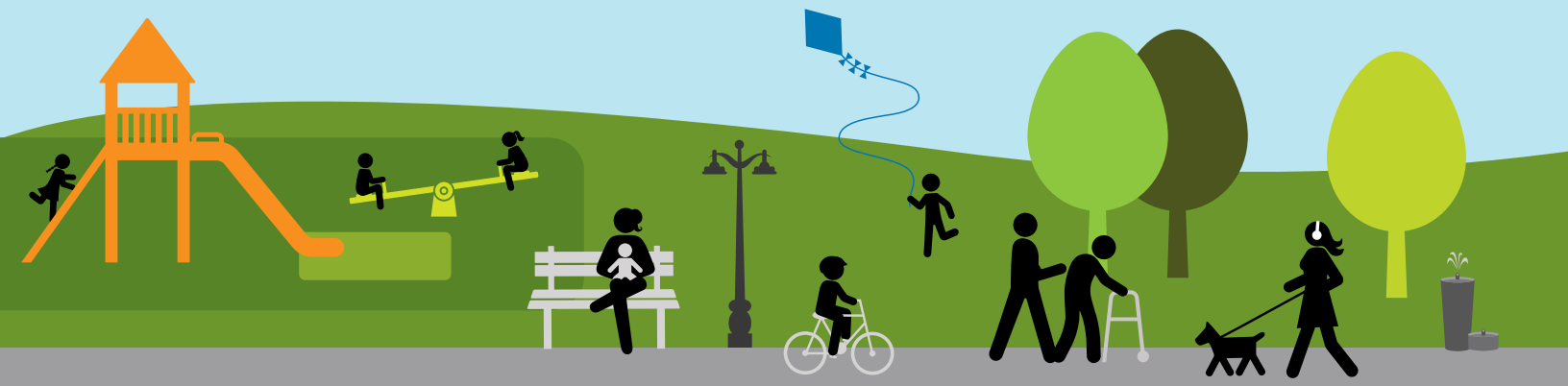


COMPLETE PARKS OVERVIEW

Creating an Equitable Parks System



Parks bring people together. When people recall happy childhood memories, parks often come to mind because they're the backdrop for birthday parties and family barbecues, sledding in the snow, playing until sundown. Parks are where many kids meet their first friends, where they learn to swim or play soccer or basketball. When we gather in parks to celebrate milestones, to laugh together and bond, these public spaces become special and important. We reconnect in parks, with nature and with our neighbors.

Everyone should be able to enjoy a great local park. But the current reality is that in many neighborhoods, people can't use parks safely or easily.¹ The benefits of parks are not fairly distributed across groups of people, and there are clear patterns by class and often by race.^{2,3} Closing this gap calls for an intentional approach; it won't happen on its own or by happenstance.

This document describes a new approach – the Complete Parks approach – and how it can be used to create a Complete Parks system. It also introduces the 7 elements of a Complete Parks system.

A PARK is accessible outdoor space intended for public use. Leisure, social, and physical activities are common in parks, which may also be used in other ways determined by the community. Parks can be publicly or privately owned land and take many forms, such as plazas, fields, or parklets.

Zoom Out: Parks in Context

A Complete Parks system achieves 3 goals:

- Provide all residents with easy access to a great park that fulfills each community's needs for nature, open space, and recreational activities, recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution;
- Close the gaps in parks access and quality by improving parks in neglected places and increasing park area for groups with the least access and the greatest need; and
- Support health and health equity by incorporating holistic health into how parks are distributed, operated, and used by people and communities.

A parks system accomplishes these goals by incorporating the 7 Complete Parks elements. Many people and organizations have examined why individual elements are important for an equitable parks system.* Complete Parks brings all of these elements together, recognizing that what makes a park successful depends heavily on neighborhood context.

Imagine a bird's-eye view of a park. Rather than seeing only the park and its boundaries, Complete Parks zooms out so the view includes the street and transit system; proximity to schools, businesses, services, and other parks; the people in the area; their sense of safety and connections to one another; and more. Parks are part of communities. A park is "complete" to the extent that it is integral to the neighborhood and people's lives.

