THE ROLE OF PARKS

IN SHAPING SUCCESSFUL CITIES

A White Paper

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and
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BACKGROUND

In 2013, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) reached out to the American Planning Association (APA) to collaborate on a reexamination of the role of parks in urban metropolitan areas in America and to commit to an effort to analyze the increasingly significant ways that parks are shaping cities and urban life.

The discussion by the CEOs of NRPA and APA was stimulated by the enduring popularity of a series of APA briefing papers that were written more than a decade ago about the value of parks and recreation and how parks contributed to the quality of life in America.

The City Parks Forum, convened by APA, was an idea ahead of its time. In the early 2000s, APA brought together parks experts, planning directors and mayors of both small and large cities around the United States to engage in conversations and high-level thinking about the responsibilities and place of parks in cities and urban metropolitan areas, present and future. According to the forum's website, the goal was to stimulate a wide-ranging discussion:

To understand what the urban parks of the future — and the cities in which they exist — will be, urban leaders need a venue for addressing the challenges of creating and enhancing parks in their cities. The City Parks Forum provided this venue.

The original City Parks Forum was made possible by a $2.5 million grant from the Wallace Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. It produced a series of briefing papers by nationally known park and open space experts on the influence of parks; six symposia gatherings and the preparation of on-the-ground case studies paired with each forum; and a bibliography of urban parks resources.

The case studies were a major undertaking of the initiative. They included Buffalo, New York's successful graffiti cleanup program; the development of Reno, Nevada's Special Events Plaza; and Nashville, Tennessee's park plan for Bell's Bend, among others. The 10 briefing papers identifying the importance of urban parks to cities have shown lasting value.

Now, in 2014, the underlying mission of the City Parks Forum has returned. Leaders of NRPA and APA are seeking to reinvigorate the goal of the forum and plan for a future in which parks and planning work together to demonstrate examples of how parks improve cities; to quantify such improvements through evidence-based research; and to provide resources to planners, parks administrators and elected officials of precisely how parks are contributing lasting value to our nation's urban areas.

Barbara Tulipane, CEO of NRPA, and Paul Farmer, CEO of the APA, agreed to explore the potential of such a strategic initiative in 2013. "We didn't know where it would lead," Farmer says. But in his mind, when planning is practiced right, "it's comprehensive. You have to have a long-range vision and adjust to the here and now." Tulipane agreed, saying, "It was a natural fit for NRPA and APA to collaborate on urban parks. The potential of parks to shape cities is incredible."

OVERVIEW

The first tangible result of these initial conversations between APA and NRPA was a concept paper developed by APA and NRPA staff that led to an invitation-only roundtable event titled "The Role of Parks in Shaping Successful Cities," which was held at the Westin Arlington Gateway Hotel in Arlington, Virginia, March 24, 2014. The event was hosted by NRPA and APA with sponsorship by the National League of Cities, the TORO Company, the Houston Parks Board and Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc.

The planning directors and parks and recreation directors of nine of the largest U.S. cities and urban metropolitan areas were invited to give brief team presentations for the roundtable. Experts from several federal agencies, as well as representatives of leading national organizations such as the American Society of Landscape Architects, Trust for Public Land, Urban Land Institute, and The Conservation Fund, along with a number of members of the Board of Directors of NRPA, also attended the roundtable. The nine cities and metro areas represented included: Atlanta, Chicago, Cleveland, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami-Dade County, Philadelphia, Seattle and St. Louis.

The purpose of the roundtable was to engage a diverse group of key urban stakeholders to share knowledge and insights about challenges being faced in cities and how these cities are using open space and parks to meet those challenges.

MAJOR THEMES OF THE ROUNDTABLE

The day was divided into three sessions by topic:

1. Economic development — the role of parks in contributing to economic development and revitalization

2. Healthy populations — planning health outcomes for city residents

3. Green infrastructure — reducing the cost of infrastructure to manage stormwater by providing green infrastructure solutions, particularly through the use of parks and open space

For the sessions, the audience heard from a keynote speaker followed by brief remarks from the parks and planning officials representing each of the nine cities.

Following these presentations and remarks, guests and presenters at each table discussed what they heard from the speakers and expanded upon the ideas brought forth about parks and open spaces, and how they were meeting similar challenges in their cities.

