, the vast majority of projects were implemented on underutilized properties that were already publicly owned. In these cases, most public entities were supportive of leasing parcels to nonprofit organizations, and some ultimately transferred ownership to these organizations (ownership scenarios are discussed further under **Recommendation 4:** "Assemble multisector stakeholders along the project pipeline").

The Role of Land Banks

Land banks are public entities with unique governmental powers, created pursuant to state enabling legislation, that are solely focused on converting problem properties to productive use according to local community goals. Land banks across the country have been a vehicle for supporting broader community development, including the transformation of vacant land into parks, gardens, and other community spaces. There are currently more than 250 land banks across 19 states in the U.S. that can serve as natural partners to enable more green spaces and parks. Nationally, vacant land makes up 90 percent of land banks' inventory.[21]

CASE STUDY

In Schenectady, New York, three privately owned vacant and abandoned properties were identified for the creation of a new neighborhood park, as part of a focused neighborhood investment strategy. Two of the properties, which had vacant structures, had years of delinquent taxes, which created a leverage point for the City to foreclose on the properties and ultimately transfer them to the Capital Region Land Bank. The Land Bank acquired a third contiguous property, a vacant lot, through private purchase. The Land Bank demolished the two unsafe structures, consolidated the parcels, and worked closely with community members to design the park and ultimately build what is now **Tribute Park**. The Land Bank then transferred the newly created park back to the City, which agreed to assume responsibility for ongoing maintenance. Tribute Park is now a vibrant community asset with a splash pad, gardens, and gathering spaces for the community. See the **appendix** to learn more about Tribute Park.

2 Prioritize strategic, multi-benefit opportunities.

Communities are strategically tying efforts to convert vacant land for new parks and green spaces to other neighborhood development goals. This strategy has multiple benefits, including ensuring development activities are holistic by including green spaces, targeting scarce resources to projects with the potential for high impact, and leveraging existing and future funding opportunities from various sources with complementary goals.

It is critical to collect data to identify strategic opportunities to leverage and potential partners to engage to achieve multi-benefit outcomes. A starting point for gathering data is to understand the scale, scope, and location of vacant land in a community to determine what opportunities exist. Qualitative data is also critical to better understand community context and how the land can be repurposed in a way that aligns with community needs. It is important to gather quantitative and qualitative data to understand the following.

- **Determining the scale and scope: How many lots are there in the city? Who maintains them? What does that cost? What are they zoned?**
- **Appreciating the historical and current context: How did the vacant land come to be? What was once here? What equity issues exist?**
- **Identifying partners: Who is already engaged in vacant land work? What are their skills, expertise, and priorities? Is there an up-to-date parcel inventory? Who can access the data?**
- **Understanding needs: What do the neighbors want to see happen with this land? Can addressing this lot address park equity issues?**

Gathering these data points and sharing data across governmental silos and with external partners can help to identify complementary goals for ongoing and future development projects.

Our case studies and research showed that leaders were able to use social and parcel data to implement projects with complementary goals and multi-benefit strategies. These included targeting vacant lots in close proximity to new housing developments; converting vacant commercial lots in commercial corridors in low- to moderate-income areas to encourage investment in commercial development; and coordinating with the public and other partners to address complementary goals, such as tree canopy restoration and stormwater management. When local community members come together to steward a vacant lot, they build relationships, identity, and power.

CASE STUDY

With American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, the city of Chicago reinvested in business corridors by activating vacant lots for public use through a competitive grant program. The **Public Outdoor Plaza (POP!)** program specifically targets low- to moderate-income neighborhoods where the city is also making other investments to revitalize retail corridors. POP! is designed to help community-based organizations activate underutilized land along the neighborhood retail corridors to create strategic community gathering spaces that serve as destination points for local residents, shoppers, commuters, and neighborhood visitors. See the **appendix** to learn more about POP!

3 Consider permanent green space as the best use case.

All too often, local government decision-makers prioritize the development of vacant lots over keeping these parcels as permanent green spaces. On its face, this approach is not unreasonable, given that communities with high inventories of vacant properties also have significantly strained budgets. Improvements to property can lead to higher property assessments and increase local governments' ability to generate more tax revenue to support local budgets. This singular focus on property improvements as a solution to revenue challenges, however, not only is short-sighted but also does not account for the other values and necessary benefits permanent green spaces bring to neighborhoods.

The infrastructure needs of cities that have seen their populations decline from 20 percent to more than 50 percent are different from what those needs were when these cities' populations were at their peak. Not every lot where a home once stood needs to be a home again, especially in neighborhoods where the cost of residential infill is far more than what the property could ever recoup in a sale. Local leaders need to think long-term about the type of development that will be needed to accommodate changing populations and include green open space and parks as essential components of plans to ensure healthy and vibrant communities.

Many local leaders will utilize the tactic of temporarily activating green spaces while they wait for potential future development. This activation could take the form of entering a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with a community group to use a vacant lot for a community garden or even making some investments in improvements such as seating and amenities for community gathering spaces. When making investments in the reactivation of vacant land, especially when those spaces have been embraced by the community, local government should contemplate permanent green space as the end use. A temporary holding strategy that eventually seeks to convert a beloved community space to new development has the potential to cause mistrust among community members or even to blunt community interest from the get-go.

