

Grounds for Change

A Policy Playbook for Social
Connection and Civic Life





10-Minute Walk

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10-MINUTE WALK® POLICY GUIDES

Trust for Public Land's Parks Initiative aims to ensure that everyone has access to a high-quality park close to home. To advance this mission, the 10-Minute Walk® program collaborates with local leaders to implement policies that expand access to quality parks—particularly in historically underinvested communities—to drive lasting, systemic change.

10-Minute Walk® Policy Guides provide practical resources to help cities put policy into practice. Each guide offers step-by-step guidance, design considerations, and real-world examples that translate research into action. These tools help local leaders advance parks as essential infrastructure for public health, climate resilience, and social cohesion.

The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented here, as well as any errors, are those of Trust for Public Land. This document is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice.

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Executive Summary



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At a time when communities are facing converging challenges—from climate change and public health crises to fraying social connection—public parks continue to offer a promising path forward. However, ensuring parks reach their fullest potential and serve people in the best possible way requires attention not only to park location, quality, and activation, but also to the processes that shape how communities engage in public decision-making around parks.

This policy playbook makes the case for strengthening those community engagement processes, and it offers practical tools to help cities make them happen. By anchoring community members as active decision-makers in policy, not just through ad hoc practices or one-off initiatives, cities can advance more equitable access to parks and position parks as a foundation for deeper civic participation and public agency responsiveness to those they serve.

Our Community Engagement Policy Playbook

Drawing on Trust for Public Land’s research and field experience, this playbook outlines practical policy strategies to move community members toward empowerment as defined by the International Association for Public Participation’s (IAP2) spectrum. The IAP2 spectrum guides participation in specific projects, but on its own it does not address the deeper, place-based relationships and civic capacity needed for lasting leadership. TPL’s [Common Ground Framework](#) adds this dimension by positioning parks as civic infrastructure that strengthens social ties and expands communities’ ability to organize and

advocate. The **10-Minute Walk® Park Equity Policy Framework** further emphasizes equitable access and quality while embedding residents in decisions about how park systems are planned, funded, and maintained. This playbook weaves together these compatible frameworks to form a mutually reinforcing foundation where engagement practices, civic capacity, and equitable park access build on one another to create stronger, more inclusive communities.

Through case studies, policy spotlights, and TPL's field-tested strategies, we show how municipal agencies can **engage community members early, activate and program parks inclusively, and sustain long-term community leadership.**



Who Should Use This Report

This policy playbook is designed for mayors, city managers and administration officials, city councilmembers, parks and recreation professionals, community organizers, and philanthropic leaders who are working to:

- **Advance equitable governance and service delivery** by identifying policy models, best practices, and strategies that position community members as active partners in public decision-making that is representative of the demographics of the community.
- **Track progress toward equity goals** using accountability mechanisms like evaluation tools, public dashboards, and transparent reporting.
- **Build collaborative capacity** by investing in staff training, partnering with trusted messengers, and compensating residents for their time and contributions.

Whether your community is just beginning to formalize community engagement policy or refining an existing approach, the strategies and examples in this report can help parks become more welcoming, inclusive spaces that reflect community priorities and foster belonging, collective stewardship, and active public involvement in shaping local decisions.

SECTION 1

Introduction



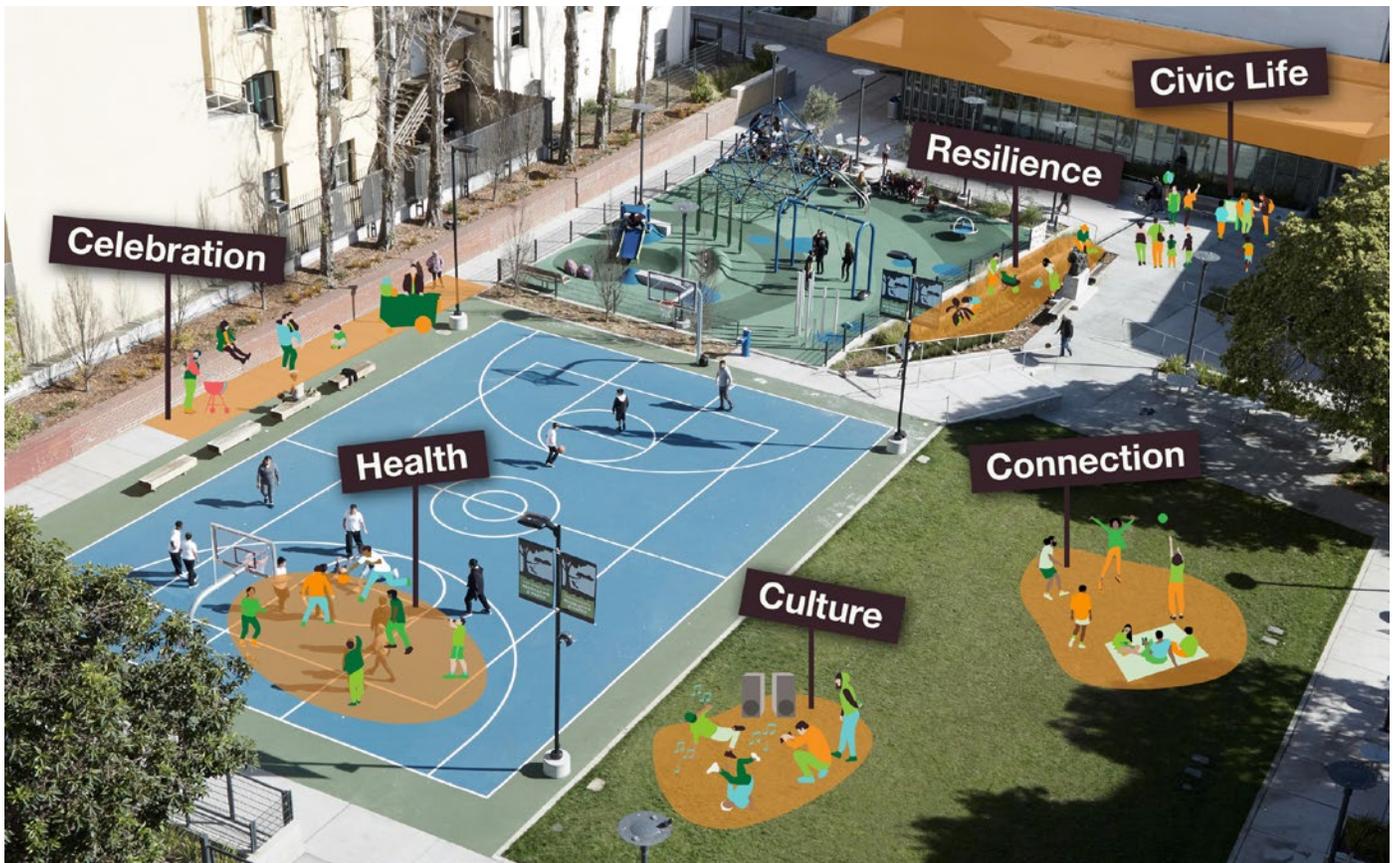
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Social Fabric in Crisis

At the heart of any thriving community lies its social fabric. Yet in many places, these bonds are frayed. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness and isolation a public health epidemic—a sentiment echoing a 2018 survey that revealed only 16 percent of Americans feel deeply attached to their local community.¹ This weakening of social ties not only diminishes individual well-being but also undercuts collective resilience, making it harder for communities to mobilize around common goals or support one another in times of crisis.^{2,3} These challenges do not exist in a vacuum, they are layered onto longstanding inequities in whose voices are heard, whose needs are served, and where investments are made. Building belonging and trust requires both protecting against future harms and creating opportunities for repair.

The Role of Parks in Building Connection

Amid these pressing challenges, there are encouraging “bright spot” strategies for building and strengthening social connections. If we aim to connect people to one another and to local institutions, while also tackling broader public health and environmental challenges, investing in public space emerges as an effective and multi-benefit solution.^{4,5} Parks, in particular, play a unique role in building community and social capital.^{6,7,8,9}



Parks are more than recreational amenities; they are essential infrastructure for healthy, inclusive, and resilient communities.^{10,11,12,13,14,15} Parks absorb stormwater, cool and clean the air,^{16,17,18} and serve as venues for education, celebration, and emergency response.^{19,20,21,22,23} They are where neighbors meet, families gather, and communities take shape. Parks are where public life happens. When designed and governed inclusively, they can help mend our social fabric and build civic strength for generations to come.^{24,25,26,27,28}

Why Community Engagement Matters

For parks to realize their incredible potential, the people who live near and use these spaces must be active partners in shaping them. Parks shaped through meaningful community engagement foster stronger connection and place attachment,^{29,30} which in turn can lead to increased park use and the health, environmental, and social benefits that follow.³¹

Just as important as the resulting park space is the process itself: meeting, collaborating, visioning, and building together creates relationships, shared identity, and community power. TPL's experience suggests that these benefits can endure independent of a park's ultimate use. While research on the social impacts of the engagement process is still emerging, field experience shows its potential to strengthen social connections as much as the final park.^{32,33,34}

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) defines a [spectrum of community engagement](#) that ranges from simply informing residents to fully empowering them with decision-making authority.³⁵ At one end of the spectrum, one-way engagement tools, such as public notices or presentations, share information but do not provide meaningful opportunities for residents to influence outcomes. At the other end are two-way and multi-way approaches that invite dialogue,

collaboration, and shared decision-making. Between these endpoints are important stages: consulting (gathering feedback on options), involving (working directly with the public to ensure concerns are reflected), and collaborating (partnering with the community on each aspect of the decision). Each stage increases the depth of public influence and trust, and agencies can move along the spectrum over time as relationships, capacity, and structures grow. These stages clarify how public influence can grow over time, but fully realizing this potential requires additional frameworks that connect participation to civic capacity and equitable park access. This playbook builds on those frameworks, described below.

