



Photo: Brian Keith Elison, and Residents of Garfield Park

# PARKS AND OPEN SPACE EQUITY

**WE** believe in a future where urban parks and open spaces are re-imagined and designed by communities as communal spaces for the benefit of supporting people's physical and mental health and creating climate resilient, thriving, equitable neighborhoods. We see communities thriving in health, climate, and cultural resilience with ample access to community-designed recreational and natural spaces that strengthen the continuity of a neighborhood's long-term economic stability for residents.

## OUR CHALLENGE

City, regional and national parks and open spaces too often reflect racist and classist attitudes - both conscious and unconscious - of the agencies planning, designing, programming and maintaining them. This results in an exclusion of the diverse communities these parks and open spaces can and should serve, creating the physical, spiritual or cultural displacement of people from the land for extraction and profit.

Deep and authentic community engagement from the outset is necessary but missing in the siting, design, development and operations process of public recreational and natural spaces. As a consequence, the well-being of so many generations of low-income communities of color in this country have been negatively and unjustly impacted. This historical and current lack of community engagement, particularly in

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**Greenspace**

**preservation/restoration  
is no longer just a  
conservation issue;  
it now is social and  
cultural.**

**Darryl Haddock, West Atlanta  
Watershed Alliance**



Black and other communities of color, including immigrant, and low-income communities, has resulted in a stark lack of open space, parks and green investment in these places, creating generations of negative impacts on these communities' health, well-being and cultural resilience.

Decision-makers at all levels continue to face growing environmental challenges from urban flooding and the growing threat of the urban heat island effect, yet change is slow to come. Climate change will exacerbate these impacts, especially in already overwhelmed existing infrastructure systems, where there is less parkland and greenspace, including fewer resources for their maintenance and amenities. These are all conditions that only perpetuate the deep-rooted environmental and social injustices in the country.



Given that COVID-19 has further underscored the urgency of equitable greenspace investments to allow people to safely utilize outdoor space, interventions that provide multiple co-benefits and explicitly consider climate justice are needed to manage stormwater, reduce heat-health impacts, and increase economic opportunity.

Lastly, parks and affordable housing sectors have worked independently of each other, which has resulted in the creation of green development inadvertently leading to the displacement of long-time residents, physically or culturally, from their homes, businesses and communities. Given these historical disconnections, we must be more intentional in prioritizing equity, community-driven development, and spatial justice for holistic, safe, and culturally connected parks and open spaces from the very beginning of each project.

## FOCUS AREAS

### **Community-led Parks Design, Development & Implementation.**

Uplifting strategies that prioritize community voices and self-determination in parks design (e.g., park site selection, design processes, operations).

### **Equitable Parks Systems.**

Advocating for existing parks systems, departments and consultants to engage in anti-racist education and systems change to equip themselves to better communicate and interact with diverse communities.

### **Green Investments for Resilient Neighborhoods.**

Ensuring that investments for parks and open spaces in underserved communities are coordinated with community-driven anti-displacement strategies. Ensure that public, private and philanthropic funding and capital are aligned to ensure multiple, integrated benefits including climate and social resilience.

*Photo Credit: Transformation Alliance and Soccer in the Streets*



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Park agencies at the local, regional and federal levels need to start with communities and continue to center communities throughout the design process. Community organizations that have established trust with neighbors and residents should be recognized and supported as key resources in planning and decision-making.

Investments for green infrastructure, including for parks and open spaces, should enhance a community's resilience, not harm it. There is a clear need for increased investment for green and climate infrastructure, particularly through parks and open space development, so that underserved communities are able to withstand worsening climate impacts. It is critical that these investments are created in tandem with affordable housing and increased economic opportunity while also being designed with community voices to prevent against the potential for gentrification and displacement.