*These groups include Active Living by Design, Active Living Research, American Planning Association, California Park and Recreation Society, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Park Service, National Recreation and Park Association, PolicyLink, Public Health Advocates, Safe Routes to School National Partnership, The Trust for Public Land, Urban Land Institute, and others.

Where we want to be...
Complete Parks System

- Provide all residents with easy access to a great park
- Close inequitable gaps in parks access and quality
- Support health and health equity

Complete Parks Systems need to include...
7 Elements

 ENGAGE	 CONNECT	 LOCATE	 ACTIVATE
 GROW	 PROTECT	 FUND	

How we get there... Complete Parks Approach

- Meaningful, ongoing community engagement
- Collaboration across the public sector

Pan Around: The 7 Elements

A Complete Parks system considers the complex connections among the 7 Complete Parks elements: Engage, Connect, Locate, Activate, Grow, Protect, and Fund. Engage and Fund, in particular, cut across all other elements. The Complete Parks elements affect one another in dynamic ways so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their parts.

ENGAGE: Inclusive, Meaningful, Ongoing Dialogue



To create a park that aligns with a community's particular goals, decisionmakers must understand local people's perspectives. Understanding community views requires building inclusive, trust-based conversations and respectful relationships, so people feel comfortable with sharing their hopes and concerns, knowing that government leaders and staff will act on their input. Community engagement is about humanizing government so it works effectively to benefit all people.

CONNECT: Safe Routes to Parks



All people should enjoy safe, convenient access to parks. A neighborhood park can be enjoyed only if people can easily and safely get there, whether by walking, rolling, biking, taking public transit, or driving a car. Parks can be designed as part of a route as well as a destination, and all people should feel safe on their way to parks. Although this element focuses on transportation safety in and on the way to parks, safe routes to parks should also provide other types of safety – for example, protection against falls and unintentional injuries.

LOCATE: Equitable Distribution of Complete Parks



In a Complete Parks system, every resident lives close enough to a park so that it's considered easily accessible. Living a half mile or a 10-minute walk away from a park are common standards for cities,⁴ although the standards would need to be adjusted for rural areas or other local conditions.

The Locate element aims to increase parkland and recreation spaces in areas that have far fewer parks than other neighborhoods and allocates resources with an emphasis on underserved areas. A city, county, or town may choose to focus on, for example, neighborhoods with high rates of chronic disease, areas around schools where more than half of the students receive free or reduced-price meals, or areas that lack safe spaces for physical activity and recreation.



ACTIVATE: Community-Led Park Activities and Programs



In a Complete Parks system, all local people can use and enjoy parks. Each park should serve many purposes and fulfill varying needs, with options for both individuals and groups. In addition to formal programs, parks should have a combination of fixed features that have a clear purpose – such as play structures or gardens – and more flexible spaces that can be creatively adapted for multiple community purposes.

GROW: Parks Maintenance and Ecology



People are most likely to use parks that feel safe and are clean, well lit, and well maintained.⁵ Overflowing trash and litter, graffiti, run-down play structures, or a lack of clean bathrooms or drinking water undermine park use and safety. Due to inequitable policies and practices, parks in low-income neighborhoods are less likely to be well maintained than those in more affluent areas.⁶ A Complete Parks system manages parks in a way that is good for the environment and makes parks attractive for long-term use by all kinds of people. The Grow element covers the construction of park buildings and structures, the choice of plants and landscaping, and ongoing maintenance.

PROTECT: Safety In and Around Parks



People in and around parks need to feel safe, and this element emphasizes safety related to crime and violence, including sexual harassment, intimidation by gangs or police, and fear of deportation. In a Complete Parks system, people address park safety within the context of broader community safety. People who feel safe in their neighborhood are more likely to feel safe in their local parks.⁷ When trust, social connection, and a sense of safety break down, people avoid using parks.⁷ To advance the Protect element, a Complete Parks system aligns with the efforts of local violence prevention coalitions and other systems that promote public safety.