FRAMEWORKS FOR PARK ACCESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This playbook builds on Trust for Public Land’s 50-year history of partnering with communities to shape parks and greenspaces that reflect local visions. In addition to drawing from TPL’s recent field research and innovative case studies, it draws from two complementary frameworks that highlight the importance of equitable park access and meaningful community engagement.

- TPL’s [Park Equity Policy Framework](#) establishes the multi-sector policies that shape park distribution, quality, and access, along with the public processes that guide these decisions. **Park equity means that everyone—especially those from historically under-resourced communities—has safe, free access to high-quality parks.** The framework emphasizes shared power, where residents collaborate with city leaders to direct investments, set priorities, and integrate parks into housing, transportation, and land use planning for healthier, more resilient, and inclusive communities.
- TPL’s [Common Ground Framework](#) introduces a community engagement model and over 50 strategies for planning, programming, and designing public spaces that strengthen social ties and support thriving communities. **It defines community engagement as the practice of building trust with representative communities, nurturing collaboration, and centering community members in the decisions that affect their daily life.** The framework emphasizes that successful policies deliver not only physical amenities but also community relationships, identity, and power.



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The State of Community Engagement Today

CURRENT PRACTICES AND GAPS

Recent Trust for Public Land research shows that many of the nation's largest cities are actively investing in community engagement, whether by convening park advisory boards, hosting civic events in parks, or creating dedicated engagement roles.³⁶ These are promising steps toward more inclusive governance. However, more research is needed into the reach, consistency, and representativeness of these efforts, especially outside the largest cities.

Even where engagement is prioritized, many parks and recreation agencies still rely on practices that limit community influence, leading to uneven participation, weaker relationships, and missed opportunities for civic involvement—while also allowing communities with greater time, resources, or political connections to play a disproportionate role in shaping decisions.³⁷ This is especially challenging in historically marginalized communities, where structural barriers have long excluded residents from meaningful decision-making.^{38,39} This can result in limited participation, weaker relationships, and missed opportunities for long-term civic involvement, while at the same time, communities with greater time, resources, or political connections may exert outsized influence, creating further imbalances in whose voices shape decisions.

Past experiences of exclusion can also leave some residents feeling unwelcome or distrustful of the community engagement process.^{40,41,42} When staff demographics differ significantly from those of the communities they serve, residents may feel even less comfortable participating. Agencies can begin to close these gaps through more inclusive hiring practices, partnerships with trusted community messengers, cultural competency training, and engagement processes that are accessible and welcoming to all.

Why Policy Matters

TPL's policy research finds that only about 40 percent of cities have formalized engagement practices through adopted policies that ensure these practices are consistent, equitable, and sustained over time.⁴³ Without such policy, even robust engagement programs can fade with political turnover, funding changes, or leadership shifts. Well-crafted policies can also address the factors that limit representative participation, such as setting standards for inclusive outreach, requiring engagement in underinvested neighborhoods, and ensuring diverse community members have meaningful roles in shaping decisions.

Cities need approaches that move beyond one-off outreach and build lasting structures for community influence. Strong community engagement policies establish clear, durable pathways for inclusive resident involvement across the entire lifecycle of parks and park systems, from early input and planning to ongoing activation and shared governance.^{44,45,46,47} Anchored in effective policy, community engagement becomes more consistent, more equitable, and more capable of driving lasting change.⁴⁸ Ultimately, embedding community engagement in policy creates the fundamental trust needed for both relationship-building and policymaking.



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SECTION 2

Unequal Grounds: Disparities in Park Access and Engagement



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Unequal Access to Parks

For parks to serve as places of connection and belonging, they must exist in the first place. Yet, in the United States, 100 million people, including 28 million children, lack access to a park or greenspace within a 10-minute walk of home.⁴⁹ And even where parks are present, they are not created equal.⁵⁰ Parks in neighborhoods with majority residents of color are half the size of parks in predominantly white neighborhoods—yet they serve five times more people per acre. Similarly, parks serving low-income households are four times smaller—yet serve four times more people than parks serving high-income households.⁵¹ And in neighborhoods with both low-income and majority residents of color, parks are often of lower quality, are less maintained, and offer fewer programs than parks in higher-income neighborhoods or with majority white residents.^{52,53} These disparities are rooted in long-standing racialized and economic inequities in public investment.^{54,55}

The Costs of Inequitable Parks

This lack of access to high-quality parks has consequences. Studies consistently show that access to green space and time spent in nature are associated with reduced stress,⁵⁶ lower rates of depression and anxiety,⁵⁷ improved concentration,⁵⁸ increased physical activity,⁵⁹ reduced blood pressure,⁶⁰ faster post-surgical recovery,⁶¹ and even lower overall mortality.⁶² In addition to physical and mental health benefits, access to parks fosters social connection, a critical factor in long-term well-being and longevity.⁶³ Inequitable access to these benefits—for instance, for people of color, who, due to racialized and economic discrimination, are nearly three times more likely to live in nature-deprived communities than white populations⁶⁴—deepens cycles of inequity. These same inequities have ecological consequences: systemic racism and disinvestment can reduce tree canopy, biodiversity, and other environmental functions, which in turn limit climate resilience and further reinforce health and social disparities.⁶⁵

At the same time, new park investments, especially large-scale improvements, can create unintended pressures on housing markets and local businesses that anchor neighborhood life. Without safeguards, these changes can accelerate gentrification and displacement of both households and businesses, including the very communities the investments are meant to benefit.⁶⁶ Community engagement policies must therefore consider not only who lacks access today, but how to ensure new access does not come at the cost of neighborhood stability and belonging.

Beyond Proximity: Social Access and Shared Power

Access to parks is both physical and social. Having a park nearby matters, but so does whether that park feels safe, welcoming, and relevant to the community it serves. What works in one community may not work in another. Certain groups, such as people with disabilities, often face additional barriers that require targeted engagement to identify and address.⁶⁷ When a park reflects local needs and removes barriers—for example by providing a well-designed playground where children feel safe and people of all ages and abilities can connect—it becomes a place that strengthens social ties and fosters civic life.

To realize their full community-building potential, parks must draw people in. That requires programming that excites residents, features and equipment that people want to use, and spaces that are accessible and enjoyable for all—all of which must be well-maintained. But understanding what will bring people into a park, and keep them coming back, depends on intentional, ongoing engagement with the community it serves.

This is where policy plays a critical role. The right community engagement policies don't just bring parks closer to people; they also bring people into the decisions that shape those parks over the long-term. When this happens consistently and with intention, parks become more than green spaces—they become civic infrastructure that helps build trust, shared power, and lasting community connection.^{68,69}



A Policy Pathway to Equitable Community Outcomes

Disparities in park access mirror and reinforce broader societal inequities. When communities lack safe, high-quality public spaces that provide quality programming, opportunities for connection and civic participation are diminished. But parks, when equitably planned and activated, can serve as entry points to stronger community health, resilience, and civic life.

THE PROBLEM: Disparities in Park Access and Engagement

-  **Lack of Park Access:** 100 million people, including 28 million children, don't have a park within a 10-minute walk of home.
-  **Low-Quality, Unengaging Parks:** Parks in low-income communities and communities of color are often smaller, under-maintained, and lack relevant and engaging programming.
-  **Chronic Underinvestment:** Many parks face years of deferred maintenance and underfunding.
-  **Unusable Facilities:** Parks often lack features or equipment for all ages or abilities.
-  **Limited or Non-Representative Engagement:** One-way tools and uneven participation reduce resident influence and erode trust over time.



WHAT'S POSSIBLE: Community-Building Parks

- ✓ **Equitable Access** to safe, accessible, nearby, and welcoming parks.
- ✓ **Health and Well-Being** through active, restorative spaces.
- ✓ **Cultural Belonging** through parks that reflect local identity.
- ✓ **Social Cohesion** as parks bring neighbors together.
- ✓ **Climate Resilience** through urban greening and natural infrastructure.
- ✓ **Community Stewardship** as residents care for and advocate for parks.
- ✓ **Civic Involvement** through meaningful participation in shaping public spaces.
- ✓ **Civic Capacity** as communities gain tools and power to lead.
- ✓ **Community-Guided Futures** shaped by local vision.

