



CASE STUDIES

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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 an Accelerator helped Pittsburgh improve access to and stewardship of the city's greenways.

How Pittsburgh is Better Linking Greenways to People

Greenways play an important role in Pittsburgh's public realm by connecting residents to wild and natural spaces that often exist just beyond their backyard. But the often murky status of greenways in the city - city-owned, not a park, but still open to the public - tends to blur the lines of responsibility for their upkeep and activation. And a lack of stewardship not only leaves them uncared for, but also, underutilized. Greenways can be destinations in their own right, as passive spaces, natural areas, or corridors for recreation, but achieving this takes a broader vision of what such spaces can offer Pittsburgh and its residents.

Luckily, a new urban land conservation model is helping the city devise innovative ways of linking residents to the greenways around them through volunteer stewardship and workforce development opportunities.

With the steel industry's downturn, the City of Pittsburgh was left with hundreds of acres of undevelopable open space. By 1980, the City had acquired and developed nearly 300 of those acres into 12 designated greenways. But over time, reliance on inconsistent care and management caused them to fall into disrepair. Most notable was Hazelwood Greenway, one of the city's largest at 183 acres, whose degradation had deterred usage.

"While parks are active spaces, greenways are seen as passive spaces," said Thomas Guentner, the director of land stewardship at Landforce, a nonprofit that trains people in green space management. "So where a greenway might start to feel like a park in some regards, it doesn't have the same intentional facilities or standards. How a user interprets a greenway is kind of up to the user."

In 2020, with a grant from Trust for Public Land, the city started a Greenways Platform Partnership pilot, which tested out new approaches to greenway use in partnership with community-based organizations and residents. It helped advance programs like The Hazelwood Initiative, which used programming and visioning sessions to raise awareness of the greenway. Guentner's organization trained neighbors to help build trails and manage stormwater. And the Allegheny Goatscape brought... well, goats.

For Isabella Gross of Pittsburgh's Department of City Planning, the agency overseeing the work, greenways are particularly well-positioned for community-led work. "We want to create a sense of ownership among the residents that live near them—that the piece of land is really their own to protect, steward and hang out in," said Gross. "It's not necessarily to create traffic in all these neighborhoods for folks from everywhere to come into the greenways. They're seen as a neighborhood-level asset."

With the Hazelwood Greenway as a model, Gross and her colleagues joined Trust for Public Land's 10-Minute Walk® Park Equity Accelerator (PEA) to expand the work that started there to other greenways citywide.

"We essentially defined a new process with the Trust for Public Land's help. So things like the volunteer applications, the different stewardship agreements that we created, the development of a new urban agriculture program," said Mackenzie Pleskovic, an urban planner for the city. "There was no champion for greenways. So we were able to rewrite what it looks like to be city-driven, with all of our partners and stakeholders bought in."

That included the formation of a "Local Advisory Committee" made up of community-based organizations and other advocates, which served as a vehicle for regular feedback throughout the process. That effort, supported by Trust for Public Land, not only helped lend credibility to the initiative within city government, said Pleskovic and Gross—it also rallied attention.

"Having a national partner that had experience doing this in other places come in and build momentum brought us together and got people excited around the potential of getting things done," said Gross. "We're also walking the walk, of providing that technical assistance to have hard policies and strategies through the city."

The process is iterative. City officials continue to learn how to best incorporate greenways into larger conversations around planning and development. It allows them to identify and designate vacant land that would be well-suited to become a greenway and to start investing through an amalgamation of resources: community stewardship, governmental funding, or nonprofit partnerships. Ongoing initiatives are teaching planners how they can better connect with volunteer help. And new sources of funding are widening the range of work that nonprofits like Landforce can train applicants for, which enhances employment opportunities.

Perhaps the most transformative impact, though, is on people. By leveraging greenways as hubs of programming, job training, and stewardship, the city has created a unique opportunity to engage with the residents and groups they serve in a whole new way. But for Guentner, that starts with trusting neighbors to know and care for their backyard.

"It's a misservice to go to a community that you don't belong to and try to prescribe something, when they know what they need better than we do," he said. "By building healthy relationships between municipalities and all the stakeholders, you can find common language you can congeal around in the end, and make something special last."

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