Benefits of Greening Vacant Land

The long-term revitalization of communities suffering from systemic vacancy will require innovations in sustainable financing. In many small and midsize cities, the conversion of vacant land to parks represents a promising, reparative, and systemic strategy for closing park equity gaps. The revitalization of vacant lots has been shown to have positive benefits across socioeconomic and health indicators, notably in reported mental health and reductions in crime.[22] Findings from place-based revitalization strategies involving vacant lot greening include the following.

- **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania:** Health outcomes for residents living near vacant lots that underwent greening and cleanup activities dramatically improved. Residents reported a significant decrease in depression. For participants living in neighborhoods below the poverty line, the greening intervention demonstrated a significant decrease in feelings of depression.[23] Furthermore, greening vacant lots had enhanced effects on the sale price of nearby homes and the benefits of vacant land greening appeared to far exceed the associated costs.[24]
- **New Orleans, Louisiana:** The number of drug crimes per square mile decreased significantly near all remediated vacant lots compared with unremediated control lots, largely driven by the significant decrease in drug crimes found near lots that received two treatments.[25]
- **Flint, Michigan:** Street segments with vacant lots maintained through the Clean & Green program (a community-based solution that facilitates resident-driven routine maintenance of vacant lots) had nearly 40 percent fewer assaults and violent crimes than street segments with vacant, abandoned lots.[26]
- **Youngstown, Ohio:** Vacant lot remediation programs resulted in significantly greater reductions in felony assault, robbery, and theft around lots that were remediated compared with those that remained vacant and disorderly.[27]

4 Assemble multisector stakeholders along the project pipeline.

Addressing vacant land and converting to new public green or park space requires partnerships across silos, sectors, and areas of expertise. Every stakeholder we connected with in this research cited a strong reliance on partnerships as being a leading factor in their success. The most successful projects included partners with specific focus and expertise in the areas of acquisition, ownership, and stewardship. We examine each of these key partners and their role across the project pipeline below.

- **Acquisition: Who will acquire the property?** In most cases, the public sector, either local government or a land bank, was the responsible entity for the acquisition of the property. In one case, TPL served this role, purchasing the property directly from a private owner but quickly transferring it to a public entity.
- **Ownership: Who will own the property?** In many cases, the local government remained the long-term owner of these properties; some nonprofit-led projects preferred local government ownership due to limitations in their capacity to maintain properties. Others expressed interest in ownership, however, to ensure green space remained in the community and to protect the property from future development.
- **Stewardship: Who will care for the property long-term?** In many cases, there was a clear delineation between the entity responsible for maintaining properties and the one responsible for programming and ensuring the space continued to serve the community.
- **Maintenance: Who will maintain the property?** In cases where the municipality owned and a nonprofit maintained the property, many nonprofits rely on volunteers for maintenance needs. The level of maintenance that was achieved varied based on the capacity of the nonprofits and the communities they were located in. Organizations often "did what they could with what they had," and while many recognized the importance of having long-term maintenance plans that were sustainable, none shared that they had such a plan in place.
- **Programming: Who will program the property?** In some cases where the municipality owned and a nonprofit maintained the property, the municipal partner that owned the property had a strong commitment to ensuring the space was adequately cared for while a nonprofit partner programmed the space.

CASE STUDY

In Colorado, TPL, the city of Denver, and **Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK)** teamed up to preserve open space and create an environmental science center in a disinvested community. Each organization had a specific role to play throughout the implementation and stewardship of the project, known as Montbello Park. There were threats that the vacant lot would be developed into a 12-story commercial building. TPL stepped in to help secure and preserve the site as open space by leading fundraising efforts to purchase the property from the owner before it was sold for development. After TPL secured the acquisition of the vacant lot, the land was transferred to the city for long-term ownership. With ELK serving as the local anchor organization, there was an early commitment to steward this project by providing programming for youth and building an environmental center. In its original lease agreement, ELK was responsible for the maintenance of the park. After a few years, the city agreed to amend the agreement in recognition that ELK would not have the capacity to manage such a large open space and environmental center. The city agreed to take on the maintenance of the park and center with the recognition that ELK's day-to-day programming, intentional investment in a disadvantaged area, and community engagement provided significant benefits to the community at large. See the **appendix** to learn more about Montbello Park.

5 Establish sustained funding.

Long-term, sustained funding for vacant lot maintenance, greening, and capacity building was the number one funding need for organizations activating vacant land.[28] Our research found that most projects to convert vacant land to parks have been financed by a combination of multiple funding sources. Most projects are funded by one-time grants from various sectors (public, private, philanthropic), with philanthropic sources being cited most often.

We found that cities that connected their vacant land conversion projects to other community benefits, such as public health, safety, and environmental justice, were able to leverage funds from different sectors. Connecting the programming of the green space to complementary initiatives that might garner interest from philanthropy and other funders can support long-term funding objectives. The success of this approach was evident in most case studies in our research, for example, when connections were made between youth programming and neighborhood revitalization, health equity and food access, and outdoor recreation and science-related activities.

One challenge that was heard across communities is that philanthropic funders and public partners are often willing to contribute funding for the implementation of projects but not the ongoing maintenance of the site. A strategy that project leaders have used to address this challenge is to incorporate two years of maintenance expenses in the project implementation budget to capture short-term costs of maintenance in funding requests.