HOW WE GET THERE: Community-Centered Policies

- ➔ **Engage Community Members Early**
- ➔ **Activate and Program Parks Inclusively**
- ➔ **Sustain Long-Term Community Leadership**



SECTION 3

Community-Centered Policies for Community-Building Parks



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Thoughtful policy can transform community engagement from ad hoc outreach to a core function of local governance. Done well, such policies help correct deeper systemic inequities—whether underinvestment, exclusion from decision-making, or a mismatch between a park’s amenities and programming and community needs.^{70,71} As parks become more reflective of and responsive to the people they serve, they grow into powerful engines of connection, belonging, and civic life—strengthening the feedback loop between public investment and community well-being.

Policy Playbook for Inclusive Community Engagement

This playbook outlines three interrelated strategies for strengthening civic participation and building better parks. Each strategy is advanced through specific policies that cities can adopt to embed community engagement in everyday governance, and is supported by real-world examples and implementation guidance.

- **Strategy 1: Engage community members early** as active partners in decision-making through formal policies that require meaningful input—especially from historically underinvested areas—across all stages of park planning, governance, and service delivery.
- **Strategy 2: Activate and program parks inclusively** by equitably allocating funding, fostering community partnerships, delivering programs and services that meet the needs of the local community, and reducing permitting barriers so residents can host events, lead volunteer efforts, and establish and deliver programs that reflect local priorities.
- **Strategy 3: Sustain long-term community leadership** through advisory boards, youth councils, and continued investment in training and capacity building to ensure communities remain active partners in shaping their parks over time.

STRATEGY 1: ENGAGE COMMUNITY MEMBERS EARLY

POLICIES	Comprehensive Engagement Policies	Mandates robust and representative public outreach for park planning, development, and programming. Impact: Ensures diverse, representative community members are integrated into all aspects of park decision-making.
	Park System Planning and Needs Assessments	Requires cities to regularly conduct comprehensive park system planning and needs assessments in collaboration with representative community members, giving them meaningful influence over priorities and decisions. Impact: Identifies gaps in access or park quality, guides long-term development, prioritizes program and service delivery, and results in park systems that reflect community priorities.
	Participatory Budgeting	Establishes a framework in which residents directly influence how public funds are allocated for park improvements and initiatives. Impact: Aligns budget decisions with community-identified needs and interests and fosters a sense of ownership over local investments.

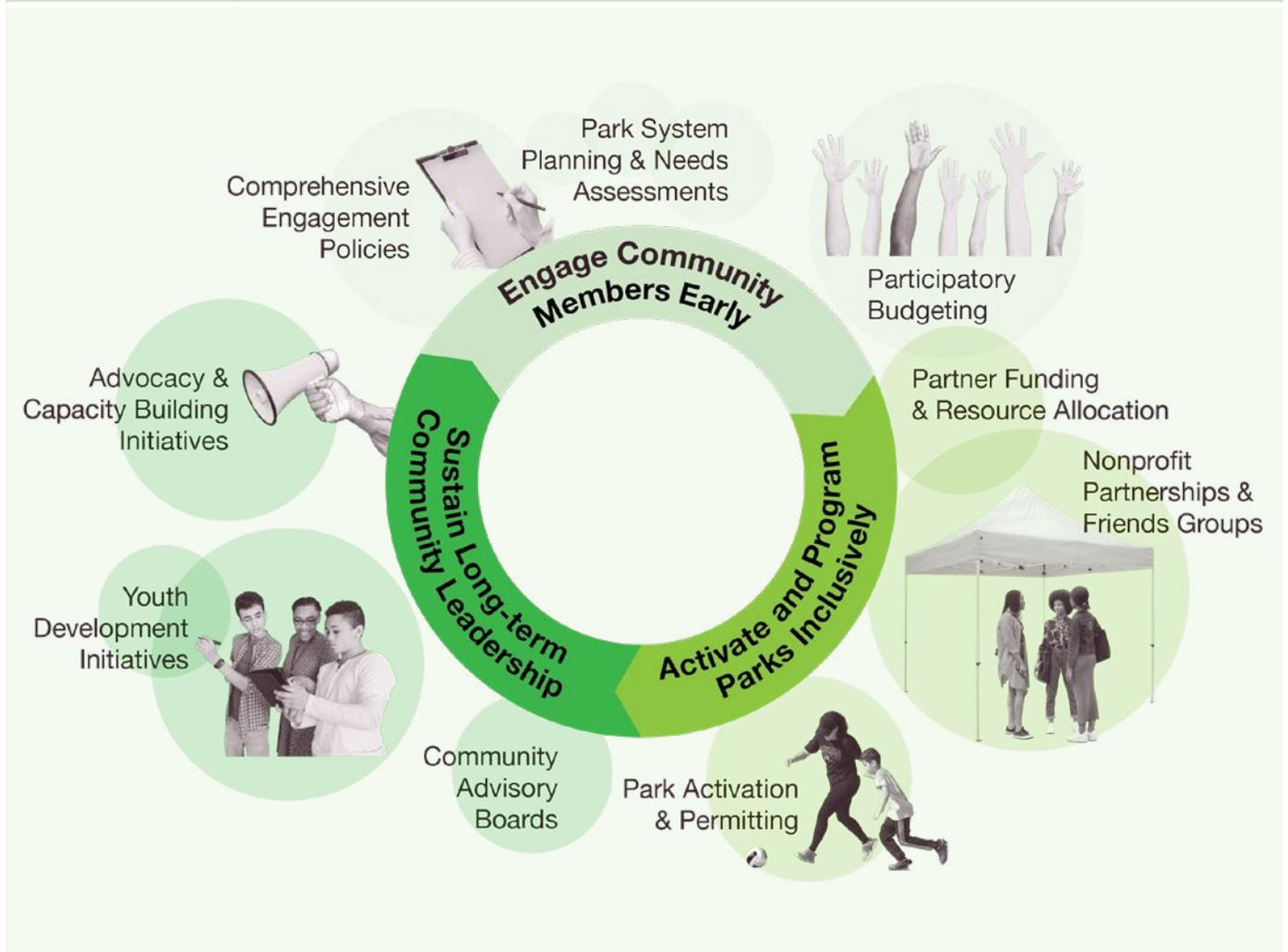
STRATEGY 2: ACTIVATE AND PROGRAM PARKS INCLUSIVELY

POLICIES	Partner Funding and Resource Allocation	Sets requirements and criteria for allocating resources to community-led initiatives with provisions ensuring underrepresented groups can access adequate funds. Impact: Reduces disparities in resource access and empowers communities to lead and partner on impactful projects.
	Nonprofit Partnerships and Friends Groups	Establishes formal partnerships (sometimes through memoranda of understanding or other agreements) between park agencies and nonprofit or community groups to co-manage and/or activate park spaces and/or service delivery. Impact: Improves and/or expands programming, maintenance, and a sense of community ownership through structured collaborations.
	Park Activation and Permitting	Simplifies permitting and insurance requirements to lower barriers for community-led events, volunteering, and activation in parks. Impact: Expands access and fosters more diverse uses by reducing administrative obstacles.

STRATEGY 3: SUSTAIN LONG-TERM COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

POLICIES	Community Advisory Boards	Creates or formalizes community member advisory boards that provide input on park policies, planning, and programming. Impact: Institutionalizes valued and diverse community participation and ensures residents inform decisions on an ongoing basis.
	Youth Development Initiatives	Establishes or formally recognizes youth councils or advisory boards to engage diverse younger generations in park planning and governance. Impact: Builds leadership skills and fosters civic engagement among diverse youth, while ensuring that park systems better reflect the needs of young people and serve as inclusive, safe spaces for youth within the community.
	Advocacy and Capacity Building Initiatives	Creates or formalizes structured programs that fund and provide training for community advocates. Impact: Strengthens local leadership, empowers residents with the skills to engage in governance processes, and ensures informed, equitable participation in decision-making.

INTEGRATED STRATEGIES: INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY AT EVERY STAGE



These three strategies, and their supportive policies, are designed to build on one another across the lifecycle of parks. Early-stage policy tools lay the groundwork for trust and inclusive decision-making, making activation more responsive and relevant to community priorities. As activation draws people into parks and deepens relationships, it creates momentum for long-term governance and leadership. Sustained engagement policies then strengthen community capacity and civic power, supporting ongoing stewardship and preparing residents to participate more effectively in the next cycle of planning and investment.

Together, these stages form a reinforcing cycle where policy and practice evolve in tandem—each informing the next—so that parks and communities grow stronger, more connected, and more equitable over time.



