



CASE STUDIES

Civic Capacity

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. To meet the scale and urgency of parks work across the country, the 10-Minute Walk® Park Equity Accelerator works hand-in-hand with communities to advance park equity through policy and systems change. Since launch in 2022, the Park Equity Accelerator has helped 21 cities and more than 150 practitioners and community members across the U.S. create lasting change. This case study shares how Accelerator projects are encouraging civic engagement by connecting local governments and residents with one another.

How Cities Are Building Civic Capacity to Make Change in Parks and Open Spaces

In this polarized time, restoring trust between residents and their government has never been more important. Parks and open spaces can play a crucial role: the public spaces in our own backyard—the neighborhood parks, the playgrounds on the corner, the local dog runs—are some of the most tangible signs we have of public investment. And because of this quality, our parks provide a crucial on-ramp for civic engagement. They present a unique opportunity for collective ownership amongst neighbors, where conversation and compromise are essential to success. It also puts a face to government, bringing together the public sector and the actual public working together to upgrade and steward these vital spaces.

In order to get there, though, towns and cities have to be willing to meet residents where they are. Recently, city participants in the Park Equity Accelerator have worked to foster this resident capacity-building, sharing tools and best practices to enable their

constituents to take charge of the processes and places around them, at what feels like a consequential time for advocacy. Three cities, in particular, stand out as examples.

Lexington, Kentucky features a growth model that has exacerbated disparities in park access: the city has large major parks, but relatively few spaces within walking distance where neighbors could feel connected to their community. A proposal to expand the city's borders even further felt like a moment to hit the reset button.

"We saw this opportunity to see what we could do to better inform residents about how that expansion could impact parks access, and what it would be like for new communities that were going to be developed," said Richard Young, the executive director of CivicLex, a local nonprofit that works to strengthen local democracy. "We also wanted to train residents to better advocate for priorities in their own communities and

hopefully change how the government engages in that kind of decision-making.”

The expansion was successful. CivicLex partnered with Trust for Public Land to host workshops with both community members and city staff to help foster relationships and connections. The timing was ideal: the city’s Parks Advisory Board was separately developing a ballot amendment for a parks capital fund, focused on enhancements voiced by residents rather than land acquisition.

Building that early foundation of engagement helped foster a culture where residents felt more comfortable to offer input that would ultimately guide public decision-making—and trust that the public sector was working towards a shared vision alongside residents, not without. “It allowed us to show to other people that we can create these really interesting partnerships between the public and government,” said Young.

Just a state away, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the city was embarking on another ambitious effort: the release of its One Chattanooga Plan, which sought to close the gaps in access between the poorest and wealthiest parts of town—parks included. But how could you call for greater equity without substantive engagement?

“We wanted to build new greenways, improve our parks, and increase the number of people within a 10-minute walk,” said Blythe Bailey, the former director of the Division of Design, Planning and Connectivity, within Chattanooga’s parks department. “And one of the best ways to do that is to build advocacy. To accelerate the initiatives of improving our parks for people, we can create more authentic engagement, which will build more capacity, which will help with initiatives that require funding and political will.”

But that buy-in has to be baked in from the start. With the Accelerator’s help, the City of Chattanooga developed steering communities for park renovations. The teams, made up of community leaders, would serve as a vehicle for action where it didn’t exist before—but also, once funding was secured, it could ensure local voices were heard throughout design, construction and everything that comes after.

“This is not me showing up and telling the people that live in these neighborhoods what their park should be,” said Bailey. “This is me showing up and listening to them tell us what their park should be.”

In Scranton, Pennsylvania, the nonprofit Valley in Motion contends with a stark reality: the former industrial hub underwent 70 years of contraction—three generations of residents saw jobs go elsewhere.

“That took a toll, not only economically but on our mindsets as well, in what I describe as a kind of learned helplessness,” said Gus Fahey, Valley in Motion’s president. Park work, he said, offers a powerful counter-narrative: “You come from a place that’s important, innovative, and worth contributing your time.”

Within the Lackawanna Valley, the larger region that Scranton sits within, municipalities often lack the personnel to extensively engage the community when opportunities arise, Fahey said. Through the Park Equity Accelerator, the staff at Valley in Motion helped to fill that gap through meaningful conversation, acting as a connective tissue between residents and governments that serve them.

Through the Accelerator, VIM hosted a series of workshops with residents to understand their perspectives on local parks. “We did an exercise of statements regarding feelings of belonging in the park, and we broke it down a little more to feelings of safety. Like, ‘I feel safe in this park,’ ‘I feel responsible for this park,’ ‘I feel comfortable in it,’ ” said Alyssa Kelley, a project manager there. “We really try to look at people’s perceptions of these parks. Is there a sense of belonging amongst residents? Or not? And is there a variable that prohibits their use?”

By understanding what hinders people from a place, the idea is that leaders can develop policies or approaches tailor-fit to their needs. Scranton’s ‘walk audit’ is one such example. Partnering with the Park Equity Accelerator, Valley in Motion staff collected data across dozens of blocks surrounding parks in Scranton to identify barriers to access, everything from a dangerous road or hefty slope to tree canopy or crosswalk conditions.

It helps simply by hearing concerns—or aspirations. It’s progress through dialogue, especially when people are empowered to speak up. “In today’s political climate, a lot of things feel out of your control, especially on a national level. And it’s easy to forget that the best way to make change is often on the local level—your neighborhood, your street, your city,” Kelley continued. “And so taking that back and focusing on that can be inspiring for people if they can see that it works.”

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