This report summarizes findings, best practices and projects highlighted during the day's events. The roundtable was designed to be a jumping-off point for sharing and intelligence gathering around ways of improving cities through innovative planning of parks and creative approaches to using public lands. The content of the sessions and connections that were formed will be the foundation for future discussions and a larger urban parks effort going forward.

PARKS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The social benefits of parks are well-documented and easily understood. As destinations for play and recreation, they've long served as community gathering places and locales for activity and fun. Playgrounds, athletic fields, swimming pools and gardens within parks provide tangible benefits during residents' leisure times. However, the economic benefits of parks are less visible, despite a

growing recognition that parks can and do generate real economic benefits for cities. A number of the presenters spoke about the expansion of the role of parks in cities. Many noted that the scope of their responsibilities has widened to include stewardship of larger swaths of public land and greater expectations of meeting civic goals such as improving the health of the population or using parks to handle stormwater runoff. Both planners and park professionals see the broader benefits that open, green spaces provide to cities, and recognize those resources are increasingly being used to revitalize communities, not just entertain residents.

David Barth, a principal at design firm AECOM, urged city leaders to look at where urban growth centers are expected to develop within their domains and then co-plan parks spaces into Master Plans that capitalize on these assets.

In Kissimmee, Florida, a city with a population of about 64,000, a $35 million renovation of a major park was undertaken specifically as an economic development initiative. The mayor decided that, to revitalize downtown, it was imperative to redo the park, including repositioning property along the lakefront and improving the adjacent streets. People asked Mayor Jim Swan why, in the middle of a recession, the city would spend substantial funds on a parks project, of all projects. "The mayor said, '*Because* we're in a recession.'" Barth explains. "Here's a small community that that saw the economic possibility of redeveloping a park."

The result has been that people first find the park and then they find downtown. In essence, both entities have become bigger draws, a situation that contributes to Kissimmee's financial wellbeing and bodes well for its future. Restaurants have since opened downtown, and the city is on more solid footing due to the parks refurbishment.

Barth points to the project as a particular success because it aligns with the goal of creating "high-performance public spaces," an objective of modern landscape design first advanced by the Design Trust for Public Space, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the future of public space in New York City. High performance public spaces hit on three aspects — providing social, environmental and economic benefits. Based on his research, Barth highlights 25 criteria, falling within these three categories, to define such spaces. The overarching premise is the need to have higher expectations for all public spaces and to subsequently raise these expectations at the outset, so that spaces are consciously and purposely designed as stand-alone amenities, but which have multiple purposes and benefits.

When it comes to creating public spaces that are innovative and transformational, several factors are key, as was evident in Kissimmee. First, the city had a long-range vision for downtown, into which the parks project fit. Strong stakeholder involvement and residents' perceptions that the redevelopment was worthwhile also spurred it along. Elected leaders and the public perceived a threat — if they didn't get this design right, the outcomes they hoped for would never come to pass. Lastly, leadership, in this case civic leaders and especially the mayor, were fully behind the effort. "I'm almost at a point of saying, 'If you don't have a champion, don't bother,'" Barth says, of securing support from the top.

In the St. Louis region, home to 2.8 million people straddling two states, the city has lost more of its population since its peak than any other so-called "legacy city" in the U.S., even Detroit and Cleveland. Population in the metro area is increasing slowly and becoming more spread out. As a result, the area is often labelled as post-industrial. Donald Roe, director of planning and urban design for the City of St. Louis, has his sights set on becoming a "post-sprawl" city by building on existing strengths and filling in needed amenities to be competitive economically.

At the helm of the regional open space and parks district for the St. Louis area, Susan Trautman, executive director of The Great Rivers Greenway District, says the region may lack beaches or mountains, but it possesses a collection of interconnected rivers that are very accessible and attractive. As such, her organization's vision is to make the area a better place to live through connectivity — primarily in the form of a 600-mile system of trails. Accomplishing this ambitious effort requires collaboration and there are now about 140 partners who can leverage dollars and land to make the connected greenway system a reality. So far, the region has received $28 million in federal grants and leveraged it all through contributions from the collection of partners. One result has been $7.7 million-plus in flood prevention funding. Trautman says the green space development also has spurred $86 million in property value increases in one portion of the development alone.

The City of Atlanta is in the midst of a $3 billion project that will provide a network of public parks, multi-use trails and transit along a historic 22-mile railroad corridor. The BeltLine, a 25-year pursuit, is the most comprehensive transportation and economic development project ever undertaken in Georgia's capital. It's also an example of how enhancements in the public realm can cut across all sectors of a city to bring about economic benefit.