STRATEGY 1. Engage Community Members Early

Equitable parks begin with early, meaningful engagement. When communities are involved at the outset, before decisions are made about park locations, features, service delivery, or funding, cities are better equipped to design park systems that reflect local priorities and ensure resources are distributed fairly. Early engagement creates the foundation for what follows: inclusive programming, strong partnerships, and long-term community leadership.

Engaging residents early is not just about participation. It is about ensuring influence is balanced and representative. Without intentional strategies, these efforts can default to a “squeaky wheel gets the grease” dynamic, where residents with more time, resources, and political access disproportionately shape outcomes. This leaves residents with fewer resources—whose communities have often experienced decades of disinvestment—without an equal role in decisions that affect their lives. Formal policies that center equity, prioritize outreach to historically underinvested neighborhoods, and require representative participation counteract these imbalances.

Additionally, early engagement is a critical safeguard against unintended consequences. When residents are partners from the outset, cities are better able to identify and address risks of gentrification and displacement linked to major park investments, and to shape strategies that protect long-term community stability alongside new amenities.

This section introduces three types of policies that help embed community members as active partners in decision-making early in the life of a park or park system plan. It begins with **comprehensive engagement policies**, which define citywide expectations and structures for public participation. From there, it explores **planning and needs assessment policies**, which guide equitable investment decisions, and **participatory budgeting policies**, which give residents direct influence over park funding decisions.



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Comprehensive Engagement Policies

Comprehensive engagement policies establish a consistent, city- or department-wide approach to ensure community members are meaningfully involved in park planning, programming, and decision-making. These policies provide the foundation for inclusive engagement across all stages of park development and activation and help ensure that engagement is not limited to a single project or moment in time. At the same time, these policies should build in flexibility, not to weaken commitments, but to ensure engagement processes are co-designed with representative community groups and responsive to local dynamics and priorities.

Unlike more targeted tools like needs assessments or participatory budgeting, comprehensive policies define the structures, expectations, staffing, and resources needed to make public participation a regular and equitable feature of parks governance. Many draw from the [IAP2 Spectrum](#), which outlines levels of public participation. On one end of the spectrum, residents are informed, on the other, they are empowered.

Key components of comprehensive engagement policies include:

- **Clear standards** for engagement based on project type, scope, and scale.
- **Formal advisory bodies** or Friends groups that reflect the demographics of the communities they serve.
- **Integration of engagement into budgeting processes**, with resources allocated for staff, outreach, and early community involvement.
- **Dedicated engagement staff** or teams within park agencies or city-wide to build long-term relationships.
- **Flexible funding mechanisms** that allow agencies or nonprofit partners to compensate residents for their time and expertise.

By codifying these practices, cities create more transparent and accountable processes, reduce the influence of political turnover, and ensure that all communities—especially those historically excluded—have meaningful opportunities to shape public space.

POLICY SNAPSHOT: Comprehensive Engagement Policies

Minneapolis, MN; Raleigh, NC; East Baton Rouge Parish, LA

Several cities have adopted formal engagement frameworks that guide outreach and participation across their park systems. These policies embed public engagement into agency operations and help ensure that community involvement is consistent, well-resourced, and aligned with equity goals:

- Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board's [Community Engagement Policy](#) standardizes engagement across all park projects following the IAP2 Spectrum.
- Raleigh's [Public Participation Playbook](#) follows the IAP2 Spectrum to guide engagement efforts across city departments.
- The Recreation and Park Commission for the Parish of East Baton Rouge (BREC) [Community Engagement Policy](#) formalizes stewardship groups as part of its park planning process using the IAP2 Spectrum as the framework for the policy.



Case Study: Developing a Comprehensive Community Engagement Policy for Chattanooga, TN

With support from [TPL's Park Equity Accelerator Program](#), Chattanooga's Department of Parks and Outdoors (P&O) developed a formal community engagement policy to ensure park planning, programming, and decision-making processes were inclusive, transparent, and responsive. Rather than drafting the policy behind closed doors, the City embraced a participatory approach grounded in the principles the policy aimed to uphold.

The process began with a review of Chattanooga's past community engagement efforts and practices, peer city policies (Des Moines, IA; Fort Collins, CO; Huntsville, AL; Knoxville, TN; Lexington, KY), and best practices from leading agencies like Denver Parks and Recreation and Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. This research identified gaps and opportunities in existing strategies.

To ensure the policy reflected local priorities and needs, the project team formed a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) composed of staff from various city departments and Chattanooga residents representing diverse ages, incomes, races and ethnicities, neighborhoods, and lived experiences. "It's very good to involve the community so that they know Chattanooga is building something better," said LAC member Claribel Hernandez. "A community should be built on trust and communication," she added.

“ It's very good to involve the community so that they know Chattanooga is building something better. A community should be built on trust and communication.”

— CLARIBEL HERNANDEZ, CHATTANOOGA PEA LOCAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBER



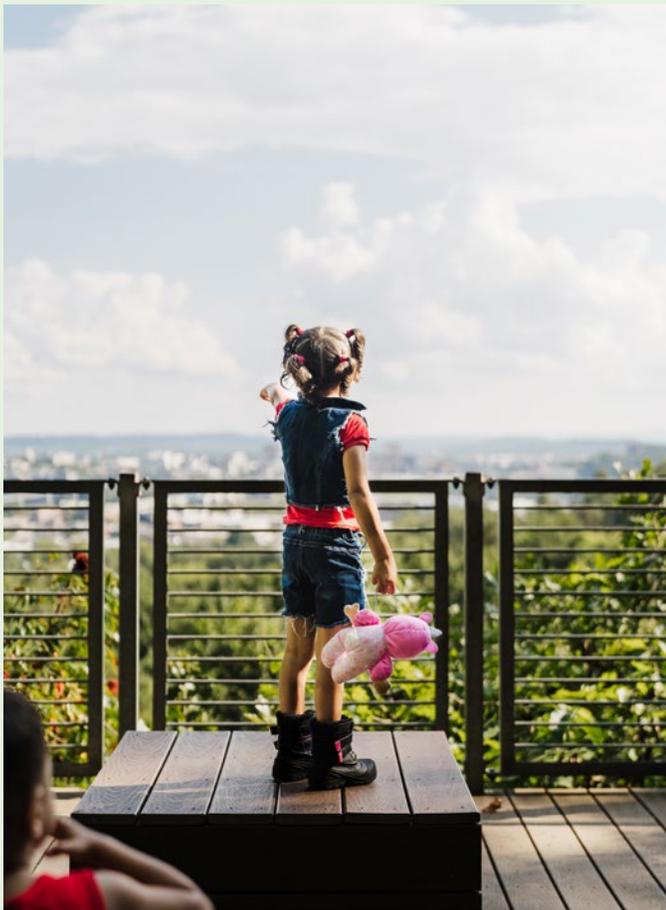
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The LAC met multiple times to explore engagement models, discuss best practices, and adapt policy lessons from other cities. Meetings were supported by broader outreach, including in-person and virtual sessions with neighborhood groups, elected officials, philanthropic organizations, housing authority representatives, and P&O partners. Malisha Carter, Interim Director of Special Events and Programming for P&O, found “joy in collaborating with community members and leaders across sectors [and] listening to their stories and passion for our parks, events, and programs.” Malisha noted the feedback gathered “was critical, insightful, and went beyond simply shaping a policy, but directly informed how we listen and focus our resources citywide.”

Using community input, the team drafted the policy and an accompanying implementation plan. These were refined through additional feedback from the LAC, leading to strengthened accountability measures and clearer alignment with community expectations. The draft policy is currently being piloted through the planning and design process for George Washington Carver Park, giving P&O the opportunity to test and refine its principles in a real-world context.

One early success has been the creation of a steering committee with more than 50 percent neighborhood representation. While technical members such as the director of early learning, city engineers, and community development staff also participate, the leadership and influence of neighborhood representatives has been so strong that City staff view the committee as being primarily defined by resident leaders—an early indication of the policy’s intent to shift power and elevate community perspectives in practice. Lessons from this pilot will inform further refinements before the policy is shared with the LAC and shepherded through internal workshops and the Parks and Outdoors Advisory Committee. Ultimately it will be presented for adoption by City Council.



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“ **Public engagement is the backbone of a well-functioning city, just as essential as public safety and infrastructure.**”

— TONY SAMMONS, ADMINISTRATOR
FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF EQUITY AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As we enter an election season, it’s important to reaffirm that meaningful, transparent engagement should be guided by a formally adopted policy, ensuring its continuity beyond any political cycle.”

By involving residents early, refining through feedback, and piloting in a real project, P&O built not just a policy, but a lasting foundation for community collaboration and equitable park planning.



Park System Planning and Needs Assessments



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Planning and needs assessment policies create the foundation for equitable parks at a city-wide scale. These policies require municipalities to evaluate park distribution, conditions, and community needs through data-driven mapping assessments, diverse public engagement, and long-term planning. Importantly, needs assessments help cities identify gaps in access, prioritize investments, and shape park systems that respond to residents' evolving needs by integrating diverse community input into planning and service delivery measures.

