

# SMART COLLABORATION

*How Urban Parks Can Support Affordable Housing*



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SMART COLLABORATION  
*How Urban Parks Can Support Affordable Housing*

WRITTEN BY  
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CENTER FOR CITY PARK EXCELLENCE  
THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

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# INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly apparent that the United States must consider reengineering the form of its fast-growing metropolitan areas, moving away from low-density car dependency and toward a higher-density pedestrian and transit orientation. There is simply not enough land, water, and gasoline to support unending sprawl, and people do not have enough time to devote so many hours to commuting. Moreover, there is a growing awareness that teenagers and senior citizens, in particular, find socialization more difficult in an environment that requires cars for almost every activity.

Already, among a small but significant subgroup of Americans, there is a new enthusiasm for living in denser, “complete” communities that are walkable, transit-rich, mixed-use “urban villages” with plenty of round-the-clock social opportunities and diverse populations. This trend could have many positive benefits for the United States as a whole, including a reduction in resources consumed and pollution generated. (About 75 percent of carbon emissions are attributed to transportation and buildings.)

Nevertheless, most Americans are reluctant to adopt a lifestyle that makes them feel confined and claustrophobic—tall buildings overlooking canyonlike streets, with only an occasional tree breaking up the concrete sterility. In study after study, people say that they want natural greenery where they live for its myriad physical and psychological benefits.

In the suburbs, that typically means private yards. In the city, it means public parks. The greater the urban density, the more important is the need for outstanding parks—places to walk, sit, meet friends, play sports, enjoy culture, see floral displays, exercise, watch birds, picnic, paint, make music, play chess, or do the hundreds of other things that parks enable and allow. Parks carefully placed among the dense buildings also improve the environment by catching and storing rainfall and absorbing air pollution.

There is another side to Americans’ renewed interest in urban living and that is the desire for diversity—an exciting variety of shops, restaurants, culture, and recreation, served by diverse transportation modes. For a dense diversity to be achieved—to have “complete communities”—we must design not only for upper-income professionals but also for lower-paid service employees, domestic workers, students, retirees, young working families, and others. And to do this, cities need to ensure the provision of housing at varying prices. Transit may make density viable, but affordable housing is what makes it vibrant, and a great park system makes it livable.

When it works it’s magic. But it is a volatile mix that is extraordinarily difficult to bring into balance. In situations where land is scarce and expensive, advocates of parks and proponents of affordable housing frequently find themselves at loggerheads. Moreover, both of those constituencies are usually at the mercy—directly or indirectly—of the for-profit development community. After all, the provision of subsidized housing is usually tied to sufficient profits from market-rate housing, and city parks are usually paid for by property taxes. This local-level tug-of-war is mirrored by strife on the federal level where different responsibilities are siloed in different government agencies. The housing silo is within the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Parks are in the Interior Department. Transit, biking, and walk-

ing are within the Department of Transportation. Economic development has roots in both the Departments of Treasury and Commerce. With the exception of HUD, none of the agencies has a mandate regarding healthy cities.

The federal government has never played a major role with urban parks; the most significant program was the rather minor Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Act, which spent a total of only \$272 million across the entire nation over 24 years. However, if “open space” is counted, it’s a different story. For a two-decade period the United States was deeply involved in scores of cities, bulldozing entire low-rise slum neighborhoods and replacing them with high-rise towers surrounded by windswept lawns. (In launching her assault on the practice, Jane Jacobs polemically asked, “Open space for what?”) After the lackluster results of most 1950s and 1960s public housing developments, the federal government changed course with the more “new urbanist” HOPE VI program. Now, dilapidated public housing towers are being torn down, and their unprogrammed and indefensible “open spaces” are being replaced with lower-height mixed-income communities (sometimes with parks and sometimes without).