Originally, the BeltLine was dreamed up by a Georgia Institute of Technology student as part of his 1999 Master's thesis. James Shelby, commissioner of planning and community development, says the idea is transforming the city in ways never seen before. The BeltLine covers 45 neighborhoods, and 22 percent of Atlanta's population lives within the planning area. Once completed, the project will add 1,300 acres of green space and 33 miles of trails. Light rail transit, the last segment of the trail, is anticipated to span 22 miles.

In terms of economic benefits, the massive project has spurred employment — 48,000 construction jobs and 30,000 permanent jobs. And it's adding 5,600 units of affordable workforce housing.

"It's still a transit project but it has generated economic development along housing and retail corridors," Shelby says. "The model was always to invest in the trails and parks, which drives the economic development and increases tax increment financing, and then leverage that to bring in transit at the back of the project."

The trails that have opened along the BeltLine so far are being heavily used. "People are contributing to this project," Shelby adds.

One challenge is as parks are increasingly recognized as economic drivers in urban areas, there is a lack of hard data to quantify those contributions.

The Chicago Park District, a separate taxing district that overlays the city, is embarking on an economic analysis to determine what the park district means for the city in terms of economic impact.

"We're always clamoring, 'The parks are important, the parks are important.' The response is, 'Show me the dollars,'" says Parks General Superintendent Michael Kelly. "I realized that we needed to really recognize the parks as economic drivers, which caused us to do this analysis."

The study results will be released this year. The analysis is being done pro bono by parks partners. Tourism is a major industry in Chicago, and the parks have long been thought of as major attractions for city visitors. The study will able to prove this theory in a more definitive way, Kelly says.

Chicago Park District is in charge of a system that includes 77 pools and 530 playgrounds. It works with a $425 million operating budget, 70 percent of which is derived from a property tax lobby. The rest comes from alternative revenue streams. Tax rates have decreased during the past 12 years, forcing parks administrators to get creative with fundraising.

Kelly says in 2013, Soldier Field was the source of $30 million in revenue for the city, which makes it the second largest source after tax-born revenue. The Lollapalooza Music Festival, a three-day musical event held annually in Chicago's Grant Park, generates $2.7 million in revenue and brings 270,000 people to the park. Both are emblematic of the innovative ways that the city is using public spaces for events and to generate revenue.

"Whether its hoops or our Night Out in the Park series...we are stretching our dollars any chance we can," Kelly says. By stretching funds, Chicago Park District is also able to plan for the restoration of 300 playgrounds in the next five years.

Cities of all sizes need to keep out-of-town visitors in mind and how valuable parks are to the tourism industry. Peter Harnik, director of The Trust for Public Land's Center for City Park Excellence, commented that city tourism directors often don't understand the relevance of parks to their work. Therefore, connecting with Convention and Visitors Bureaus is a key strategy. Harnik suggests taking time to discover why visitors are coming to an urban area to help make the case that open spaces and developed parks are a factor.

In addition to how public land is developed, city planners are also rethinking their relationships with private developers, so that their various projects fit in with overarching plans for green space.

For instance, in Chicago, for any major development, there's an approval process that includes a required allocation of open space along with building the housing or retail project. Atlanta developers come to the city's planning office with open space as part of their plan. "We don't have a difficult time getting developers to adhere to that," Shelby says. "They see it as an amenity, and it adds to the bottom line of their profit." Atlanta has also hired a parks planner to review all developers' plans and ensure they fit into the city's vision.

New York, similarly, requires developers to undergo a review to ensure their work aligns with what the city wants to achieve holistically as an urban center. Barth says he appreciates this thoughtful review because it doesn't impose set standards or have one codified number of mechanisms that must be fulfilled in terms of open space. "It says, 'We're trying to create this place, and here's where you fit in.'"

PARKS AND HEALTHIER POPULATIONS

During the past 20 years in the public health sector, the approach has shifted from simply endorsing healthy behaviors to creating policies that make the healthy choice the easiest choice. Robert Ogilvie, vice president for strategic engagement at ChangeLab Solutions, says public space strategies have included increasing access and proximity for all residents, setting open space requirements, and adding health elements and language into cities' general plans.