FUND: The Support Network for a Complete Parks System



Local governments should strive to distribute funds and resources equitably throughout their jurisdiction, prioritizing resources for communities that have further to go to reach optimal health and prosperity. Creating a Complete Parks system requires resources. In addition to funding, this element covers supports related to the following areas:

- Leadership
- Training and capacity building
- Coordinating multiple sectors and collaborating with communities
- Dedicated staff members or staff time
- Communications
- Data systems
- Strategic planning

Change the Scenery: The Complete Parks Approach

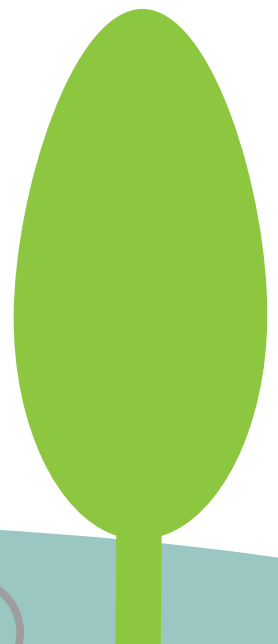
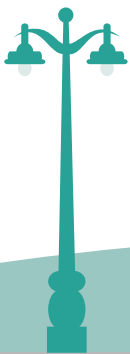
All people, no matter where they live, should benefit from a park where they can connect with neighbors, nature, and activities that matter to them. This is possible when residents can count on sectors within local government to collaborate in designing parks and to prioritize equity and community engagement. Ideally, city and county agencies would seek out many different, often-unheard voices as a matter of course, as well as pursue ongoing dialogue with groups who have historically been left out of public decisionmaking. This is the Complete Parks approach, the path to a Complete Parks system.

The Complete Parks approach is defined by

1. Meaningful, ongoing community engagement. To truly meet community needs, decisionmakers need to listen to many different residents in all neighborhoods, especially people from groups whose perspectives historically have not been taken into account when government makes decisions. Priority populations in this approach include people who live in areas of concentrated or generational poverty, communities of color, people who don't speak English as their first language, seniors, and youth and young adults. Depending on the local context, other important populations might include the following groups who might not feel welcome at parks:

- people with disabilities
- people who are homeless
- the re-entry population
- people who identify as LGBT+
- immigrants or refugees

Many parks and recreation agencies are committed to inclusion as a core value. In a survey conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association, 55% of parks and recreation agencies have a formal inclusion policy or intend to develop one in 2018.⁸ But around 1 in 4 parks and recreation agencies said their outreach activities do not sufficiently reach underserved community members.⁸ Parks and recreation agencies recognize that they need additional partners to understand the needs of these priority groups and serve them well.



2. Collaboration across the public sector. The sheer variety of elements affecting a parks system means that many partners besides the parks and recreation department must work together. Local government agencies that work well together are uniquely positioned to improve parks, because they make decisions that can transform a whole neighborhood or jurisdiction. In addition to residents, community-based groups, advocates, activists, and organizers, other partners might include the following:

- community and neighborhood service providers
- economic and workforce development agencies
- educational institutions
- elected officials
- fire and law enforcement agencies
- housing authorities and developers
- planning departments
- public health departments
- public works departments
- social service providers
- transportation departments
- people who liaise between local government and communities
- people who coordinate efforts across departments at the city, county, or regional level

Insufficient funding and staffing were identified as the top 2 challenges to creating an inclusive parks system,⁸ so parks and recreation agencies are likely to welcome partners in creating a Complete Parks system. Nearly all of them (93%) already work with other agencies and community organizations, such as transit agencies, schools, nonprofit organizations, and agencies that serve elderly people or people with disabilities.⁸

Parks and green space are a good testing ground for government agencies to pilot a more coordinated, strategic method of working together. Improving parks is seen as a tractable problem, one that's worth fixing,⁹ and is beneficial to many sectors and departments. Ideally, success in working together on a concrete, relatable issue like parks makes future multisector collaboration more likely, paving the way for much-needed improvements in other areas and, over time, community transformation.