In the current fiscal and political climate, many Washington policy makers do not imagine having a role in making cities green, affordable, and vibrant. This is unfortunate. While the federal government has consistently shown itself to be a clumsy giant when tinkering with fine-grained urban life at the sidewalk and neighborhood level, federal nudges, rewards, and even publicity campaigns can be supremely effective. This has been demonstrated over the years by everything from the Highway Trust Fund to the tax-deductibility of mortgage payments to the “only-you-can-prevent-forest-fires” advertising campaign.

Converting the “American dream” from a suburban-based paradigm back to one that is urban based (i.e., from driving to walking, biking, and using transit) involves actions on three different levels. At the highest scale, rules governing housing, zoning, schools, and transportation—which were massively rewritten after World War II—must be reformulated to once again promote (or at least allow) urbanity. At the middle scale, pricing must be synchronized with goals, either gradually by government action or jaggedly through market responses to scarcity. And at the smallest scale, mechanisms must be developed to enable on-the-ground changes to actually occur—brownfields to be reclaimed, affordable units to be built, parks to be renovated or created, neighborhoods to be stabilized, infrastructure to be improved, loans to be made.



In September 2007, at the invitation of The Trust for Public Land’s Center for City Park Excellence and under a grant from the Home Depot Foundation, 22 experts gathered in Washington, D.C., for a two-day colloquium to discuss these issues. The experts were from a wide cross-section of backgrounds—academia, national and community nonprofit organizations, government agencies, private companies—and from many fields—housing, parks, environment, transportation, conservation, planning, zoning, historic preservation. They delved deeply into all these issues, partly educating one another on the nuances and complexities,



partly brainstorming about possible new directions and alternative solutions. While the colloquium did not attempt to produce a consensus document or blueprint for action, it did yield much fruitful discussion and the outlines for further research and action. The group generally agreed on the following:

- There is not yet a widespread understanding of the benefits of density. While some aspects of our auto-based lifestyle are leading to growing frustration and unhappiness, there is little comprehension of the correlation between “sparsity” (the opposite of density) and the need for so much driving, so many cars, and so many parking spaces.
- It is recognized that, overall, U.S. cities are gradually becoming less dense, although many specific neighborhoods—and even a few cities in their entirety—are densifying. Most significant, there are no baseline data on how much density Americans are willing to accept and under what conditions.
- There are different opinions about the benefits of investment in low-income neighborhoods (“gentrification”); at the extremes are higher-income nonresidents who strongly favor it and lower-income residents who are fearful that it will result in their displacement. Again, there is much heated rhetoric but little baseline data on this volatile topic. There is also little awareness that different cities have markedly different rates of elasticity regarding the effect of population pressure on rents and housing prices.
- There is no generally accepted definition of “affordable” or “low income,” much less what constitutes a sufficient proportion of such units in a given development or neighborhood.
- There are widely different perceptions on the desirability of parks, based largely on issues of safety and defensible space. Conservationists’ blanket love of “greenness” is not universally shared. Many people are skeptical that the private yard experience can be duplicated by a public park—they feel that it is too busy and too noisy and that it is used by people with different mores, customs, or expectations.
- A major objection to dense communities is based on issues of automobiles and parking. Because of skepticism that the United States can provide reliable alternatives such as frequent mass transit, car sharing, and easy car rental, most Americans are unwilling to consider reducing the number of cars they own. With so many cars, dense living is not possible.

Taken as a whole, this Gordian knot of challenges may seem insurmountable. But realizing that it came into being gradually through accretion gives confidence that it won’t have to be attacked with a sword but can be untied loop by loop. Easiest to contemplate (and already somewhat under way) is the gradual shift of public transportation investments from those that benefit air travelers and solo drivers to those that benefit train, bus, and bicycle riders as well as walkers. Or, more broadly, investments in transit-oriented development. More difficult, but not impossible to contemplate, are revised policies relating to housing, zoning, and parks.