## 1. Community-led Parks Design, Development and Implementation

Community organizations that represent residents and local priorities focused on building parks programs need to be elevated and supported to ensure integration of community voices in regional park planning offices and programs. Policy recommendations to support community-led parks design include:

### SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS

**Convene community-based leaders and advocates** for equitable urban parks and open space planning who understand community needs and can respond to political pressures at multiple levels affecting the community.

**Amplify experiences and tools that recognize and address past and present injustices** in parks and open space planning. For example:

- Honor indigenous and traditional uses of the land
- Ensure that spaces are not criminalized (for instance, including for homeless people and street vendors)

**Share, identify, and co-create tools that support the prioritization of land acquisition and development** of integrated parks, affordable housing, and climate resilient infrastructure that is community-owned and stewarded as well as addresses existing vulnerabilities and inequities.

**Identify pathways** (e.g., target audiences, platforms) **for increased community engagement** in park planning processes at local, regional and federal levels. Ensure that community members are compensated for participating in the design, development and implementation of parks and related programs/projects.

### LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

**Spotlight, celebrate, and promote best practices** in integrated, equitable, and community-driven parks design systems.

**Create tools and programs** that support community needs and local parks infrastructure but do not contribute to displacement.



## 2. Equitable Park Systems

To recognize and address the historic inequities in parks and related development processes, creating space for conversation and anti-racist trainings for park agencies at the local, regional, and federal levels will be key in building the awareness and respect needed to engage, involve, and collaborate with communities. Policy recommendations to improve on existing parks systems to center communities include:

### SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS

**Identify anti-racist programs/workshops** to build awareness in park agencies, planners, and the public in recognizing the historic and current racism embedded within the park design infrastructure that has and continues to negatively impact Black and indigenous communities of color.

**Identify and promote case examples** of a park agency process at each of the local, regional, and federal levels that implement a participatory budgeting process and increased community engagement planning processes for further learning and evolution.

**Identify and spotlight metrics** that assess the impact of parks on community livelihoods as a means of avoiding disproportionate impacts, as well as to address unintended racial equity consequences (such as higher housing costs or displacement).

### LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

**Identify and promote reparations** to cover funding gaps (e.g. Asheville N.C.) rather than through taxes and utility rate-paying to fund transportation, jobs and park improvements to improve quality of life for low-income communities in proximity to parks.

**Advocate for private and philanthropic funding** to be invested in systemic park improvements.

**Advocate for a proportionate annual regional parks budget** or at least 50% of the annual regional parks budget for the next 10 years be dedicated to the long-term maintenance and beautification of public park spaces in underserved regions that support affordable housing.

## 3. Green Investments for Resilient Neighborhoods

Policy recommendations to re-envision community-serving green investments for the purposes of promoting resilient neighborhoods include:

### SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS

**Identify and support a local coordinating entity** to consistently link green investments with investments in affordable housing, economic opportunity, and other community needs.

**Pinpoint and promote areas for cross-collaboration** between parks departments and housing departments to ensure that green investments do not contribute to displacement.

**Identify opportunities and pathways** for park agencies to divest from fossil fuels.

**Elevate and support the integration of equity**, open space and parks in federal, state and local programs and legislation (including CDBG, FEMA, Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and other actions). Ensure that community-based organizations can equitably and effectively access and implement programmatic resources and funding.





## LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

**Increase capital for green infrastructure** that leads to economic stability and opportunity, not to displacement. Support a process for scaling these types of projects.

**Identify and spotlight programs for local workforce development** and hiring for parks and open spaces through green infrastructure training programs that culminate in job placement in green infrastructure.

**Develop innovative collaborations** with park systems, investors and NGO's to establish markets: micro and macro enterprises, such as outfitters, vendors, food venues, refreshment stands and entertainment and arts providers that help build and support local wealth. (e.g. park vending issues, [efforts that sustain economies](#)).

**Identify and implement strategies** to encourage multi-benefit outcomes for private and public sector parks development, e.g., local/targeted hiring, and partnerships with other agencies to provide a broad range of community services.



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The process is just as important as the outcome!

Na'Taki Osborne Welks,  
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