Ultimately—and this is a conclusion that resonated across all projects—***predictable and recurring funding is critically needed to convert vacant land to new green space and parks at a systemic level***. For under-resourced cities with high rates of vacancy, this need is even more acute. In order to cultivate a national practice of converting vacant land to parks and green spaces, it is critical for advocates to focus on this core need. For communities with more stable finances and stronger markets, there is a need for more innovative public financing strategies than general fund allocations and special parks districts (since bonding is reserved almost exclusively for new construction). For communities that are already fiscally constrained and struggle with higher levels of vacancy, either (1) new, dedicated funding must be made available by state or federal entities or both, or (2) rules for federal programs such as the Community Development Block Grant program need to be adjusted to allow for ongoing maintenance of park assets that help close the park equity divide and advance healthier neighborhoods for low-income residents.

Benefits of Greening Vacant Land

While the concept of systemically leveraging vacant land to address park gaps is a nascent concept, a few exceptional cities are leading in this work. The mayor of Dallas, Texas, called on city departments to work with TPL to inventory publicly owned vacant and underused properties to find opportunities to convert them to parkland.[29]

In 2022, Dallas Mayor Eric L. Johnson appointed Garret Boone as the city's first-ever "greening czar," with a goal of transforming vacant land into usable green space.[30] Mayor Johnson outlined his hope for Boone "to determine the highest and best uses of available parcels of city-owned land in Dallas—be it transformation into a playground, sports court, pocket prairie, community garden or traditional park." In a State of the City address, Mayor Johnson said, "If there isn't a feasible development plan for any piece of city-owned property, we should responsibly and strategically develop it into a park or other green space or affordable housing." In the *Dallas Park and Recreation Annual Report 2021–2022,* Mayor Johnson recognized the importance of this initiative in an opening message: "Even more impressively, we have done much of this work by repurposing and redeveloping former illegal dumping grounds, ugly surface parking lots, even highway overpasses." Dallas's leadership in this field is a positive example for other cities to follow in establishing a systemic approach to conversion of vacant land to parkland.

6 Engage residents in equitable stewardship.

One significant theme we heard from partners was the importance of ensuring the projects aligned with the needs and desires identified by the community. Many of the projects were realized thanks to the advocacy efforts of community members themselves. Some projects were resident-driven from their inception, with community members identifying the vacant lots causing harm that needed to be addressed or seeing the opportunities that conversion to green space offered. In other projects, community members were engaged to provide recommendations on what could be done with an already identified space or engaged to provide feedback during the design process.

In a survey conducted by Community Progress, resident engagement was the number one most widely endorsed practice contributing to organizational success in maintaining and greening vacant lots.[31] Many of the green spaces that relied on volunteers for maintenance and programming discussed challenges with capacity and burnout. These challenges also highlighted equity concerns that need to be examined further. Communities and neighborhoods with the least resources relied on volunteers most often.

Why Resident Engagement Matters

[from Community Progress's Survey on Greening]

- Identifies residents' needs: Gathering resident input early in the planning stages helps project leaders identify resident needs and prioritize development of programs and services that are more responsive.
- Increases community buy-in: Engaging residents early and often in the planning process increases community buy-in for proposed initiatives.
- Demonstrates respect: Understanding and honoring residents' wishes helps project leaders demonstrate fundamental respect for the communities they serve.
- Accomplishes more: Supporting resident-engaged maintenance and greening with tools, supplies, and labor helps project leaders accomplish more and better sustain their work.

CASE STUDY

The Giving Grove began in 2013 as a grassroots effort to make fresh fruits, nuts, and berries freely available to Kansas City neighborhoods with high rates of food insecurity. The Giving Grove provides trees, supplies, and training necessary for community residents to grow fruitful orchards. After finding success in Kansas City, the program's founders began expanding The Giving Grove across the nation in 2019. They intentionally decided to use a national network of local affiliates because they knew firsthand that this work needs to be embraced, led, and implemented by residents with local knowledge, connections, and pride. Since then, The Giving Grove has expanded to 10 cities and 400 orchards across the U.S. The orchards are managed and maintained by more than 700 volunteer orchard stewards and local partners including nonprofits, food banks, schools, and conservation land trusts. Each project is uniquely designed and implemented according to the steward's vision. Each site has two to three dedicated stewards to complement the local organizational support. Most of the stewards are volunteers, though some do receive a stipend from the affiliate organizations. See the **appendix** to learn more about The Giving Grove.

Conclusion

Vacant land offers cities a unique opportunity to enhance park access for residents. Across the country, local leaders have found innovative ways to repurpose vacant land for parks and public green spaces, yielding significant positive outcomes for their communities. Our national research reveals several key trends and critical components that can guide the successful conversion of vacant land into parks. However, the key challenge remains scaling this work to have a widespread impact. Our findings did not identify any cities with fully developed strategies that enable the large-scale conversion of vacant, underutilized land into parks. More importantly, sustainable and innovative funding sources to support these conversions are sorely lacking.