Needs assessments typically operate at the park system level, often adopted as elements of citywide Park System Plans or Strategic Plans. They provide broad insight into how parks are used, where deficiencies exist, and what communities want most. While many cities conduct these assessments as a matter of course, equity-focused approaches go further to ensure input comes from residents who are least represented in civic processes and least likely to be current park users.



These assessments typically include baseline elements such as:

- **Community surveys and public meetings** to gather resident input representative of the demographics of the city (i.e., age, income, race/ethnicity, geographical location) on park use, priorities, and barriers to access.
- **GIS mapping and spatial analysis** to examine park distribution, accessibility, and proximity across populations by race and ethnicity, income, geography, and more.
- **Park usage and participation data** to assess how different communities engage with park facilities and programs.
- **Opportunity analyses** to identify areas for park expansion, greenway connections, and other system-wide improvements.

Equity-focused practices go further by:

- **Using statistically valid surveys** with oversamples to capture perspectives from underrepresented populations, not just highly engaged residents.
- **Meeting residents where they are** through pop-ups, community events, focus groups, or interviews with non-park users, rather than relying only on centralized public meetings.
- **Pairing data analysis with qualitative insights**, ensuring metrics do not replace listening to lived experience.
- **Conducting historical and cultural assessments** to understand how past planning decisions, patterns of racism, or community conflicts shape current perceptions of parks and trust in public space.
- **Integrating related assessments**—such as public health or housing needs reports—that highlight broader community conditions and disparities. These insights then shape park planning and investment priorities.

By embedding needs assessments in policy, cities commit to a regular and transparent process that gives residents a clear role in shaping decisions, directs investment more equitably, and strengthens accountability over time. These assessments can also bolster funding efforts by demonstrating where need is greatest and how investment decisions are guided by data and public input.

POLICY SNAPSHOT: Park System Planning and Needs Assessments

Tacoma, WA

In 2022, Metro Parks Tacoma conducted a [community needs assessment](#) to better understand citywide patterns in park use, program demand, and barriers to access. The survey gathered responses from over 500 randomly selected households to inform future planning and investment priorities that reflect community needs across neighborhoods.

To ensure these assessments continue on a regular basis, the City of Tacoma codified the practice in its forthcoming Comprehensive Plan's [Parks and Recreation Element](#) through Policy P-5.3, which mandates periodic evaluation of park preferences using surveys, usage data, and participation trends. Supporting policies further call for incorporating resident knowledge (P-5.1) and employing inclusive outreach methods (P-5.2), such as storytelling, walking tours, festivals, and digital platforms.

Together, these policies institutionalize community-informed planning and embed equity into long-term park system investment strategies. They demonstrate how codified, recurring needs assessments can structure inclusive engagement and guide more responsive, equitable park investments over time.

EQUITY INDICATORS

Equity frameworks often incorporate indicators like poverty, heat risk, population density, or limited mobility to highlight where needs are greatest. For example, Tacoma, WA's [Equity Index](#) and Louisville, KY's [Parks for All Action Plan](#) use such data to guide investment.



Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting policies give residents a direct role in decisions about how public funds are allocated for park improvements and programs. By centering representative community members as equal partners in budget decisions, these policies ensure that park investments reflect local priorities.

As a tool for early engagement, participatory budgeting brings residents into the process before projects are designed or investments are finalized. When structured with equity in mind, it not only surfaces local needs but also shifts power by giving communities meaningful influence over how public resources are allocated.

Participatory budgeting typically follows a multi-step process:

1. **Idea generation and outreach workshops** to inform residents of available funding and collect ideas.
2. **Proposal development** where residents and agency staff work together to shape ideas into actionable projects.
3. **Community voting** where residents select projects that best reflect their needs and values.

These initiatives are often codified through local resolutions or embedded in annual municipal budget cycles. When implemented effectively, participatory budgeting policies can expand resident participation in local government, direct more funding to historically under-resourced neighborhoods, improve transparency and trust in budget decisions, and build civic capacity by giving residents hands-on experience with public processes.



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POLICY SNAPSHOT: Participatory Budgeting

Seattle, WA

Seattle’s [Park CommUNITY Fund](#) is using participatory budgeting to allocate \$14.8 million to community-prioritized park projects between 2023 and 2028. Designed to address historic racial disparities in park access, this fund places community members in a central decision-making role through a structured three-phase selection process: idea collection, proposal development, and final review by residents, the Board of Park and Recreation Commissioners, and the Superintendent. In 2024, more than 2,900 residents participated, with \$4.25 million awarded across [15 projects](#). While implementation is managed by Seattle Parks and Recreation, a portion of the funds support community engagement during project rollout. Evaluation workshops follow each cycle, allowing the city to refine the program and improve equity outcomes in future rounds.

Boston, MA

Launched in 2024, Boston’s [Ideas in Action](#) participatory budgeting initiative enables residents to direct over \$2 million in public funds toward community-driven projects. Guided by a formal rulebook and oversight board, the program emphasizes transparency, equity, and access, particularly for communities historically excluded from civic decision-making. In its first year, residents submitted more than 1,200 ideas through multilingual outreach and workshops led in partnership with contracted local organizations. From those ideas, 15 proposals were developed and over 4,400 residents voted to select which projects would be funded.



STRATEGY 2. Activate and Program Park Inclusively

Early engagement with residents lays the foundation for equitable park systems, but meaningful participation must also extend into how parks are used and experienced. When residents shape programming, lead events, and activate public spaces, parks evolve into platforms for inclusive community life and increased civic engagement.

This section explores three policy tools for inclusive park activation. It begins with **partner funding and resource allocation policies**, which channel support to community-led initiatives and underrepresented groups. It then examines the role of formalized **nonprofit partnerships and friends groups**, in expanding programming and embedding community leadership. Finally, it considers **park activation and permitting policies**, which streamline processes and reduce barriers so residents can more easily use parks for events, recreation, and cultural expression.



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Partner Funding and Resource Allocation

Community-led initiatives—such as neighborhood groups organizing cultural festivals or volunteer associations maintaining community gardens—often depend on access to local funding. However, without formal resource allocation mechanisms, these efforts can be difficult to sustain or scale. Even well-established local groups may struggle to meet bureaucratic requirements, navigate competitive grant processes, or access city resources without structured support.

Partner funding and resource allocation policies help address these challenges through dedicated programs that prioritize historically underrepresented communities and grassroots organizations. Often implemented at the program level and embedded within broader community development or public service frameworks, these policies create small grants or targeted funding streams and reduce administrative barriers that might otherwise limit participation by smaller or volunteer-led groups.

Formalizing this type of support enables cities to better align public investments with neighborhood priorities. It also helps strengthen local leadership and ensures that programming remains culturally relevant and equitably distributed.



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POLICY SNAPSHOT: Partner Funding

Minneapolis, MN

The [People for Parks Fund](#) originated with the *People for Parks* grassroots initiative, which was founded in 1977 to support under-resourced park projects. In 2020, this community-rooted effort merged with the Minneapolis Parks Foundation, forming the People for Parks Fund as it exists today.

The fund supports community-driven projects by providing resources that nurture stewardship, strengthen local engagement, and expand access to public spaces. In the past four years, the fund has distributed nearly \$200,000 across 44 initiatives, ranging from youth swim and snowboard lessons to educational programs for communities of color, community bike rides, and Afro Cardio and yoga classes.

These grants are designed to break down barriers to park access and ensure that all residents see themselves reflected in their local parks. The fund's priorities include equity and cultural inclusion, climate resilience, community health and well-being, connection to nature, and local economic vitality. Funding is available to community groups, nonprofits, and other entities with fiscal sponsors. A dedicated advisory committee evaluates proposals using criteria such as equity impact, community support, and potential for visible, lasting benefits—making equity not just a priority, but a formalized standard.



Nonprofit Partnerships and Friends Groups

Nonprofit organizations and community-based partners are essential allies in activating parks and expanding access to culturally relevant programs. These groups often bring deep community trust, local expertise, and the capacity to lead inclusive initiatives that reflect neighborhood priorities.

When cities formally support these partnerships, through structured policies or memoranda of understanding, they help institutionalize the role of community-based organizations. These policies can provide funding pathways, clarify roles, and establish expectations for collaboration between agencies and nonprofit leaders.

Friends groups, often composed of local volunteers, also play a key role in stewarding parks, organizing events, and strengthening neighborhood connections. Municipal policies that support Friends groups typically offer guidance on formation, registration, and leadership structures, and may provide training, permitting assistance, or small-scale funding opportunities.