At a time when childhood obesity and other chronic health ailments increasingly afflict citizens, there's an opportunity to repurpose rights of way and other plots of land so that they have recreational functions or allow people to be physically active. For instance, in St. Petersburg, Florida, the mayor adopted an initiative to have a park within one-quarter of a mile from every resident. Ogilvie helped to write shared-use agreements around the city so that schools, playgrounds and recreation centers could be open to all and contribute toward this mission of access. "To them, it's all the same system. They want something safe and close to get to," he says. Less important is whether space for play is on the site of a school, city-owned park or even a church.

In cities elsewhere, Ogilvie has pushed communities to reconsider where recreation and healthy living can happen. Neighborhood churches with ample space, for example, can be repurposed for community gardens. Traditional parks could be turned into sports fields. It's a matter of exercising creativity and flexibility to create healthy spaces.

Similarly, Gayle Berens, of the Urban Land Institute, shared during the table discussions that her organization is looking at what constitutes a healthy community. So far, the agency has found that most are lacking very basic factors like walkability and ample lighting. Parks represent an opportunity to engage residents on a range of issues from transportation to health care, and to begin to build healthy communities.

Los Angeles has become so committed to healthy living it's added a health and wellness chapter to its General Plan. The city particularly struggles with disparity issues. Average life expectancy differs by 12 years from the lowest-income portion of the city to the highest-earning, which has caused leaders to create a health atlas that geographically maps out parks, frequency of obesity and other critical health factors. That data is being used to formulate land use plans as the city acquires new property and redevelops existing public spaces.

"The maps show it's really a tale of two cities," says Michael LoGrande, director of Los Angeles' Department of City Planning. "Access to parks is a

big item for us. There are many communities with lots [of parks] and in other communities, not only is the acreage not there but access is limited. We want to change that, make access greater in areas where we want people to have healthier lifestyles. It goes beyond just access to parks. It goes into urban design, even the DNA of the buildings."

The proposed solution is to create 50 new parks in five years to "forever change our park footprint," Michael Shull, acting general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, says. The plan comes at a risky time as city budgets are being slashed. Yet Shull says the goal of creating parks within a 10-minute walk of all city residents is important enough to take on. Parks officials have also worked with the Trust for Public Land and area nonprofits, which will develop 30 percent of the parks and then turn them back over to the city. So far, 21 of the 50 planned parks have been completed and are open to the public. Los Angeles isn't stopping at 50, however — 11 additional parks are being incorporated into the vision as well.

According to Shull, 670,000 people live within a half-mile of these 61 sites. "We're putting the parks in the right spot. 170,000 people previously did not have a park within a half-mile of their home," he says.

Access to public spaces is also a consideration in Prince George's County, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C. During the roundtable discussions, Ronnie Gathers, director of the Department of Parks and Recreation of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, said the county's recent Master Plan created health and wellness zones. In doing an assessment of safe transportation routes to play spaces, officials found that many communities are "cut off by major highways."

"We have come up with transportation alternatives, busing kids, working with schools," Gathers says. "We give free passes to ride the Metro system, so they can ride Metro to parks. Community gardens have [also] been hugely popular."

The result is that D.C. residents are traveling into Prince George's County to take advantage of its open spaces and programmatic activities, not vice versa, Gathers says.

Cleveland Metroparks, a 23,000-acre park system serving Northeast Ohio, is working with partners on projects that seek to use available land to foster healthy living, especially among inner-city residents in the urban core.

Projects like nature centers, where community members learn about windowsill gardening and how to raise free range chickens and otherwise grow sustainable food in their backyards, are being explored. Rivergate Park is located in an up-and-coming neighborhood — Cleveland Metroparks acquired the parcel with the intention of adding a skate park and an organic restaurant, as well as revitalize the land that abuts the river in partnership with the City of Cleveland. Down the line, a new trail network will connect the area to the heart of the city.

"Part of our planning, when it comes to connectivity when we're acquiring parcels is, 'How can we be a stopping point on someone's bike ride or jog? How can we bring people to an area that maybe wasn't as highly visited and give them a reason to go somewhere else,'" Chief Operating Officer Joe Roszak says.

His organization also has forged an innovative program with the Cleveland Clinic called "Walk with a Doc," in which citizens can walk through a park with a physician while chatting about health.

Cleveland has struggled with foreclosures and now has 20,000 scattered vacant lots that Cleveland Metroparks and its partners are hoping to develop into creative spaces. The Ohio city is an urban place that doesn't seek to out-suburb the suburbs. "Therefore, the new vision is, 'Let's concentrate on our densely built urban areas and between them we'll have open space — greenways and smaller urban gardens."'