Initially, most actions will be at the state, city, or community level, and they will invariably involve cooperative efforts between private and public entities. A few states, led by Vermont, California, and Massachusetts, have programs that simultaneously benefit parks and housing through either incentives or funding, or both. Several city governments, notably those of

Portland (Oregon), Seattle, and San Diego, are also thinking more comprehensively of parks and housing together in their large-scale downtown redevelopment projects. And in Minneapolis, Boston, Baltimore, Lincoln (Nebraska), and Portland (Oregon), innovation is springing from community-level activism as nonprofit housing and parks advocates begin to find common ground in smaller in-fill and redevelopment projects. (All these innovations are discussed below.)

Once there is public awareness of initial successes, attention can shift to the national arena, where both lobbying and nonlobbying techniques will have a role. On the nonlobbying front, a national publicity and education effort can evaluate and promote the ecological and social benefits of compact living—extolling, in effect, a new American dream that is more energy efficient and more socially integrated. On the political front, a coalition of organizations can work to change federal (as well as state and municipal) laws, rules, and funding so as to enable brownfield redevelopment, more urban housing of all price levels, and better urban parks.



Following the colloquium, and building upon it, the Center for City Park Excellence undertook research into some of the innovative activities taking place at the intersection of urban parks and affordable housing. While they are still relatively few and far between, these leading-edge programs and projects have the capacity to be highly influential. The successful ones are likely to generate a cascade of imitations and second-generation spin-offs in the coming years.

## STATE EFFORTS

In the absence of federal leadership on this issue, several states have taken up the mantle of innovation. Vermont broke new ground in 1987 by creating a totally unprecedented agency, the Housing and Conservation Board. Like someone who can walk *and* chew gum, the board invests in both preserving rural natural land and providing urban affordable housing. (In Vermont “urban” frequently involves nothing larger than a village center, but that still means developing in places that already have infrastructure investment.) The result has been 8,700 permanently affordable homes and 250,000 acres of recreation and natural land over 20 years. While the majority of projects have a single focus—either land *or* homes—the board prefers wherever possible to join the objectives of infill housing and parks. “When an application comes to us with combined goals, it receives a high priority,” says Program Manager Polly Nichol. The poster project is a lakefront rail-trail on a former brownfield in downtown Burlington where the board aided in the land purchase and also funded a 40-unit housing development. (All but six of the units were below market rate.)

Massachusetts uses a different approach for the same goal. Under its Community Preservation Act, the Bay State allows each town to decide (through public referendum) whether to increase taxes slightly to pay for both affordable housing and parks. By the end of fiscal year 2007, more than one-third of the state’s jurisdictions (although not Boston) had voted to use the approach. Through that year, over \$190 million in Community Preservation funds were spent on historic preservation and affordable housing, and \$180 million on open space preservation and park development. Interestingly, in the run-up to the passage of the act in 2000, political polling revealed that neither the conservation community nor the housing community alone had sufficient strength to pass a one-dimensional measure; only by combining the passionate support of two separate constituencies behind one bill did proponents have enough strength to prevail.

California has perhaps the simplest approach. Using bond money approved in a referendum, the state simply rewards communities that provide additional housing for its residents who are low income (making less than 80 percent of the median income) and very low income (less than 50 percent). Under the Workforce Housing Rewards Program, state “reward” funds are available for capital expenses, including parks, bike paths, and playgrounds. Of the total \$69 million distributed through 2006, the city of Sacramento did particularly well, receiving \$6.7 million and programming about \$2.6 million of that toward park-related projects. “We used the money to put amenities in place,” says Desmond Parrington, urban infill coordinator for Sacramento. In midtown, which is seeing increased density from 300 mixed-income housing units (with more to come), the city acquired and cleaned up a one-acre brownfield for a new plaza. In 2007 Californians strengthened the effort with a ballot measure. Under the straightforward name of the Housing Related Park Program, the state offers communities cash for creating and renewing parks in return for building affordable housing. The \$200 million program runs for six years and could be profoundly influential for those looking to make affordable housing more attractive to mayors and neighbors.