Nevertheless, there is growing interest and momentum to advance this work, offering potential for meaningful systemic change. While additional, intentional planning and policy conversations are needed to explore how vacant land can be leveraged to address park access at a systemic level, we offer the following recommendations for cities—especially local government decision-makers—to consider as they begin:

- **Conduct a comprehensive review of underutilized vacant land** to assess the scale and scope of existing opportunities. This should include both publicly owned properties with no identified use and privately owned properties that are causing harm to the community. These parcels should be mapped and made publicly accessible.
- **Maintain transparency and openness with stakeholders** about which parcels the city is willing to explore for conversion from vacant land to public green space. Clear communication can foster partnerships with community-based nonprofits and other stakeholders eager to engage in conversion projects that align with their missions.
- **Assess existing budget allocations** to determine if there is capacity to support the acquisition and long-term maintenance of additional public green spaces. Look beyond traditional park budgets and frame park development as part of broader goals such as enhancing public health, driving economic vitality, and promoting environmental sustainability. This approach can open new opportunities for collaboration and funding at the city or state level.
- **Explore diverse funding avenues**, including public-private collaborations, philanthropic support, and leveraging state or regional grant programs. By leveraging new financial mechanisms, cities can create sustainable green spaces without relying solely on traditional budgets.
- **Engage with other leaders and organizations** interested in enabling the conversion of vacant land into parks. Reaching out to organizations like Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk program can help foster collaboration and provide additional resources and expertise.

Addressing vacant land and improving park access requires a coordinated, collaborative approach. While challenges remain, there are clear opportunities ahead through creative funding, cross-sector partnerships, and community involvement. By taking proactive, strategic steps, leaders can set the stage for lasting change—turning vacant land into vibrant, accessible green spaces for all.

Case Study Appendix

CASE STUDY

Montbello Open Space Park: Denver, Colorado

In Denver, Colorado, a local nonprofit, the City of Denver, and Trust for Public Land have teamed up to protect open space and provide environmental education resources to neighborhood youth.

MONTBELLO PARK, DENVER, CO. © EMILY PATTERSON/TPL

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Park/green reuse type: open space and environmental center

Prior use: vacant lots

Lead: Environmental Learning for Kids, Trust for Public Land

Project/program investment: public and philanthropic

Maintenance financing: City Parks Department

COMMUNITY CONTEXT: DENVER, COLORADO

Population: 715,000

Vacancy rate: 2 percent

Poverty rate: 12 percent

Population of color: 46 percent

Population living within 10 minutes of a park: 89 percent

Environmental Learning for Kids (ELK) is a Denver-based nonprofit organization established in 1996 by two wildlife biologists who saw a growing need to connect Colorado's under-resourced youth to math, science, leadership, and career opportunities. To date, they have served more than 5,000 youth through year-round intensive programs as well as in-school and after-school programming. In the beginning, ELK's programming was held in the founders' home, with the vision of creating a safe community and educational space to connect children to nature.

In 2012, a 5.5-acre vacant lot in the northeastern Montbello community was identified as a potential location for a future ELK Education Center. Montbello is a dense, diverse Denver neighborhood where a quarter of residents live below the poverty line. The site, which is centrally located in a residential area and near a previously inaccessible national wildlife refuge, became the focus of ELK's vision to create a park for recreation and environmental education.

Surrounded on two sides by large warehouses and commercial development, there were threats that the vacant lot would be developed. Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit that protects land for public benefit, stepped in to help

secure and preserve the site as open space. TPL and ELK led fundraising efforts to purchase the property from the owner before it was sold for development. The acquisition funds were provided by four key funders: Great Outdoors Colorado, whose funding comes from state lottery taxes to fund parks, trails, and open space; the State of Colorado's Natural Resource Damages (NRD) program, with funds used to address natural resources that have been contaminated (a former federal chemical and weapons testing facility close to the site made it eligible for funding); and private funds from the Gates Family Foundation and the Piton Foundation. After TPL secured the acquisition of the vacant lot, the land was transferred to the city for long-term ownership. Initially, TPL's role was solely to ensure the land would be protected, but TPL has remained involved in support of ELK's vision.

Over the course of a year, TPL and ELK began a detailed master planning process with support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and a Wells Fargo Environmental Solutions for Community grant. The team held several community engagement events to receive input on the design of the project. Construction of the park took 10 years and occurred in three phases. Throughout this build-out process, and with great intention, ELK's capacity also grew, enabling the organization to become a strong leader and steward of the project.

With ELK serving as the local anchor organization, there was an early commitment to steward this project and ensure it was accepted and adopted by residents through their inclusion in the decision-making process. ELK also made the commitment to activate and manage the completed open space based on the ethos that only through use and activation does a space become an indispensable community asset. Similarly, the city departments that participated in this process were assured that the project would be managed well into the future. The city was able to streamline the permit and approval processes and served as a fundraising partner, providing ELK with access to public dollars and federal grants.

In its original lease agreement, ELK was responsible for the maintenance of the park. After a few years, the executive director worked with the city to amend the agreement in recognition that ELK would not have the capacity to manage such a large open space and environmental center. The city agreed to take on the maintenance of the park and center with the recognition that ELK's day-to-day programming, intentional investment in a disadvantaged area, and community engagement provided significant benefits to the community at large.

The open space project was completed in 2021. It restored 5.5 acres of undeveloped parkland, designed to mimic the native short-grass prairie ecosystem. The last acre of the park houses ELK's nature education center, which assists ELK in accomplishing its mission of providing outdoor programs to youth who may otherwise not have the opportunity to engage in science and science-related activities. On the site, green infrastructure techniques improve stormwater flow, enhance water and environmental quality, and encourage the growth of wildlife habitat in the arid urban landscape. The open space also features native play areas, a climbing boulder funded by The North Face, and art features that were designed and constructed by Chevo Studios. The park improvements were funded in part by the National Park Service's Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program, a nationally competitive grant program that delivers funding to urban areas, with priority given to projects located in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods that lack outdoor recreation opportunities. The project was also awarded a Great Urban Parks grant through the National Recreation and Park Association to support the green infrastructure improvements on the site. This effort, which gathered more than 30 partners along the way, truly demonstrates the advantages of collaboration for mutual benefit.