So far, 230 community gardens are bringing local food into neighborhoods, a vineyard has taken the place of an area that was the scene of riots during the 1960s and a six-acre site in the inner city is being farmed by refugees. Cleveland also has a program designed to encourage neighbors to take vacant lots and make them into small neighborhood gathering places, such as an arts and music park for locals.

Leaders in Miami-Dade County see their developing region as trying to find itself. Like other cities, it's grappling with problems around congestion, obesity and rapid population growth as people move back into the urban core of the city. Jack Kardys, director

of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, says these problems create an opportunity to use public spaces in new and exciting ways to bring about more livable neighborhoods.

"Miami-Dade County is a car-driven, suburban sprawl community with an outdated zoning code, plain and simple," he says. "We have nowhere to go but up. It has allowed us to rethink and reshape our development patterns around density."

Maria Nardi, chief of planning within the Department of Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces, says this reshaping includes transit-oriented parks, redeveloping spaces under metrorail as nontraditional-style parks and coordinating all of these activities with a holistic approach that takes into account the geography of health disparities. As new plans to evolve Miami take shape, parks are becoming catalysts for revitalization and part of the design patterns to develop neighborhoods surrounding their borders.

PARKS AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

In cities, good infrastructure is critical to the systems that support citizens living together in densely populated areas. Traditional infrastructure has been viewed as static with a limited lifespan. However, the concept of infrastructure is being reimagined to respond to a host of new challenges being manifested in the urban environment. Michael Van Valkenburgh, a noted landscape architect and CEO of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, says rising sea levels and extreme weather are probably "going to define the work of not only landscape architects but of a big segment of society for the next century."

Similarly, states with coastal areas are gradually losing land and living space at the shore due to increasingly destructive flooding. On the West Coast, extreme weather conditions are resulting in physical problems of a different nature as long-term droughts are causing severe water shortages.

In many cities across the country, as these forces disrupt established development and ways of life, infrastructure is simply falling apart. To restore it to its former condition is exorbitantly costly, so it's making more sense to invest in what is known as green infrastructure, or the practice of using nature and natural systems to control and manage stormwater and runoff. Van Valkenburgh considers green infrastructure to be more complex, reflecting an interwoven strategy that's more dynamic, self-sustaining and resourceful than traditional "gray" infrastructure. Often, the tools of green infrastructure are the "materials of the landscape itself" and require working at a larger scale in an interdisciplinary style involving engineering and design.

Van Valkenburgh's practice considers the incorporation of green infrastructure as a unique opportunity for partnerships that can be engines of innovation. For instance, at the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, his team eliminated, almost entirely, the use of drinking water to supply the irrigation system. Instead, rainwater is collected, recycled and introduced back into the grounds of the garden. The Brooklyn Waterfront is the epitome of a project that ultimately created a different kind of park by taking into account coastal erosion and reusing natural materials. At the Bush Library in Texas, located on a marginal brownfield site on the edge of a highway, Van Valkenburgh's team incorporated a nature-based stormwater management system that's reflective of how water exists in the north Texas landscape.

"We're seeing the 21st century as a heterogeneous collage of interactive places, many directly related to infrastructural ones," Van Valkenburgh says. "These would give us places of assembly, places of exploration, places of pleasure, places for families, teens, for strolling, for respite and generally things that support the life of the city."

In Philadelphia, the concept of green infrastructure is at the heart of several plans that the city is using to guide its future. The peak of Philadelphia's population was 2.1 million in 1950. For the first time since then, the city's population, currently at 1.5 million, is experiencing growth, albeit slowly. At the same time, there's still significant poverty, but there is and a dense, revitalized urban core rebuilding between two rivers and around five public squares. City leaders, during the recession, saw an opportunity to restrategize to the point where, "we've probably done more coordinated planning than we have in 50 or 60 years," Alan Greenberger, deputy mayor for economic development, says.

The coordinated Master Plans seek to improve quality of life, bolster Philadelphia's attractiveness and create potential for sustainable development.

The longest range plan is called Philadelphia 2035 and takes a comprehensive view of the city, its changing land uses and needed infrastructure changes over a 25-year period. By 2035 the goal is to convert one-third of the city's land area from impervious to pervious cover.