City of Sacramento, courtesy Desmond Parrington

Steve Jones Park in Sacramento the result of the state’s Workforce Housing Rewards Program. The program awards cities money for parks for building affordable housing.

## CITY EFFORTS

A few leadership cities have accomplished more than most states. The Portland (Oregon) Development Commission (PDC) has provided more than \$84 million over the past 24 years for nearly 92 acres of new and renovated parks. In the nationally noted Pearl District, a dense downtown neighborhood built on a former railyard, PDC spent \$23 million renovating one park and creating three new ones—Jamison Square with its popular splash fountain; Tanner Springs Park, a carefully crafted artificial wetland habitat; and The Fields, four acres of recreational fields.

Meanwhile, though strong demand has pushed up Pearl District housing prices, PDC has created nearly 1,700 low-income housing units there. (PDC pays for its parks through tax-increment financing, a mechanism whereby new taxes generated in a specific neighborhood are channeled for a period of time not to the city general fund but to localized infrastructure improvements. By law, the commission is required to set aside 30 percent of tax increment revenue for affordable housing.)

In San Diego, which is in the midst of a building boom that will increase center-city residential population from 28,500 in 2004 to 45,000 in 2010, the Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC) is working to create seven new parks and plazas to mitigate the impact of the unprecedented urban densification. CCDC, which operates in a tax-increment financing district, is required by California law to assure that 20 percent of new housing be affordable to low- and moderate-income residents (although only half of them must be within the district; the rest can be built elsewhere in the city).



Portland Development Commission

Portland, Oregon requires that 30 percent of tax increment financing funds go toward affordable housing and it uses the remainder of the money to pay for community amenities such as two-acre Tanner Springs Park shown here.

## PRIVATE SECTOR EFFORTS

Denver is emerging as a city where private developers take the lead on projects that combine parks, density, and affordability. In the city's older northwest, New York-based Jonathan Rose Companies gambled that it could make a profit on a dense, small-lot "new urbanist" development. Opened in stages between 2002 and 2007, Highlands Garden Village includes a central neighborhood park and community gardens. The green spaces are open to the public even though they are owned and maintained by the Jonathan Rose Companies.

A few miles to the east, one of the largest redevelopment projects in U.S. history is occurring on the former Stapleton Airport—3,300 acres of residences interspersed with 1,400 acres of parkland serving a projected 30,000 residents at a gross density of 6.4 persons per acre (slightly higher than the 5.8 persons per acre for the city as a whole). Under the agreement with the city of Denver, 10 percent of for-sale homes and 20 percent of rental units are mandated to be affordable. As of January 2009, 378 of 4,129 units sold and rented—9.2 percent—were affordably priced.



Ben Welle

Community gardens and parks were created along with mixed-income housing in the compact and walkable Highlands Garden Village, a Jonathan Rose Companies development in Denver.

## COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES

While it will ultimately take federal, state, and local rules (and money) to drive a massive shift toward dense livable and affordable urban centers, it is currently nonprofit neighborhood organizations that are leading the way. Community development corporations, which formerly concentrated exclusively on housing production, are often now thinking about a broader portfolio that includes park advocacy and even park planning, construction, and maintenance. Conversely, some friends-of-parks groups are beginning to look beyond the boundaries of their green spaces to the more complex issues engulfing the surrounding neighborhoods.

In Minneapolis, Hope Community, Inc., has been working since 1989 to transform a two-block area just south of downtown that had suffered from rampant drug dealing and boarded-up buildings. Parents in this area feared for their children's safety.

Starting by constructing 223 dwelling units in four new buildings, Hope Community gradually came to realize that nearby Peavey Park—sitting in disarray, culturally disconnected from its community, and saddled with decrepit and unused tennis courts—was part of the problem. Hope proposed a redesign to the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board in the hopes that Peavey could become the community's well-used and safe gathering space. When the board agreed, Hope conducted an extensive process that included dozens of meetings and interviews with community residents and establishment of a community leadership group. In 2001 the park board approved the final plan, drawn by an architect. Implementation has moved slowly although staffing in the park has increased, and Hope has hired two community organizers for youth issues. "We don't see ourselves just building affordable housing; we see ourselves as building neighborhoods," says Mary Keefe, executive director of Hope Community.

