TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND™

Building the Field

TPL's Parks Initiative is dedicated to expanding equitable park access nationwide, ensuring close-to-home access to parks and their benefits for all. Through the 10-Minute Walk® program, we are building strong collaborations with mayors, cross-sector public and private partners, and community leaders to advance local policies and transform park systems. The 10-Minute Walk® program is one way we work—in collaboration with cities and partners—to address the most pressing questions and challenges to park equity. This case study shares how the 10-Minute Walk® Community of Practice and Park Equity Accelerator is helping to build the field of park equity practitioners.

Why It's Important to Build The Field of Park Practitioners

Maintenance and operations. Capital projects. Equitable development. Strategic planning, engagement, and mobility. Not to mention climate change and a pandemic. Each year ushers in a unique set of challenges, both big and small, to parks nationwide. And throughout, there are common solutions and tools, transferrable from city to city.

Yet in what feels like an increasingly unpredictable time, opportunities to foster connection among the people who care for public spaces seem more important than ever. Because even amidst geographic, spatial and socioeconomic differences, there are practical tools, resources and knowledge that can be applied in a diversity of settings.

That's just one goal of the 10-Minute Walk® Program, where park leaders and advocates nationwide can come together and strategize around the issues they regularly face. The open dialogue on best practices allows practitioners to both bring ideas to the table and take some home. And in several cities, that sharing has had an impact.

For John Henderson, the founder and president of Green Spaces for D.C., the actual experience in the park itself—or, rather, navigating to and from—matters just as much as the numbers. And in the nation's capital, that looks different by neighborhood: for a city known for its robust offerings of national malls, monuments and parkland, Henderson said notable gaps persist.

"I live in a neighborhood called Columbia Heights, which is the most urban neighborhood in the District. It's also a heat island. It's underserved with parkland, and so the ability to get to those few green spaces in the neighborhood is extremely important," said Henderson. "In my mind, connectivity is not just physical. There's a lot of psychological aspects, too. You're anticipating the benefit that you're gonna get when you get to the park, but you're also considering the obstacles in the way."

Through Communities of Practice, Henderson learned that the fault lines in Scranton, Pennsylvania looked familiar. There, the city undertook a 'walkability assessment' to better understand how neighborhoods

Connecting everyone to the outdoors.™

perceived access to the parks and green spaces. With help from the Park Equity Accelerator, Valley in Motion, a local community development nonprofit, spoke with neighbors around four local parks to find out what their walk was like there, pairing survey findings with data points like vehicular crashes and available park programming.

Now, Henderson is in talks to undertake the same study closer to home. "What Scranton was doing resonated with me," he said. "We may not do their questionnaire exactly the way they did it, but we can adapt it to our conditions here. We've got 'streateries,' shared e-scooters and e-bikes, app deliveries—all kinds of things that perhaps do not exist as much in Scranton. But we can take their work and build from it."

But for Henderson, a longtime parks practitioner who has done extensive work with Trust for Public Land over the years, the opportunities for peer exchange amongst parks—to experiment and measure success—have dwindled over time. But an immense need to learn from one another still persists, even if the answer isn't always a surefire solution. That, for Henderson, is what's most valuable.

"There are not many places where you can have such in-depth nuanced conversations about the park experience and how to improve access," he reflected. "It's really fascinating. And I think everyone benefits."

Other cities, especially those of the same size, could relate. Lewisville, Texas, for example, is growing: in the last five years, the population has increased by about a fifth. That change has pressured its Parks & Recreation Department to keep up, as recently arrived residents seek out local parks and open spaces. Officials are partnering with developers to incentivize green space where possible, and working with towns nearby to connect trails and greenways. But as part of its next five-year vision, the team wanted to better meet neighbors where they are, when a larger project might be far off.

"People from all over the world move to Lewisville. For instance, we have a large population of Burmese refugees here," said Stacie Anaya, the department's director. "So we didn't just want to set up a town hall meeting and say, 'Hey, what do you need from us?' Talking to the government may not be as natural. So how do we establish relationships so that there's an element of trust and it's not transactional?"

Culturally diverse populations might engage with parks and open spaces differently, but the baseline need for access is all the same. And so hearing from other places who face similar challenges through the Park Equity

Communities of Practice gave Lewisville officials some ideas. Like its novel mobile recreation and outreach unit, where the Parks & Recreation Department brings programming encouraging physical activity on the road. Through peer exchange, the team was inspired to test out new approaches to incorporating data into its service delivery, which allowed them to better target the communities most in need that lacked access to parks, playgrounds and open spaces.

"LLELA is our 2,600-acre nature preserve and serves as the community's green centerpiece," said Jose Martines, a senior analyst. "Through Nature on Wheels, we're able to go into the community, educate people about nature, and help them take their first steps outdoors. At the same time, an equity index that uses CDC health data helps us identify gaps and reach residents who might otherwise be left out—because ultimately, our goal is to improve the community's health."

That resonated in Cincinnati, which, like many cities, had a data problem. For years, its use existed in silos, even though agencies had shared jurisdictions. Parks, in particular, were left out. "We wanted to start integrating more analysis into decision-making. But unfortunately, our park system didn't have collective management tools available to the public," said Matt DiBona, a member of the Parks Board. "So, for instance, if we're talking about utilities, one could easily get that data. But in the parks world, we hadn't created that yet."

But park systems didn't have to reinvent the wheel, DiBona said; the examples were out there. What a forum offered was a hub for solutions—because while backdrops varied, what the data could do transcended borders. Today, Cincinnati is a known innovator for utilizing GIS data to equitably grow its urban tree canopy.

"When it comes to this type of technology and implementing it, knowing the field you're working is more crucial than the actual tool itself," added DiBona. "Leveraging that is important. You don't need the best analyst; you just need to know how to be critical about the certain pieces of data that can be leveraged to make the right choices."

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