CASE STUDY

ReBUILD Metro: Baltimore, Maryland

In Baltimore, Maryland, a coalition of partners have leveraged new housing development in disinvested neighborhoods to increase green space and promote long-term community resiliency.

FAITH LANE PARK, BALTIMORE, MD. © REBUILD METRO

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Park/green reuse type: neighborhood parks and gardens

Prior use: vacant lots, residential and commercial

Lead: coalition of public, nonprofit, and private partners

Project/program investment: primarily philanthropic funding

Ownership: various, but mostly city

Maintenance financing: two years of basic maintenance built into every project implementation budget

COMMUNITY CONTEXT: BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Population: 585,000

Vacancy rate: 11 percent

Poverty rate: 20 percent

Population of color: 73 percent

Population living within 10 minutes of a park: 88 percent

Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) is an interfaith, multiracial community power organization rooted in Baltimore's neighborhoods and congregations. In 2002, in response to a tragic firebombing in Baltimore's Oliver neighborhood that resulted in the loss of a community leader and her five children, pastors and congregations of local BUILD-affiliated churches committed to rebuilding Oliver and other historically disinvested neighborhoods in East Baltimore. The church leaders engaged the Reinvestment Fund, a national community development financial institution, to explore how they could rebuild East Baltimore together. In the ensuing years, they worked together to leverage development and investment into East Baltimore neighborhoods. In 2017, ReBUILD Metro (ReBUILD) was officially established as an independent nonprofit built on this decade-long effort and partnership.

ReBUILD is focused on addressing property vacancy and community disinvestment without displacing existing neighborhood residents. In order to promote long-term community resiliency, the organization addresses vacant lots and supports green space projects in targeted areas where ReBUILD is also advancing housing redevelopment.

Over the years, ReBUILD has expanded its work to other East Baltimore neighborhoods. As a first step, community leaders invite ReBUILD to support the planning and development of a comprehensive vision to address specific neighborhood needs. After communities have completed the planning process, ReBUILD may stay involved to assist with implementation of the plan.

The neighborhood plans that ReBUILD supports typically identify specific parcels of vacant land, which are usually owned by the city of Baltimore, for green space creation and improvements. The city will frequently agree to enter lease agreements with neighborhood groups, churches, and nonprofit organizations to grant them temporary access and use of the identified properties. The groups can then lead the reactivation of these vacant lots and their maintenance as long-term green spaces that enhance community livability, health, and sustainability.

In 2020, ReBUILD launched its Greening and Sustainability program with the intention to expand the organization's role in collaborative efforts to plant more trees, activate public park spaces, and continue to facilitate the conversion of vacant lots into pocket parks, gardens, and landscaped stormwater facilities.

ReBUILD has worked to consolidate a total of 127 lots into the following green spaces across four neighborhoods:

1. Johnston Square
    a. Greenmount Park Interim Field: 28 lots
2. Greenmount West
    a. Barclay Street Greenspace: 16 lots
3. Oliver
    a. Kaboom Playground: 23 lots
    b. Oliver Community Garden: 51 lots
    c. Faith Lane Park: 6 lots
4. Broadway East
    a. Triangle Park: 3 lots

FAITH LANE PARK, BALTIMORE, MD. © REBUILD METRO

The properties continue to be owned by the city of Baltimore and maintained by the community.

It is the goal that all green space projects taken on by ReBUILD include funding for maintenance for two years after completion. Most often this funding is embedded into grants supporting the implementation of the new green spaces. Some projects are now reaching the end of that two-year time frame, and it is evident that long-term support is needed. While the partnering neighborhood organizations are committed to stewarding these projects to the best of their abilities, ReBUILD leaders recognize that communities have varying levels of capacity, and therefore the maintenance funding needs will vary from project to project. ReBUILD often engages local landscaping contractors as well as the nonprofit organization The 6th Branch to carry out maintenance services. Residents also volunteer to provide additional maintenance support, though the capacity levels vary from community to community, resulting in uneven conditions among the projects. Some minor maintenance is also provided through the city's BMORE Beautiful program Care-A-Lot, which supports community-based vacant property maintenance in Baltimore. The program is limited in size, however, and is not a long-term solution given programmatic restrictions on where support can be offered.

One of the keys to ReBUILD's success is its establishment of and participation in long-term collaborative partnerships. To encourage collaboration, ReBUILD sits at a discussion table with several other local nonprofits to discuss upcoming projects and opportunities. This group is known as the Baltimore Environmental Equity Partners (BEEP) and includes Interfaith Partners of the Chesapeake, Blue Water Baltimore, Neighborhood Design Center, Turnaround Tuesday, and Patterson Park Audubon Center. Originally, these convenings were funded through a local grant, creating space and opportunity to have dedicated time for strategic conversations. Even after those funds were expended, the organizations have continued to come together regularly, as they recognize they can achieve more through cooperation than by operating alone.

CASE STUDY

The Giving Grove: Kansas City, Missouri

More than 500 orchards and a national network of community stewards have sprouted from a Kansas City initiative to address food insecurity.