Green City, Clean Waters, the city's stormwater management plan required by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Clean Water Act, takes a green infrastructure approach to deal with Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) problems. Other cities use conventional gray infrastructure, typically large underground tunnels. According to Mark Focht, first deputy commissioner of Parks and Recreation, the plan is the only EPA-accepted one to rely almost entirely on green infrastructure, and Philadelphia entered into the forward-thinking initiative voluntarily.

The price tag is $1.2 billion altogether, but officials are quick to point out that's compared to an estimated $6 to $8 billion in gray infrastructure upgrades it would have taken to accomplish the same ends. Of the total, $800 million is devoted to green infrastructure, $200 million to wet weather treatment plant updates and the remaining $200 million to undetermined projects that will take shape during the next 25 years.

"What does this look like?" Focht asks. "We have very dense row houses. So this is not about creating new public green space; this is about greening what we have." That includes greening street right of ways, roofs and other existing structures, which won't be torn down to create new spaces.

Philadelphia also is following a Green 2015 plan that involves a partnership with the Trust for Public Lands to green existing parks and schools. Most of the city's school yards are asphalt, and the plan strategically selects school sites that have nearby recreation centers for more collaborative planning. Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter had, in recent years, challenged parks and planning leaders to make improvements that would allow everyone to be within a 10- to 15-minute walk from green space.

"The easiest way to begin this is to green city-owned spaces before having to go out and buy land," Nutter says. "We have five neighborhoods where residents are not [10 to 15 minutes from green space], so those are where we're targeting."

In Austin, Texas, watershed protection is an area that will soon be the responsibility of its Parks and Recreation Department, allowing the city to take on green infrastructure projects. During roundtable discussions, Sara Hensley, director of the Parks and Recreation Department, talked about these changes and explained that such green infrastructure projects include habitat restoration and stream bank restorations.

That city also has a sustainability officer whose job includes encouraging green infrastructure such as urban gardens, solar farms, farm-to-table eateries and green roofs. The city is also teaming up with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center on a new type of turf that doesn't require as much water and thus will be more environmentally-friendly.

Seattle, Washington, a city surrounded by water, sees green infrastructure as an important piece of its overall sustainability puzzle and incorporates it into a number of long-range policies, regulations, capital projects and code requirements. As a result, green infrastructure is integrated and implemented by city agencies and departments, as well as by private developers.

Seattle Planning Director Marshall Foster says proper stormwater management is a topic that city leaders have considered for some time, but climate change and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns are creating more urgency. At present, Seattle struggles with how to manage the flow of water in major storm events. The city's land mass is 89 square miles, populated by more than 600,000 people, so it's a relatively compact area that's also surrounded by water. That's why efforts are being made to spur developers to integrate green infrastructure into what they design and build and, ultimately, to attenuate the flow of stormwater, Foster says.

Efforts to monitor green infrastructure in the context of private development began in 2001 when Seattle took on pilot stormwater projects across the city. Then, in 2006, the Green Factor was created. It's a point-based landscaping standard designed to encourage the use of green infrastructure landscape features to comply with landscaping and stormwater management requirements. The Green Factor is also

considered to be the first building code regulation in the nation to require a score for landscapes.

Seattle, long an environmentally forward-thinking city, does not have a dedicated green infrastructure plan *per se*. But their plan, Toward a Sustainable Seattle, is a comprehensive strategy that guides growth, as well as long-range policies for the city to support green infrastructure implementation through every stage of project development and creation.

For instance, one of these long-range policies is a climate action plan enacted a year and a half ago to address the problem of excessive rain saturating soil to the point of it not being able to hold any more water. Green infrastructure is key to finding a solution for this issue.

Incorporating more green infrastructure, Foster says, and making it visible to city residents through signage and publicity has been a powerful tool. "People in Seattle really support stormwater management as a way to educate and celebrate public space," he says, "so we're really trying to bring this into all of our public space projects around the city."

Beyond private development, Seattle has re-engineered its waterfront to better filter water at Elliott Bay and to manage stormwater there. The city's park system is a compact 6,500 acres spread over 89 square miles. The second largest park, Magnuson, was transformed over the course of 20 years and with $100 million in funding so that the 350-acre park would include athletic fields along with a wetland area. Christopher Williams, acting superintendent of the Department of Parks and Recreation, says the project involved removing a huge swath of concrete. As a result, there have been social, environmental and economic benefits including the reemergence of wildlife like frogs and $2 million in stormwater benefits.

