



# How cities use parks for...

# Community Engagement

## Executive Summary

Community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with individuals and groups to achieve specific goals. For parks and open spaces, community engagement allows mayors and public officials to directly involve their constituencies in the ongoing design, planning, and management of these resources. This process results in informed and engaged residents that feel better connected to their communities. While sometimes contentious, but more often productive and rewarding, community engagement is an essential ingredient of making successful urban open space.

Parks support community engagement by providing residents with a venue for participation in and attachment to their communities. They also provide a sense of place and offer essential life-enhancing qualities that aid community and individual well-being. By understanding the community benefits of parks, decision makers can develop constituencies that can sustain their urban park systems over time.

## Key Point #1

Parks are one of the quickest and most effective ways to build a sense of community and improve quality of life.

## Key Point #2

Parks provide places for people to connect and interact in a shared environment.

## Key Point #3

Parks channel positive community participation by getting diverse people to work together toward a shared vision.

**KEY POINT #1:**

*Parks are one of the quickest and most effective ways to build a sense of community and improve quality of life.*

Parks are one of the most effective methods available within the political term of a mayor to change the character and improve the image of a community. Park improvements are often quick and tangible actions for mayors and citizens, which can work in concert with other issues such as reducing crime, eliminating graffiti, or traffic management.

**Eugene, Oregon. Parks and Community Gardens**

Parks in this city are used to involve residents in a variety of civic and environmental activities. Eugene's Downtown Park Blocks host one of the community's signature events, the Saturday Market, which brings people together for clothing and jewelry shopping, for produce at the farmer's market, and for food and entertainment. People also go there to see other people, hang out, eat, and listen to the music. Eugene residents also "took back" Washington-Jefferson Park from drug dealers and prostitutes by working together in a community watch. They became organized over a period of a few months, and the park's turnaround occurred within a year of residents becoming involved. Washington-Jefferson Park now is used for various recreational activities, such as late-night basketball games, and community celebrations such as Eugene's Cinco de Mayo. ([www.planeteugene.com/parks](http://www.planeteugene.com/parks))

**Minneapolis: Peavey Park Community Listening and Visioning Project**

In partnership with Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Hope Community, Inc. led a community engagement process to bring about positive change to Peavey Park and the surrounding Phillips neighborhood. Issues common to urban parks, such as drugs, gangs, and gun violence, plagued the park's north end. Physical barriers included crossing major arterial streets for access and a barren, non-welcoming park landscape. The City Parks Forum provided grant money to enable Hope, in partnership with the city and park board, to assemble a group of community leaders to plan and conduct 18 community listening sessions revolving around Peavey Park and the Phillips neighborhood. Nearly 200 adults and children attended the sessions, conducted in several languages to allow the participation of the diverse ethnicity of the neighborhood. Next, Hope conducted several community visioning sessions. Working with an architect who attended both sessions, residents created a concept plan to revitalize their park. Following the 12-month process, community members, many of whom had never before attended a public meeting, presented their plan to the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board. ([mkeefe@hope-community.org](mailto:mkeefe@hope-community.org))

**KEY POINT #2:**

*Parks provide places for people to connect and interact in a shared environment.*

Parks create a sense of place by connecting residents to one another and to their larger environment. City parks also provide residents with meaningful ways to express their concerns about the environment. They can physically reconnect communities to themselves by creating linkages or restoring historic connections broken by highways, sprawl, and poor planning decisions. Greenways, green streets, and linear parks are now widely used open space types (Smith and Hellmund 1993).

For example, a study by **Human-Environment Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign** found that the more there is green space in inner-city neighborhoods, the more that common public spaces are used by residents (Kuo et. al. 1998). The researchers found that relationships between neighbors are made stronger by the mere presence of vegetation. Compared to residents living near barren spaces, those closer to green spaces enjoy more social activities, have more visitors, know more of their neighbors, and have stronger feelings of belonging. They found that greener common areas facilitate the development and maintenance of stronger social ties.