KANSAS CITY, MO. © THE GIVING GROVE

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Park/green reuse type: community orchards

Prior use: vacant lots, school yards, underutilized parks

Lead: The Giving Grove and local affiliates

Project/program investment: philanthropic, private, and public

Maintenance financing: two years of basic maintenance built into every implementation project

COMMUNITY CONTEXT:

National

The Giving Grove began in 2013 as a grassroots effort to make fresh fruits, nuts, and berries freely available to Kansas City neighborhoods with high rates of food insecurity. The Giving Grove provides trees, supplies, and training necessary for community residents to grow a fruitful orchard. The benefits of a community orchard model go well beyond food security. These spaces serve as destinations for people to gather safely while also restoring urban canopies to address community challenges such as climate change.

Within a few years, The Giving Grove program housed within Kansas City Community Gardens helped install more than 100 orchards in neighborhoods throughout Kansas City that have faced decades of environmental and health inequities. Each orchard produces hundreds of pounds of free, fresh produce for the neighborhood.

After finding success with The Giving Grove program in Kansas City, its founders created a separate nonprofit organization in 2017 to began expanding the program across the nation. They intentionally decided to use a national network of local affiliates because they knew firsthand that this work needs to be embraced, led, and implemented by residents with local knowledge, connections, and pride. Since then, The Giving Grove has expanded to 14 cities across the U.S., with 500 orchards and growing, each within walking distance of 1,000 or more residents. The orchards are managed and maintained by more than 1,000 volunteer orchard stewards and local partners including nonprofits, food banks, schools, and conservation land trusts.

The Giving Grove is designed to support residents from the first point of contact well into the management of their community groves. With technical assistance, education, material support, and knowledge, interested resident-growers become long-term stewards. Technical assistance includes site visits, relationship-building, and customized troubleshooting to support the entire growing process from seed to shelf. The Giving Grove team encourages thinking about species diversity for new groves to protect against threats to single-species planting. Each project is uniquely designed and implemented according to the steward's vision. Each site has two to three dedicated stewards to complement the local organizational support. Most of the stewards are volunteers, though some do receive a stipend from the affiliate organizations. After the local groves are established, The Giving Grove provides ongoing education to local affiliates on topics that relate to horticulture, orchard steward training, and program sustainability.

Ownership and access to the properties for these orchard projects differ from city to city. In some cities, local partners acquire the vacant land. In other cities, residents connect with conservation land trust organizations that are already amenable to preserving and expanding green spaces. About a quarter of orchards nationally are planted at schools, and many others are planted at social service agencies or faith communities. Other local affiliates work directly with their local governments, particularly parks departments, to address city goals such as increasing tree canopy. Regardless of ownership, reactivating vacant land for the use of food production can be challenging if there is no access to water. Some affiliates have worked with their local government partners on policies that enable water access to sustain the orchards.

With the establishment of a new affiliate partner, The Giving Grove provides up to $75,000 of seed funding to support design, implementation, and maintenance of orchard projects in that city for the first two years. Each local affiliate is expected to contribute a matching amount to ensure there are proper resources to maintain the orchards. The Giving Grove is flexible in how local affiliates can achieve this matching requirement. For example, The Giving Grove teamed up with a local partner to collaboratively apply for a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant; they were awarded $300,000, which covered both The Giving Grove's investment and the local match. As a national organization with internal fundraising capacity, The Giving Grove is able to pursue and attract funding from various sources. The Giving Grove's collaborative approach to fundraising creates opportunities for lower-income places and smaller communities to gain access to funding sources that they may not be able to access independently.

Operational support for these orchards requires continual fundraising efforts. The Giving Grove provides fundraising support tailored to local affiliates' needs and context. The Giving Grove will often collaborate with affiliates to pursue larger grant requests or provide technical assistance on grant applications and grant management. The Giving Grove seeks federal funding, such as U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and USDA grants, as well as financial support from local family foundations, national partners, and private individuals.

Local affiliates also pursue similar funding sources, with some relying on corporate sponsorship of parks or corporate cleanup days. The Giving Grove has succeeded in connecting the importance of green spaces with health equity in its fundraising efforts and can effectively demonstrate the impact of its interventions and investments through data and storytelling. Leaders have learned that conducting advocacy and education with philanthropic and institutional partners takes time but can lead to more impactful outcomes. They continuously explore opportunities to diversify funding for long-term sustainability.

The Giving Grove's national network of embedded local affiliates allows for shared knowledge building, communal technical assistance, and insights into best practices. For example, The Giving Grove affiliates meet quarterly to disseminate information and share strategies from a diverse set of experiences. The annual affiliate conference brings all the partners together for hands-on training and sharing in rotating affiliate cities, allowing partners to see how implementation works in different communities. The most common best practices relate to innovative partnerships, funding opportunities, and creative end use ideas.

CASE STUDY

Tribute Park: Schenectady, New York

The Capital Regional Land Bank and the Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority have transformed vacant properties into a community park with much-desired public amenities.