"We were able to find that right balance between active recreational uses with the passive uses in the park," Foster says.

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Park and planning professionals have historically worked apart, even as their missions of improving cities have overlapped. Whether through formal changes to agencies' makeup or through informal personal relationships developed within agencies and city departments, there's more need than ever for both worlds to come together. The roundtable itself was an effort to foster collaboration between leaders from both fields. Representatives from the participating cities discussed the critical nature of these burgeoning partnerships, even unanticipated ones that can develop between the private and public sectors.

In some cases, putting more formal structures in place is useful in bringing parks and planning professionals together. Farmer cited an example from when he worked in Minneapolis at the helm of its planning department. The city charter required one of the planning commissioners to be a sitting county board member, one to be a sitting school board member, and one to be sitting parks commissioner. Setting up the planning board in this way ensured diversity at the table and that the schools and parks were factored into all city plans, Farmer says.

At other times, hiring a planning official with a background in parks and recreation is helpful, or vice versa. For example, New York's new parks commissioner Mitchell Silver is a former APA president and planning director of Raleigh, North Carolina, and he's the first planner to hold the top parks position in New York.

In Miami, Nardi is a planning professional with training as an architect who Kardys brought into the Parks Department a decade ago in a special planning capacity. As his agency tries to become more proactive about utilizing public spaces to solve problems, her planning expertise comes in handy. Kardys has also tried to place his department in a leadership position that other departments follow. "Planning folks come to the Parks and Recreation Department because we're the ones who have tied it all together. We have positioned ourselves so that we're inseparable from the decisions made city- and county-wide in how we develop things," Kardys says.

The value of personal relationships across parks and planning can also go a long way in fostering collaboration. Shelby, Atlanta's commissioner of planning, and his parks counterpart, George Dusenberry —who has subsequently left his position with the city — got along well, allowing them to take on many projects together, perhaps most notably the BeltLine initiative that forms a loop around the city's core.

Andrew Mooney, commissioner of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development, agrees that the most crucial factor in forming his collaboration with Kelly was their ability to get along well. Mooney subsequently enlisted Kelly to serve on the planning commission. "The most important aspect is the personal relationships between heads of these agencies," Mooney says. "The personal relationships are as important as the structural relationship."

Besides ensuring that parks and planning are both at the table in setting agendas for cities, it's also beneficial to work with additional branches of government, as well as private organizations with similar visions, and with federal agencies and grant-making bodies of national and regional stature. With decreased budgets this is especially paramount, according to Ogilvie.

"That's where partners can be useful — in shoring up more money. They might have political connections or other resources," he says. "Or together you can have a bigger voice to get more resources."

ChangeLab Solutions spends a lot of time drafting language and adapting zoning code amendments to set up partnerships and shared-use agreements between entities as diverse as churches, school systems and health departments. Ogilvie says building these partnerships, along with formal documentation, is, at the core, about two entities trying to help each other solve problems and finding common ground to advance similar objectives.

Philadelphia enjoys an unusually collegial relationship between the parks and water departments. Much of this is historic in nature. During the mid-1800s, Philadelphians realized that to protect the city's body of waters — and hence, drinking and other usable water — would require protecting the surrounding land. As a result, the two agencies have since worked in concert.

That dynamic plays out when the city's Parks and Recreation Department has a playground or recreation center it's ready to renovate. DiBerardinis says he immediately alerts the Water Department, which then runs a cost estimate on the financial investment of greening the site. In this way, there's coordination from the start.

The relationship speaks to the necessity of partnerships "to get things done in cities these days," Greenberger says. "American cities are back...but resources are thin and, therefore, it's absolutely essential to find partnerships — in the private world, in the quasi-public world and with agencies that have historically been siloed off, all to make things happen by spreading the resource pool out and, as a result, also integrating your ideas together."

CONCLUSIONS

Parks were, for a long time, thought of simply as places for recreation, preservation of open space and social gatherings. However, the role of parks in cities and urban metropolitan areas has become much greater as the scope and impact of parks increasingly influences quality of life, economic development, health, and many other aspects of urban life.

One of the key takeaways of the roundtable is that parks exist as just one element in a larger context of public space, the "public realm," as Barth noted. "If you think about parks in the context of a larger system, you're forced to think about the streets and the right of ways adjacent to it," he says. "You're forced to think about how people get to it, the interconnectivity, and you're forced to think about all the other civic spaces that are part of the public realm."