At the same time, these partnerships are not automatically equitable. Research has shown that public–nonprofit partnerships can sometimes reproduce existing disparities, particularly when Friends groups or nonprofit partners primarily represent wealthier or whiter neighborhoods. Without intentional design, this can lead to uneven access to resources, programming, and influence across a park system.⁷² To mitigate this risk, policies should include safeguards such as equity criteria for funding, representation requirements for advisory bodies, and regular evaluation of who benefits from nonprofit partnerships.



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Nonprofits and Friends groups also serve as important advocates, helping to elevate community priorities in park funding, planning, and policy decisions. In some cases, formalizing these roles through municipal policy can make park activation more sustainable and more reflective of community needs by providing clearer expectations and stable pathways for collaboration. However, this approach does not work for every context. Some groups value independence from city structures in order to maintain their advocacy voice, while others actively seek formal agreements, such as memoranda of understanding, to legitimize and strengthen their role in the park system. Cities should approach these partnerships with flexibility, recognizing that the right level of formality depends on local context, power dynamics, and community priorities.

POLICY SNAPSHOT: Nonprofit Partnerships and Friends Groups

Louisville, KY

In 2023, Louisville dedicated [Alberta O. Jones Park](#) to honor the legacy of Alberta Odell Jones, a civil rights leader and prolific lawyer. In 1965 she became the first woman appointed as a city attorney in Jefferson County, only to be murdered that same year. Her first law office stood just blocks from the park site, making the dedication a meaningful tribute to her contributions to justice and equality.

The [Parks Alliance of Louisville](#), a community nonprofit, led community engagement, fundraising, and park development efforts to ensure the space reflected both Jones' legacy and the needs of the surrounding community. To maintain local leadership in decision-making, the Alliance includes two neighborhood residents on its Board of Directors, ensuring community members have an ongoing role in shaping park priorities and stewardship. In addition to overseeing the park's long-term maintenance, the Alliance serves as an ambassador for public space management, with a Park Superintendent dedicated to supporting its care and programming. The Alliance also plays a key advocacy role, helping to advance equitable park funding and ensure residents are active participants in citywide planning efforts.

Baltimore, MD

Baltimore's Friends of Parks program formalizes partnerships between community members and Baltimore City Recreation and Parks (BCRP) to support long-term park stewardship. Through their [Friends of Parks Manual](#), BCRP offers detailed guidance on forming and sustaining Friends groups, including steps for registration, leadership structure, community outreach, and fundraising. The manual emphasizes grounding each group's work in community priorities and encourages them to conduct neighborhood surveys and host public meetings to assess local needs.

Friends groups in Baltimore organize volunteer service days, host cultural and recreational events, and build partnerships that activate parks and foster social connections. They also serve as advocates for their neighborhoods by voicing local needs and shaping broader parks and recreation priorities. Baltimore's approach elevates these groups as formal partners in park management, supporting ongoing community engagement in planning, programming, and maintenance.



Park Activation and Permitting

Community-led events, volunteer projects, and cultural celebrations help bring parks to life, but outdated permitting processes and administrative hurdles often stand in the way. Complex applications, high insurance costs, and unclear requirements can prevent residents and small organizations from using public spaces, especially in historically underrepresented communities.

Permitting policies that streamline approvals, reduce financial burdens, and clarify expectations make it easier for communities to access and activate parks. These policies support equitable use by ensuring that residents can host events, lead programs, and participate in public life without facing unnecessary barriers.

POLICY SNAPSHOT: Park Activation and Permitting

Cleveland, OH

Cleveland's [Community Projects in Parks Program \(CP3\)](#) was developed to make community-led park improvements more accessible, especially for residents who have faced confusing or burdensome approval processes in the past. The program was shaped through input from local leaders and advocates, including a community workshop hosted by the Cleveland Parks and Greenspace Coalition and Trust for Public Land.

CP3 introduces three categories of projects—small improvements, large improvements, and annual stewardship agreements—each with its own timeline and requirements. Small projects like flower planting typically no longer require liability insurance, while larger projects and ongoing stewardship have clearer, scaled expectations.

The program also brings together city staff from the Department of Parks & Recreation, the Mayor's Office of Capital Projects, and the City Planning Commission for biweekly coordination and community proposal reviews, significantly speeding up the process. CP3 provides residents with clear templates, documentation, and examples for each project type, giving community members a transparent and predictable pathway to bring their ideas to life. The program is currently in its pilot phase and is expected to inform longer-term permitting and stewardship practices.

Philadelphia, PA

Philadelphia Parks and Recreation supports Friends groups and community organizations through a structured permitting framework. The city provides a detailed, step-by-step guide through its [Friends and Community Groups Special Event Permit Process](#) and [Permit Application Resource Packet](#) to help residents navigate event approvals.

While the process is not yet fully streamlined, the city offers clear instructions on permit requirements, insurance, and city services, along with pre-application support. Registered Friends groups can access municipal insurance and may have permit fees or security deposits waived. These supports reduce financial and logistical barriers, helping residents organize clean-up days, cultural events, and recreational programs. Together, they expand equitable access to public space and empower community-led park activation.



STRATEGY 3.

Sustain Long-Term Community Leadership

Engaging community members as active partners early in the process and supporting inclusive park activation are essential steps toward equitable park systems. But building truly community-centered park systems requires long-term structures that sustain leadership and participation. When cities invest in these structures, they create space for communities to shape not just individual parks, but also the systems and policies that guide them.

This section highlights three policy tools for sustaining community leadership over time. First, it looks at **community advisory boards**, which institutionalize resident participation in park decision-making. Next, it explores **youth development initiatives** that engage young people in leadership roles and foster civic participation across generations. Finally, it examines **advocacy and capacity-building initiatives** that equip residents with the knowledge, skills, and resources to navigate civic processes and influence park policy.



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Community Advisory Boards

Community advisory boards provide a formal structure for residents to participate in park planning, programming, and policy decisions over time. These boards create consistent pathways for community input and help park systems stay responsive to local needs while deepening transparency and trust.

Typically established by ordinance or department policy, advisory boards bring together local stakeholders—such as residents, business owners, and community leaders—who volunteer to guide park priorities and represent community perspectives.

Boards meet regularly to:

- Advise on park policies, programming, and development plans.
- Identify community concerns and advocate for improvements.
- Collaborate with agencies to align investments with neighborhood priorities.
- Support outreach, fundraising, and volunteer coordination.

When advisory boards reflect the demographics and lived experiences of the communities they serve—especially those historically excluded from decision-making—they become powerful tools for advancing equity. Their role in fostering accountability and ensuring park investments align with community priorities is especially critical in under-resourced neighborhoods, where past disinvestment and limited representation have often left residents with fewer opportunities to shape public decisions. By establishing consistent and representative participation, these boards help repair trust and create more responsive, community-driven governance. They can also strengthen outreach and engagement efforts by acting as trusted liaisons between government and the public.

POLICY SNAPSHOT: Community Advisory Boards

Chicago, IL and Los Angeles, CA

In both Chicago and Los Angeles, park advisory groups serve as enduring platforms for community leadership and feedback in public space governance. Chicago's [Park Advisory Councils](#) (PACs), present in over 225 parks, operate as independent, community-formed bodies that plan programming, advocate for resources, and elevate neighborhood concerns. Their ability to fundraise, set agendas, and share public updates helps build transparency and community trust.

Los Angeles' [Park Advisory Boards](#) (PABs), facilitated by city staff, center resident perspectives in shaping park programming and services. PABs regularly advise on local priorities and help guide partnerships, events, and resource allocation. The Department of Recreation and Parks frames PABs as a mechanism for aligning public investments with evolving community needs.

Together, these models demonstrate how sustained advisory roles can move beyond consultation to embed community members as active decision-makers, ensuring accountability and advocacy are integrated into everyday park governance.



Youth Development Initiatives

Youth development policies create formal structures, such as advisory councils, internships, and fellowships, that engage young people in shaping park systems. These structures may involve establishing new councils or formally recognizing existing youth leadership groups, provided they are given a clear policy pathway to influence decision-making. The goal is not only to involve youth, but to ensure that their role is legitimized and sustained through policy.

These initiatives are typically housed within parks and recreation departments, but youth teams based in community nonprofits or faith-based institutions often bring the added value of being rooted directly in the neighborhoods they serve. While citywide advisory councils may draw youth representatives from across a municipality, community-based teams can elevate more localized perspectives and lived experience.

When supported by policy, youth development programs offer hands-on experiences that give youth a direct role in decision-making, build civic leadership, and make parks more responsive to younger residents. They also foster early connections to public service and help cultivate the next generation of civic leaders. Beyond individual benefits, these policies ensure that parks reflect the needs of youth across the community and function as inclusive, safe spaces for young people to gather, connect, and thrive.



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Youth development programs often include opportunities to:

- **Advise on park policies and programs** by offering a youth perspective to city officials and park administrators.
- **Participate in leadership training and mentorship** through public meetings, project planning, and governance discussions.
- **Lead community service initiatives** that address youth needs, from park improvements to engagement events.
- **Gain professional experience** through fellowships, internships, and committee roles that provide exposure to municipal government and public service.