Parks and other green spaces support various goals related to quality of life, place, and health. For example, they can feature rain gardens, which help neutralize flooding during storms, or community gardens, which increase the availability of fresh, affordable, healthy food. Parks can be also an asset for disaster preparedness and first responders, or they can be a neutral ground for mobilizing residents, building social cohesion, or enhancing school curricula.



Listening to Underrepresented Communities in Houston*

As part of developing a new master plan for parks in 2014 and 2015, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department created an online survey and promoted it at many Houston parks. The Houston residents who completed the online survey were mostly white people who made more than \$75,000, although most Houston residents are people of color and the median household income was \$45,620 at that time.

To reach groups not well represented in the online survey, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department worked with a group of Rice University students to conduct a second survey focused on 3 parts of the city where many black and Latino people lived. Trained interviewers visited 18 parks in these areas at various times of day and spoke with people in English or Spanish.

Very different priorities emerged from the two surveys. Two-thirds of online survey respondents rated as a high priority the ability to bike or walk between neighborhoods. In contrast, only 2 of the 357 black and Latino residents who spoke to interviewers mentioned these types of access problems. Black and Latino residents were concerned about poor park maintenance and the lack of restrooms, water fountains, and a sense of safety. They cared most about improving basic services in existing parks.

The differences between the two sets of survey results speak to the importance of making an extra effort to hear from groups who have systematically been denied power and self-determination for generations. The Houston Parks and Recreation Department was successful in part because it took the following actions:

Enlisted the help of other organizations to support its engagement efforts.

Understood and addressed barriers to participation. To reach people who might not have easy access to the internet and the online survey, Rice University students conducted in-person interviews in people's preferred language and at times and places convenient to black and Latino park users.

Valued residents' expertise and made different decisions based on their insights. The Houston Parks and Recreation Department specifically investigated the preferences of groups who typically experience inequities and have historically been left out of public decisionmaking, bringing them into local policy discussions.

* Based on Smiley KT, Sharma T, Steinberg A, et al. More Inclusive Parks Planning: Park Quality and Preferences for Park Access and Amenities. *Environmental Justice*. 2016;9(1):1-7.



Transforming Vacant Lots to Green Space in Philadelphia*

In Philadelphia, vacant lots made some areas seem less desirable, discouraging housing and business developers from investing in many neighborhoods. The city's concerted effort to convert vacant lots throughout the city to green space had positive effects in the following areas:

Nonprofit organizations. In partnership with city agencies, local nursery businesses, and other community-based groups, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society removed trash and debris from 3,000 abandoned lots, then planted trees and grass. This city-funded effort helped the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society advance its mission of connecting people with the art and science of growing plants.

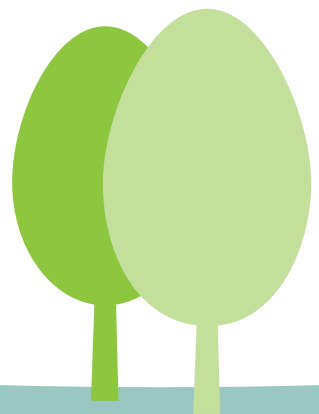
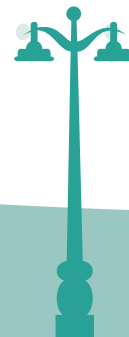
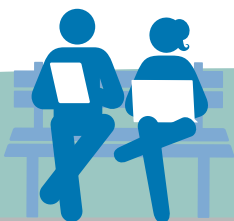
Workforce development. Formerly incarcerated residents in community-based job training programs maintained the improved spaces by learning to mow grass, prune trees, and repair low wooden fences.