**Davis, California: Village Homes.** Village Homes is an ecological neighborhood with 242 single and multiple family houses located in the university city of Davis. The plan for the neighborhood emphasizes common open spaces designed, developed and managed by residents (Corbett and Corbett 2000). Post occupancy evaluation studies of the community show that people that live there have twice as many friends and three times more social contacts than residents in a nearby conventional neighborhood in Davis (Francis 2002). When first proposed in the late 1970s, the developers had difficulty securing financing for the project. Today, Village Homes is Davis' most desirable neighborhood with homes selling at \$10-\$25 per square foot premium in 30 percent less market time. ([www.lgc.org/freepub/land\\_use/models/village\\_homes.html](http://www.lgc.org/freepub/land_use/models/village_homes.html))

**KEY POINT #3:**

*Parks channel positive community participation by getting diverse people to work together toward a shared vision.*

The benefits of participation in the development of urban parks and open spaces include leading to a stronger sense of community (PPS 2000) and an increased sense of user or community control (Francis 1989). There are also many low cost and effective methods of community participation available including workshops, surveys, interviews, and observation (Hester 1990).

Yet participation does have risks and limits that need to be understood. Landscape architect Randy Hester suggests that participation sometimes leads to what he calls "participatory gridlock" where nothing is agreed upon or the resulting plans runs counter to established environmental or social goals. He suggests that to be effective, participation needs to be done with "a view"—a clear vision on the part of the city officials and designers of the desired future (Hester 1999). While this vision can be modified and enlarged by participants during the design and planning process, the city officials and designers need to be proactive in their approach (Francis 1999).

**St. Louis, Missouri: Forest Park.** Forest Park, dedicated in 1876, was host to the 1904 Worlds Fair and the 1927 homecoming celebration for Charles Lindbergh after his historic flight over the Atlantic. In need of updating and renovation, park planners with the significant involvement of a former Mayor Freeman Bosley, Jr., who had played in the park as a young child, developed a new Master Plan and vision for the park in the 1990s. More than 300 people attended an early meeting in 1993 to discuss plans for the park. The design process was "the mechanism for conflict resolution, public education, empowerment of stakeholders and citizens, and the recognition by the public of what constitutes design excellence" (Lewis 2000). ([www.forestparkforever.org](http://www.forestparkforever.org))

**Oakland, California: Union Point Park.** More than 1,000 community residents as well as 50 community organizations and local nonprofits from across Oakland contributed to developing a plan for this waterfront park. Part of the Fruitvale Recreation and Open Space Initiative (FROSI), the park is a partnership among the Spanish Speaking Unity Council, the Trust for the Public Land, and the University Oakland Metropolitan Forum. Fruitvale, the most densely populated district in Oakland, has one of the highest concentrations of children and the least amount of parks and open space. Union Point Waterfront Park proposes to transform a previous industrial site into a public, recreational waterfront serving the nearby Oakland neighborhoods and the surrounding region. The park plan includes three major design elements: a series of mounds, a pedestrian waterfront promenade, and public art to educate visitors about the surrounding community and its history. ([www.unitycouncil.org/html/frosi.html](http://www.unitycouncil.org/html/frosi.html))

**New Orleans: Kid's Cafe Pocket Park.** Mayor Marc Morial wanted to create a model for converting blighted, vacant lots in New Orleans into neighborhood assets. Using a CPF grant, Parkway Partners Inc., a partnership program of the community, set out to convert a vacant lot in the Central City neighborhood into a children's garden. Donated by a longtime resident and business owner, the lot they chose is near the Kids Café, a nonprofit project that provides inner-city children with free meals, nutrition education, and a safe environment. More than 50 volunteers joined together to build the garden. Through the collaboration of The Neighborhood Gallery, the Contemporary Arts Center, and local artists, a large mural was painted on the back wall of the garden and additional arts programs were developed. WDSU News Channel 6, another project partner, provided publicity for the program. A volunteer mentoring program, led by Parkway Partners' staff, teaches area youth about horticulture and life skills. Harvested produce is taken home by the children, taken to the Kids Café for preparation, or shared with senior citizens who visit the garden. ([www.parkwaypartners.com](http://www.parkwaypartners.com))

**Resources**

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For an expanded discussion of this topic and further resources, contact the author; Mark Francis, FASLA, University of California, Davis. 530-752-6031, mofrancis@ucdavis.edu. He would like to thank Randy Hester; Marcia McNally, Stan Jones and Bill Thompson as well as several reviewers who provided useful comments while developing this briefing paper:

Cover photo: Kid's Café Pocket Park, courtesy of Parkway Partners, Inc., New Orleans

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