POLICY SNAPSHOT: Youth Development Initiatives

Menlo Park, CA; Toledo, OH; Minneapolis, MN; and Colorado Springs, CO

Cities across the country are institutionalizing youth leadership through formal advisory councils that embed young people as active participants in park planning, programming, and governance.

In Menlo Park, the [Youth Advisory Committee](#) (YAC) offers high school students one-year terms to advise the Parks and Recreation Commission and city staff. Members meet twice monthly to plan youth-focused events, engage in service projects, and develop a yearlong initiative that culminates in a special program or project. This process helps connect civic participation with tangible community outcomes.

Toledo's [Youth Advisory Board](#) (YAB) offers two-year terms for youth between 14 and 18 years old to shape the city's 129-park system. Members lead monthly meetings, collaborate with parks staff, and design action plans addressing issues such as mental health, safety, and equitable access. The board creates meaningful leadership roles that directly inform city policy and youth engagement strategies.

Similarly, in Minneapolis, the Park and Recreation Board's [Youth Advisory Council](#) provides a two-year, project-based structure where youth evaluate programming, advise on violence prevention, and support outreach initiatives. Participants commit to 5–12 hours per month and gain professional training in financial literacy, customer service, and public speaking.

In Colorado Springs, the nonprofit [RISE Southeast](#) hosts a Youth Advisory Council rooted in neighborhood leadership. In partnership with Trust for Public Land, youth leaders played a central role in shaping the redevelopment of Panorama Park, and ensuring the design reflected community priorities for accessibility, climate resilience, and inclusive programming. This model highlights how community-based youth councils, when formally recognized and supported, can directly influence major park investments while cultivating local civic leadership.

Together, these models demonstrate how youth development policies can cultivate long-term civic leadership while shaping more inclusive and responsive park systems.



Advocacy and Capacity Building Initiatives



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Advocacy and capacity-building initiatives equip residents with the knowledge and skills to effectively engage in park policy and planning. These programs offer structured training on civic processes, policy advocacy, and leadership development to ensure that residents—particularly those from historically underrepresented communities—can meaningfully influence park and greenspace decisions.

While many cities and park agencies implement advocacy and capacity-building programs, few have adopted formal policies requiring them. Instead, these initiatives are typically embedded within broader community engagement strategies and often led by nonprofit partnerships or municipal departments committed to deepening public participation. Common approaches include leadership development workshops, civic engagement training, and structured opportunities for residents to collaborate with local government on policy decisions.

When residents gain the skills to navigate civic systems and advocate for park equity, they become long-term partners in shaping public space. Codifying these programs through policy also ensures they are sustained beyond political cycles and embedded in departmental culture.



Case Study: Strengthening Advocacy through Civic Education in Lexington, KY

With support from Trust for Public Land's [Park Equity Accelerator](#) (PEA) program, Lexington [piloted a new approach](#) to community engagement focused on advocacy training and directly involving residents in parks and greenspace policy. While this work did not result in a formal policy requiring ongoing advocacy initiatives, it is a strong model for inclusive policymaking and deeper engagement between city staff and historically underrepresented communities.

This effort was led by a coalition of partners, including the City of Lexington [Division of Planning](#) and [Parks and Recreation](#), in collaboration with two community-based organizations: [CivicLex](#)—a nonprofit dedicated to increasing civic knowledge and participation—and [Seedleaf](#)—an urban agriculture and food justice organization. These community-based groups leveraged their longstanding relationships with residents who had traditionally been excluded from public decision-making and served as trusted facilitators for bridging community and government collaboration.

The project followed a three-phase engagement model:

- **Phase 1:** Community listening sessions to surface barriers to engagement.
- **Phase 2:** A series of civic education workshops on historic land use inequities, current park planning practices, and strategies for policy advocacy.
- **Phase 3:** A small grants program to support resident-led greenspace projects, reinforcing the connection between advocacy, knowledge, and tangible community change.

All materials were presented in multiple languages and interpretation services, food, and childcare were available at each meeting to ensure accessibility and inclusion.

“Our hypothesis—that providing policy education would encourage advocacy efforts—proved itself in these community-led projects. Participants used their knowledge about parks and greenspace access in Lexington to design projects that intersected with policymaking for these spaces. These conversations are important not only because they help meet immediate needs in communities, but they also empower residents to participate in the policy-making process itself.”

— MEGAN GULLA, DIRECTOR OF PARTNERSHIPS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, CIVICLEX

One key outcome of this work was community participation in advancing a zoning ordinance amendment that would require open spaces in new developments to function as true community amenities. Residents who attended the PEA workshops worked directly with city staff to shape the new standards—an example of advocacy translating into concrete policy change.



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While the PEA was time-limited, the initiative laid the foundation for continued collaboration between residents and local government. It also highlighted the value of structured advocacy training and underscored that meaningful community engagement goes beyond resident provided input—it must also ensure that residents have the necessary knowledge and tools to influence policy.

“ I think we did a great job of creating opportunities, but our area of growth—maybe a lesson learned—is about how we get people to those opportunities we’ve created.”

— ADRIENNE THAKUR, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF RECREATION,
LEXINGTON-FAYETTE URBAN COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Lexington’s experience shows that equipping residents with knowledge of the local policy process, fostering engagement with governmental decision-makers, and piloting new forms of community-driven advocacy can deepen community influence and spark meaningful policy change. Together, these efforts offer a replicable framework for cities seeking to embed equity, leadership development, and sustained engagement in park policymaking.

SECTION 4

Making Policy Change Equitable and Effective



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The previous section outlined the strategies and policies cities can adopt to embed, activate, and sustain community engagement in parks. This section turns to the question of *how*: how policies are developed, implemented, and evaluated so they remain equitable, effective, and responsive over time.

It highlights three key principles—spanning relationship-building, day-to-day practice, and ongoing evaluation—that help ensure the entire process is equitable and effective:

- **Principle 1: Develop Policy with Equity at the Core**
- **Principle 2: Put Policy into Practice with Integrity**
- **Principle 3: Ensure Accountability Through Transparency and Evaluation**



PRINCIPLE 1.

Develop Policy with Equity at the Core

Strong community engagement policies are built with community, not just for community. When cities engage residents from the start, they lay the groundwork for policies that reflect real needs, build trust, and deliver more inclusive outcomes. Centering equity also means recognizing where past engagement efforts have excluded or harmed communities and committing to practices that prevent recurrence while opening pathways for repair. This section shares practices cities can use to embed equity into policy development by reducing participation barriers and co-creating clear, data-informed equity goals.

Meet Residents Where They Are

Cities can make participation easier and more welcoming by reducing common logistical barriers. This includes:

- ✓ Offering flexible meeting times
- ✓ Holding events in community spaces that are familiar and accessible to all ages and abilities
- ✓ Attending and tabling at events already happening in the community
- ✓ Providing food and childcare
- ✓ Using mobile-friendly and low-bandwidth digital tools that can be accessed on phones
- ✓ Sharing materials in multilingual formats
- ✓ Establishing funding mechanisms to compensate residents for their time, transportation, and expertise—treating community contributions with the same value and respect shown to consultants

Beyond logistics, reducing barriers also means building trust and cultural relevance. Partnering with community-based organizations, training staff in inclusive practices, and acknowledging histories of harm and neglect are all essential. Because of these past harms, engagement with historically marginalized communities is often difficult and slow to build. Years of exclusion can make residents understandably cautious or distrustful and as a result, low turnout and early setbacks are common—but persistence matters. Trust grows over time and giving up after one or two attempts can reinforce the very exclusion these efforts

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED

The actions listed in the *Meet Residents Where They Are* section are useful across all community engagement processes, not just for policy development. Taking the first step of showing up and meeting people in their own neighborhoods is something city staff can do right away to lay the foundation for broader engagement.

The next step is to move from good intentions to more structured action. Begin by assessing current engagement practices: Where is input being gathered? Who is participating, and who is missing? Pilot initiatives, such as forming advisory boards for specific projects or incorporating participatory budgeting into park improvements, can demonstrate early wins and build support. Naming engagement goals and practices in adopted plans, like comprehensive or parks master plans, can also set the stage for more formalized policies.



are meant to undo. Meeting people where they are—both literally and relationally—ensures engagement efforts are not only accessible, but also meaningful. Collaboration strengthens participation. Cities and parks departments can:

- ✓ Hire trusted consultants from the neighborhood to support outreach
- ✓ Partner with local businesses when providing food, childcare, or translation
- ✓ Co-design engagement events with community members themselves
- ✓ Coordinate with other city departments or nonprofits already active in a neighborhood to reduce participation fatigue and strengthen turnout
- ✓ Tap into networks of partners who have existing trust



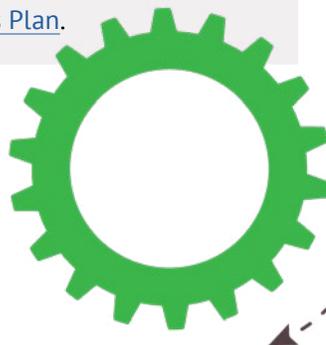
Set Clear, Data-Informed Equity Goals

Policies are most effective when cities and communities work together to define what success looks like. Setting shared, equity-centered goals builds accountability, while robust data on access, usage, and community conditions helps identify disparities and shape more responsive decisions. Together, clear goals and strong data ensure that engagement efforts lead to measurable improvements in park access, quality, and participation.

IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT: Meet Residents Where They Are

Cities across the country are already demonstrating the importance of these activities:

- In **Cleveland, Ohio**, the Parks and Recreation Department offered stipends, bilingual materials, and family-friendly open houses for its [2023 Community Needs Assessment](#).
- **St. Paul, Minnesota** engaged residents through “design-a-park” activities to make planning its new [System Plan](#) more interactive and accessible.
- **Chattanooga, Tennessee** hosted pop-ups, neighborhood meetings, and focus groups to engage underrepresented residents in its [Parks and Outdoors Plan](#).



IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT: Set Clear, Data-Informed Equity Goals

Some examples of these efforts underway:

- In **Louisville, Kentucky**, the [Parks for All Action Plan](#) links equity goals to measurable actions in park planning and tracks progress in public reports.
- In **Minneapolis, Minnesota**, the Park and Recreation Board’s [Racial Equity Action Plan](#) outlines specific expectations for hiring, community engagement, and investment priorities.
- In **Tacoma, Washington**, the [Equity Index](#) uses social and environmental data to prioritize investments.
- In **Atlanta, Georgia**, the [Equity Data Tool](#) maps disparities in access, safety, and health outcomes.

PRINCIPLE 2.

Put Policy Into Practice with Integrity

Adopting a policy is only the first step. Its impact depends on what happens every day after adoption—how staff, partners, and communities bring the policy to life. Integrity in practice means translating commitments into consistent actions by sustaining relationships and investing in the people who carry this work forward.

Maintain Structures and Partnerships

Community engagement policies are most effective when implemented through durable structures and collaborative relationships. As outlined in Section 3, cities can establish advisory boards, nonprofit partnerships, and engagement teams through formal policy. But adoption alone isn't enough. To bring policies to life, these structures must actively be maintained and empowered to support implementation over time.

IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT: Maintain Structures and Partnerships

Examples:

- In [Los Angeles, California](#) and [Chicago, Illinois](#), park advisory boards provide structured, ongoing input to park staff and commissioners on programming and planning, ensuring resident perspectives are consistently reflected in decisions.
- **Minneapolis, Minnesota** maintains a [Youth Advisory Council](#) and [community advisory committees](#) embedded in park governance.
- **Cleveland, Ohio** partnered with over 100 institutions, like libraries and small businesses, to conduct outreach during their [needs assessment](#).
- In **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**, the [Outside Voices](#) program brings teens into advocacy through partnerships with educators and parks staff.

Invest in People Every Step of the Way

Policies only work when the people responsible for them—city staff, residents, and partners—have the skills and support to succeed. Training, leadership programs, and peer learning opportunities ensure that engagement is consistent, culturally competent, and adaptive to community needs.

IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT: Invest in People Every Step of the Way

Examples:

- The [Park Champions](#) program in **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania** trains and pays residents to lead outreach in their communities.
- **Minneapolis, Minnesota** requires [staff-wide equity training](#) to align department culture with its engagement goals.



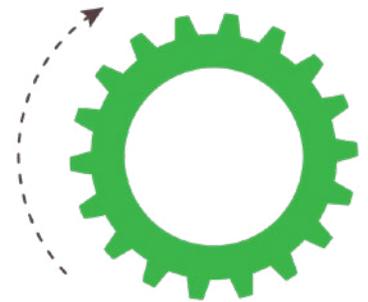
PRINCIPLE 3.

Ensure Accountability Through Transparency and Evaluation

To build public trust and ensure engagement efforts remain effective, cities must track progress, share information, and act on what they learn. Evaluation and transparency are critical not only for measuring results, but also for making engagement an open, participatory process. Accountability also requires acknowledging past harms and inequities, committing to practices that guard against future harm, and creating space for healing and renewed trust. It isn't just about metrics—it's about co-defining success with communities, making data accessible, and ensuring residents can continue shaping how their parks evolve.

Make Information Accessible

Transparency builds trust. Cities should track metrics like participation, investment, and service delivery and share this information in clear, accessible ways. Equally important is showing how resident input has shaped decisions and closing the feedback loop so communities can see how their engagement influenced outcomes. Dashboards, equity reports, and public data portals are powerful tools for this, making it easier for residents to track progress, understand trade-offs, and hold agencies accountable.



IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT: Make Information Accessible

Commitment to these practices is growing, as evidenced by the work of multiple cities:

- The [Open Data Portal](#) in **Austin, Texas** shares park investment metrics, project timelines, and service delivery data in real time.
- The Park District in **Fargo, North Dakota** uses [digital tools](#) to make park planning and engagement data interactive and easy to explore.
- The [Capital Improvement Program Dashboard](#) in **Minneapolis, Minnesota** shows how resident priorities are shaping investments in neighborhood parks, including project timelines and funding sources.
- The [Parks and Recreation Dashboard](#) in **Phoenix, Arizona** provides transparent updates on capital projects and performance metrics, connecting budget decisions directly to community input.
- The Department of Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities [Dashboard](#) in **Alexandria, Virginia** reports key indicators such as program participation and facility use, allowing residents to track outcomes from their engagement.
- The [Accountability Hub](#) in **Oak Park, Illinois** links budget, project updates, and performance measures in one place, giving residents a clear view of how their input and tax dollars are reflected in park improvements.

Institutionalize Feedback and Adaptability

To keep engagement policies accountable and responsive, cities need systems that link resident feedback to everyday decisions—and they need the internal capacity to respond. When resident input is built into budgeting, planning, and strategy processes, engagement becomes a sustained part of governance, not just a phase in a project.

IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT: Institutionalize Feedback and Adapability

Examples:

- Fort Collins, Colorado uses a [biannual budget cycle](#) structured around its Strategic Plan to directly connect resident engagement, strategic planning, and budget adoption. Community input is gathered throughout both years and helps shape everything from staffing to capital priorities. Tools like “Budget 101” videos, public open houses, and hearings promote transparency and informed participation.
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania co-created the [Restoring Pittsburgh Parks](#) plan through extensive public engagement. This process not only guided investment priorities but led to a 2019 ballot referendum that created a \$10 million annual Parks Trust Fund, directly linking community-defined needs to long-term funding.

Build Internal Infrastructure to Support Accountability

Cities also need people dedicated to this work. Staff roles, cross-department teams, and equity-focused units help translate feedback into action and build a culture of learning and responsiveness.

Taken together, these approaches help cities move community engagement policies from paper to practice. But their true impact depends on sustaining policies through relationships, responsive implementation, and a long-term commitment to the people they serve. When cities treat engagement as an ongoing partnership rooted in department culture, parks become a deeper expression of shared investment in public life and the future of our communities.

IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT: Build Internal Infrastructure to Support Accountability

Examples:

- The [community engagement policy](#) in **Cincinnati, Ohio** created a citywide team of “engagement champions” who share best practices, track resident feedback, and support adaptive strategies through training and annual reporting.
- The [Healthy Parks, Healthy Portland](#) strategy in **Portland, Oregon** centers underserved communities and includes dedicated equity teams to help the city remain responsive to evolving needs.
- National resources from **TPL**, such as the [Common Ground Framework](#), and from the **NRPA**, such as the [Community Engagement Resource Guide](#), provide practical tools for training staff and developing inclusive engagement teams.



SECTION 5

Conclusion



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Parks are essential civic infrastructure delivering environmental, social, and health benefits that strengthen communities. Yet equitable access to high-quality, locally relevant parks does not happen by chance—it requires sustained, intentional strategies for community engagement—and supportive policy to formalize, resource, and sustain them across every stage of the park lifecycle.

Without formal commitments, community engagement risks remaining performative rather than transformative. Embedding engagement as a core function of governance is more than an investment in equity and civic trust—it's a blueprint for a more just and connected society. When local governments share decision-making power with community members at every step, parks can fully serve their civic role: uniting people, reflecting shared priorities, and building the foundations of equitable public life for generations to come.

Future Directions for Research and Practice

While this playbook outlines promising policy models and best practices, further research is needed to refine and scale these approaches. Key questions remain about long-term impacts, scalability across diverse contexts, and how participatory governance structures can best serve those most in need of such practices: historically marginalized communities. Continued learning, both from established frameworks and evolving community needs, will be critical to building resilient, inclusive, and community-led park systems.

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