By bringing together leaders in the parks and planning professions, the roundtable reflected on how parks in U.S. cities are taking on greater importance and, hence, how individuals in charge of public lands and in planning departments have new parts to play as they tackle new and old problems.

The notion of how urban metropolitan areas can be bettered by parks and other public spaces, focused on three themes. Participants presented and discussed ways of (1) including parks in economic development strategies; (2) using parks and recreation spaces to improve citizens' health outcomes; and (3) using green infrastructure in parks to improve stormwater management and provide environmental benefits.

Among the examples provided that demonstrated these principles:

- Atlanta is in the midst of a $3 billion project that will provide a network of public parks, multi-use trails and transit along a 22-mile railroad corridor. The BeltLine is

the most comprehensive transportation and economic development project ever undertaken in Georgia's capital and shows how enhancements in the public realm can cut across all sectors to bring about monetary gain.

- The Chicago Park District is embarking on an economic analysis to determine what the park district means for the city. Concrete numbers will be used to recognize parks as an economic driver.

- Los Angeles is creating 50 new parks in five years to forever change its park footprint and improve access for residents of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

- Cleveland Metroparks is using nature centers to teach community members how to do windowsill gardening and turning 20,000 vacant lots from foreclosures into community gardens, vineyards and a six-acre farm operated by refugees.

- Seattle is requiring developers to incorporate green infrastructure into projects as they're designed and built.

- Philadelphia's Green City, Clean Waters plan is ground-breaking in that it relies on green infrastructure to deal with its combined sewer overflow problems as opposed to traditional gray infrastructure.

Creative and reimagined purposes for land use are common threads among these ideas. There also is a need to better plan for how parks and public spaces fit into cities' overall plans.

As cities work on solutions in terms of economic development, health and green infrastructure, collaboration is a critical component going forward. If city leaders work together, parks — and public space as a whole — can be agents for change. Agencies can also share funds and resources and work across departmental boundaries in order to achieve more.

The roundtable provided example after example of cases in which high-functioning relationships between parks and planning directors — and their staffs — translated into projects with greater impact. In some cases better collaboration comes from more formalized structures; in others, friendships among peers in different departments caused the coordination. There's also value in hiring parks officials with prior experience as planners and planning leaders who have experience running parks.

As parks and planning departments work more cohesively, the roundtable participants stressed the need to bring in nontraditional partners as well, from national nonprofits to health and water departments so that all stakeholders share a common goal and framework. Urban metropolitan areas have big problems to solve and can do more with all agencies trying to solve these problems together.

Discussions at the event also centered on several goals for parks and planning officials to consider and keep in mind going forward:

- Transcending silos across city departments, especially boosting how park and recreation agencies work with planning units, as well ascity divisions like water and health.

- Making public projects visible and understandable to the public whenever possible.

- Stretching dollars, especially as budgets for parks and other city services shrink.

- Holding public spaces — and how they're developed — to higher standards.

- Thinking of parks as part of a larger public realm that also includes schools, greenways, trails, right-of-ways and outdoor urban spaces.

- Seeking creative and transformational usages for public spaces that help solve problems in cities, ranging from public health concerns, such as obesity and lack of physical activity, to environmental concerns, such as eroding coastlines and stormwater management.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dena Levitz is an award-winning journalist with 10 years of experience as a writer, editor and digital media innovator. She's worked as a staff writer for the Augusta Chronicle covering transportation and crime and then for the Washington Examiner reporting on efforts by then-chancellor Michelle Rhee to reform D.C. schools. In her role as the Newspaper Association of America's manager of digital strategies, she spent three years helping U.S. newspapers formulate tactics to grow audience and revenue. Dena's freelance credits include The Atlantic Cities, Washington Post, San Francisco Chronicle, PBS Mediashift, Washington City Paper, Bloomberg News, Narratively, NetNewsCheck and Northern Virginia Magazine.

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The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing park, recreation and conservation efforts that enhance quality of life for all people. NRPA represents all park and recreation agencies in America, touching the lives of more than 300 million people in virtually every community, whether rural communities, suburban neighborhoods, or urban centers. Through its network of 40,000 recreation and park professionals and citizens, NRPA encourages the promotion of healthy and active lifestyles, conservation initiatives and equitable access to parks and public space.

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