MAYOR GARY MCCARTHY, SCHENECTADY, NY.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Park/green reuse type: neighborhood park

Prior use: vacant lots, residential and commercial

Lead: Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority/ Capital Region Land Bank

Project/program investment: $115,000 from foundations and public funds for demolition

Ownership: City of Schenectady

Maintenance financing: City and Land Bank operating budget

COMMUNITY CONTEXT: SCHENECTADY, NEW YORK

Population: 67,000

Vacancy rate: 23 percent

Poverty rate: 20 percent

Population of color: 57 percent

Population living within 10 minutes of a park: 71 percent

The Capital Region Land Bank is a nonprofit created by intermunicipal agreement between the cities of Schenectady and Amsterdam and Schenectady County and administered by the Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority (Metroplex). Metroplex was established in 1998 as a public benefit corporation by the State of New York to institute a comprehensive, coordinated program of economic development activities in the Route 5 and Route 7 corridors of Schenectady County, with a particular focus on Schenectady's downtown corridor. The state enabling statute allows Metroplex to design, plan, finance, site, construct, administer, operate, manage, and maintain facilities within its service district and is funded through dedicated sales tax receipts derived from Schenectady County. The sole purpose of the Land Bank, which is managed by the staff at Metroplex, is to convert vacant and abandoned properties into productive use according to local community goals.

The Eastern Avenue neighborhood was one of the Land Bank's first "focus neighborhoods," a priority corridor chosen for revitalization. The Land Bank and Metroplex were committed to enabling new housing development, increasing real estate values for the neighborhood, and eliminating blight from the target area in a way that was comprehensive and in line with community goals. As part of that plan, 25 derelict buildings were targeted for intervention and demolished by the Land Bank. During the planning process, neighbors expressed a desire to have open green space and park access due to increased

concerns about children not having a safe place to play. Metroplex and the Land Bank identified 3 of the 25 parcels for the creation of an urban pocket park. Abandoned and deteriorated structures were on two of the parcels, which the Land Bank worked with the city of Schenectady to acquire through the property tax foreclosure process. The Land Bank acquired a third contiguous property, a vacant lot, through private sale. The Land Bank demolished the two unsafe structures, consolidated the parcels to create Tribute Park, and then transferred the entire site to the city of Schenectady.

At nearly half an acre, Tribute Park was designed to address specific needs and desires articulated by the nearby residents through engagement with the neighborhood association. The Land Bank and the city entered an MOU that allowed the Land Bank access to the property as a construction partner and demonstrated their long-term interest and investment in sustaining the park.

SCHENECTADY, NY. © BILL BUELL FROM THE DAILY GAZETTE

The Land Bank took a phased approach to implementing the projects and contemplated the long-term maintenance requirements along the way. In the first year, the site was cleaned; donated trees were planted; and new lighting, sidewalks, and utilities were installed. This work was funded by a blend of philanthropic and state funding, including a $100,000 grant from the Wright Family Foundation, a $15,000 grant from The Carlilian Foundation, and a grant made available to the Land Bank by the Office of the New York State Attorney General. The second phase of the project, made possible through a $100,000 grant from The Schenectady Foundation, involved the installation of a splash pad, benches, tables, and plenty of green space to fulfill the wishes of the families in the neighborhood.

The intentional phasing ensured the city and the Land Bank could maintain and sustain what was being newly installed. Easy-to-replace materials were used for the benches and signage in case of vandalism to accommodate quick repairs, as the team recognized that keeping the park in good repair was critical to the success of the corridor. With that in mind, the splash pad was designed with the jets installed below grade to decrease risk of damage. The city is responsible for the basic maintenance of the park, including mowing and addressing vegetation. Metroplex and the Land Bank have responded to assist the city with various signage and equipment repairs.

Tribute Park has been embraced by the community and is well used by children and adults alike. Derelict properties that were causing harm to neighbors have been transformed into a wonderful community asset in the Eastern Avenue neighborhood of Schenectady.

CASE STUDY

The Public Outdoor Plaza (POP!) Initiative: Chicago, Illinois

With American Rescue Plan Act funding, the city of Chicago has activated vacant lots for public use through a competitive grant program.

CHICAGO, IL. © LJC

The Public Outdoor Plaza (POP!) program is managed by the city of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) and is one component of the city's $1.2 billion strategy for an equitable economic recovery. The program was inspired by the success of pilot projects facilitated by the city to create more outdoor publicly accessible spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, the DPD announced POP Courts! an initiative to help small businesses expand street dining options and increase outdoor spaces for community members to gather safely. POP Courts! was originally funded at $150,000, but when it was clear this sum was insufficient, a second round of fundraising secured another $200,000. As part of the initiative, a community plaza in the Austin neighborhood's commercial district was constructed, which was quickly embraced by community members. Driven by greater public gathering in the commercial corridor, businesses started taking additional interest in vacant storefronts. The pilot was such a success that the POP! program launched shortly after the ribbon cutting at POP Courts!

POP! is designed to help community-based organizations revitalize underutilized land along neighborhood retail corridors. The program sought proposals from trusted organizations in special service areas (similar to business improvement districts) to create strategic community gathering spaces that serve as destination points for local residents, shoppers, commuters, and neighborhood visitors. These organizations, called Delegate Agencies as part of the program, are the primary implementers of these spaces.

Nonprofit organizations with an existing relationship with the city that have a demonstrated connection to their community and a strong fiscal standing were selected as Delegate Agencies. The Delegate Agencies were eligible for $500,000 in city funding for the design, construction, and maintenance of their proposed projects. Proposed plaza locations could be on publicly or privately owned land but had to be located within moderate- or low-income areas. Because these projects were supported using American Rescue Plan Act funding, there was pressure to implement the new community spaces quickly in order to meet the funding deadline. The DPD provided coordination and technical assistance to the Delegate Agencies, ensuring that permitting and other public processes would not serve as a barrier for project implementation. However, Delegate Agencies were required to have a dedicated general contractor to activate the spaces as quickly as possible, which served as a barrier limiting the ability of smaller organizations to be competitive in the selection process.