Public health and public safety. Studies evaluating this effort found that greening vacant lots and keeping public spaces clean was linked to fewer gun assaults and less vandalism.¹⁰ In some neighborhoods, residents said they exercised more and felt less stressed.¹⁰ Greening vacant lots reduced overall crime as well as gun violence and burglaries.¹¹ It also increased residents' perceptions of safety and use of outdoor spaces for relaxing and socializing.¹¹

Economic development. According to the Next Great City Coalition, greening vacant lots in Philadelphia helped raise property values by up to 30%, and land maintenance activities encouraged investment.¹²

* Adapted from Davis RA, Tsao B. Learn from Others: Greening Vacant Lots in Philadelphia. In: *Multi-Sector Partnerships for Preventing Violence: A Collaboration Multiplier Guide*. Oakland, CA: Prevention Institute, 2014:102.

The Complete Parks approach allows government policies, practices, and programs to be more responsive to each community's particular needs, to be more effective at serving all residents, and to more efficiently use limited resources. The Complete Parks approach helps ensure that solutions address the complex reality of people's lives, so people begin to trust government and believe it's working in their interest.



Get the Gear: Complete Parks Tools

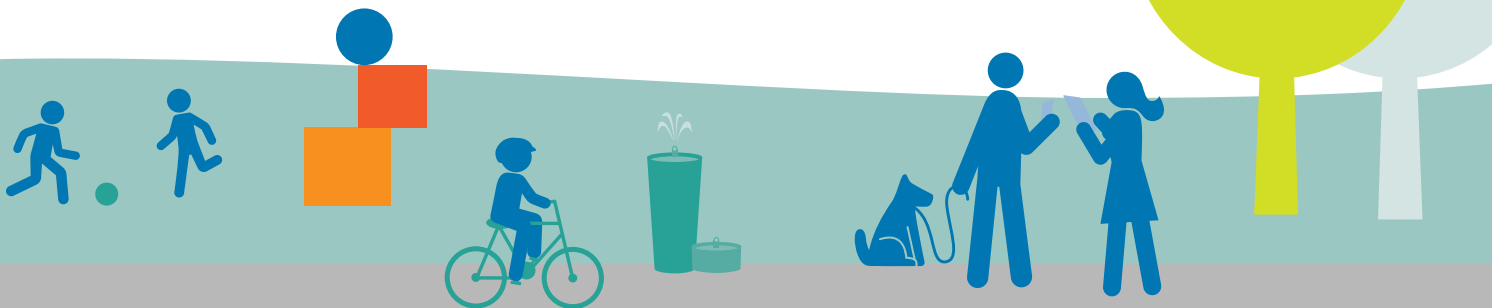
ChangeLab Solutions has developed the following publications to guide communities and local governments in creating a Complete Parks system. Available for download at changelabsolutions.org/publications/complete-parks, these tools emphasize policies that help institutionalize Complete Parks.

Complete Parks Playbook describes the 7 elements of a safe, connected, and healthy parks system. The *Complete Parks Playbook* illustrates each element with several related policies for advancing it, a real-life example from a California city, and a list of recommended reading. An abbreviated Spanish-language version of the Complete Parks Playbook – *Los sistemas completos de parques* – is also available.

Complete Parks Model Resolution provides sample language that a city or county government can use to commit to creating a Complete Parks system. Policies can help ensure that parks are reflected in all planning activities, and this model resolution includes research on the benefits of parks and recommendations for a multisector commission. Designed for community advocates and government staff, the Complete Parks Model Resolution can be used in conjunction with Complete Parks Indicators or on its own.

Complete Parks Indicators recommends indicators for assessing a parks system and measuring its evolution into a Complete Parks system. Assessing a parks system allows a city, county, or town to make decisions based on a deeper understanding of what's actually happening in communities rather than relying on assumptions or guesswork. Organized by element, these indicators can be applied to the parks system as a whole, along with additional analysis for priority populations and neighborhoods.

Funding Complete Parks presents ways for local California agencies to fund a Complete Parks system or increase funding for parks. Parks are an undervalued resource, often among the first to experience budget cuts despite their outsize benefit to neighborhoods. The funding mechanisms listed in this publication are organized into 4 categories: funds for parks creation or improvement, funds for parks creation and operation, funds for parks operation, and new or innovative funding sources.



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