CHICAGO, IL. © LJC

The Delegate Agencies signed a three-year lease agreement with the city for use of the properties, which requires them to maintain the plazas, including vegetation management, snow removal, and basic upkeep, even for the properties that remain in city ownership. Because of this agreement, project designers were encouraged to consider minimal maintenance in plans, including features such as painted concrete and murals. They were also strongly encouraged to use local minority-owned contractors for the construction of the plaza.

The city's Corridor Ambassador program works in parallel to POP! and tracks activities in the commercial areas. It is anticipated that the city will also help track use of the POP! project spaces and additional needs that may be present at the new community spaces.

The city's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events provided grants to the Delegate Agencies to assist with programming and basic maintenance of the space. The Delegate Agencies can continue to raise funds to independently support the project or monetize use of the space through vendor fees or programming fees. DPD will continue to oversee all the projects throughout the three-year agreement.

Of the 12 plazas established under this program, three were developed on city-owned property. The city had initially planned to retain ownership of the plazas as part of a long-term holding strategy, given the potential for future development of these sites. Due to the success of these efforts, however, the city is now open to transferring ownership of these three projects to the respective Delegate Agencies or an appropriate designee to preserve these new community spaces. A local videographer documented the success of these projects, including the community planning process and implementation. The high-quality videos provided the city and community with compelling storytelling tools that captured the projects' positive impacts and honored the community leaders who were integral to that success.

CASE STUDY

Station Soccer: Atlanta, Georgia

In Atlanta, Georgia, publicly owned underutilized land has been activated for recreation, gardening, safe community gathering spaces, and community power building in disinvested neighborhoods.

ATLANTA, GA. © MARTA

Soccer in the Streets, an Atlanta not-for-profit organization, was established by Carolyn McKenzie, a social worker who focused much of her time in disinvested neighborhoods with a high percentage of publicly subsidized housing. She noticed that the youth, and particularly children of color, did not play soccer despite it being the most popular sport worldwide. In 1989, McKenzie founded and launched Soccer in the Streets, which seeks to ensure underserved and low-income neighborhoods have access to sports-based youth development programming.

Decades later, leaders at Soccer in the Streets recognized that the youth in low-income and disinvested neighborhoods did not have the financial means to "travel" to play soccer as part of a formalized team structure, and they didn't have safe recreational spaces in their neighborhoods. During his daily commute via MARTA (the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority), the director of strategic partnership for Soccer in the Streets noticed the underutilized swaths of land and parking lots near the subway stations. This sparked an idea: What if Soccer in the Streets could create a network of mini soccer fields anchored by MARTA transit stations across Atlanta? The organization was able to do just that, and in 2016 StationSoccer, a program of Soccer in the Streets, was launched on the plaza level at Five Points Station—the first soccer field project inside a train station in the world.

MARTA, the city of Atlanta, and the Atlanta United Foundation, a subsidiary of the Arthur M. Blank Foundation, were critical first partners in this work. The success of this first official project led to more StationSoccer projects and three additional fields. The collaboration between partners also grew with key stakeholders such as Atlanta's Department of City Planning, the Transformation Alliance, Musco Lighting, FieldTurf, and others coming to the table to provide resources and support.

The majority of the fields and programming spaces are on MARTA-owned land, with a few on privately owned land. StationSoccer established a lease agreement with MARTA to use and program the land, and MARTA continues to maintain the property. StationSoccer programming on privately owned land relies on the same lease agreement parameters.

The city was incredibly supportive throughout the permitting and administrative process of these sites and invested $100,000 into each of the projects installed, demonstrating city leaders' understanding of the importance of this initiative.

StationSoccer's innovation and proven track record of success garnered national and international attention. This exposure and interest created significant fundraising opportunities for the organization. It was successful in achieving its $6 million capital campaign goals, which included a $1 million allocation of funds from the Biden administration in a COVID relief package. Now, not just capital support but programming and corporate funding are starting to flow into the program. MARTA maintains all the grass around the fields, which reduces the overall burden on StationSoccer and thus increases the organization's ability to implement programs and address the community challenges at a deeper level.

The ultimate goal is to build a "League of Stations" that encourages kids and adults to represent their own station community and play other station teams by using the public transit system. But the leaders, partners, and supporters know that the impact is much greater than just learning and playing soccer. Soccer in the Streets and partners are promoting a new model for youth development, using soccer as the conduit to provide life-changing programs, primarily focused on job readiness, that benefit thousands of youth around the city. While they work to support individuals, especially youth, StationSoccer program sites have found other opportunities to address larger community needs. The team is very intentional about who they are trying to serve, working with school systems and social service partners and supporting life on and off the field rather than keeping an eye out for future soccer talent. This intentionality is evident in decisions to offer free programming for youth and hire locally for field managers while creating a pay-to-play model for adults and others who have the resources.

Due to the program's success, parents and other community members have now embraced the mission of StationSoccer and contributed to the organization's expansion of its services. Now, community gardening and other activities are happening on MARTA land with parents and community members supporting the maintenance efforts.

ATLANTA, GA. © STATIONSOCCER

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