A Boston community development corporation (CDC) is benefiting from its dual role as affordable housing developer and parks advocate in a gentrifying neighborhood near one of Harvard University's campuses across the Charles River from Cambridge. Since 1980, Allston Brighton CDC has helped more than 600 families buy homes and has also renovated and preserved 370 units of affordable housing. Aware that nearby public parks were trash strewn and unkempt, the group helped generate resident advocacy that eventually led to the creation of an open space master plan. As a member of the Boston Urban Forestry Coalition, Allston Brighton is now working with residents and the city to beautify street medians and increase tree cover. It is also hosting events in, and organizing improvement of, 10-acre Ringer Park. "Keeping the park clean has been important in bringing residents together," says Kate Jordan, open space organizer for the CDC, "plus it defuses our role as an affordable housing developer. People may not agree with affordable housing, but they usually support better open spaces—and we can use this as a source of common ground."

One of the greatest park-and-affordable-housing successes has been flowering over the past two decades in the Patterson Park neighborhood of east Baltimore. With the area in significant decline in the early 1980s, a group of conservation-minded residents formed Friends of Patterson Park to work for improvements to the historic, iconic, 135-acre green space at the heart of the community. The park had been the scene of some violence and was on the verge of becoming shunned. Two longtime housing-oriented groups that hadn't done park work—Patterson Park Community Development Corporation and Banner Neighborhoods—recognized the impending crisis and decided to fund three staff positions to shore up the park itself. The relatively small seed investment paid enormous dividends; the fledgling Friends were able to organize numerous programs, celebrations, parades, festivals, and cleanup events, bringing back a sense of fun and excitement to the park. (Because of residents' enthusiasm and the resulting political impact, the city of Baltimore eventually invested



more than \$20 million in capital improvements to Patterson Park.) Meanwhile, the community development corporation was sufficiently encouraged by the progress that it redoubled investments in distressed properties to make them affordably available for sale and rent. Banner Neighborhoods similarly helped elderly homeowners keep and maintain their homes in the area.

“No one was going to take the chance on investing in the neighborhood unless the park was on-line again,” says Tim Almaguer, executive director of Friends of Patterson Park and one of the original staff paid for by Banner Neighborhoods and the CDC. “The number-one building block [the two organizations provided] was capacity building.” The message to other friends-of-parks groups and neighborhood organizations is to look for common goals and then form alliances that can make them happen. “You can’t think in a petri dish,” says Almaguer. “You have to share resources and put a hand out to other organizations.”

In Lincoln, Nebraska, a community development organization called NeighborWorks Lincoln is trying to duplicate Baltimore’s success. Working in historic Antelope Valley, a community with a 20 percent vacancy rate and only 14 percent home ownership, NeighborWorks is simultaneously investing in a 24-unit mixed-income, mixed-use development and the expansion of eight-acre Trago Park. The housing is financed through affordable housing tax credits, city

support, and loans. The park is a joint effort with the city; NeighborWorks donated \$30,000 in capital funds and also paid for organizing the community around the effort. NeighborWorks Executive Director Michael Snodgrass says the improved park is planned to attract and retain residents and is key to achieving additional investment. “Families want to be next to parks, especially when yard space is limited,” he says. “But for the park, I don’t think we’d be in this neighborhood.”

As is often the case, Portland, Oregon, is at the forefront of this movement. In 1994, after researchers began to notice the appearance of negative economic and housing trends in greater Portland, local leaders became alarmed enough to form a new organization, the Coalition for a Livable Future. Now composed of more than 90 organizations working on land use, affordable housing, conservation, transit, social justice, and inner-city development, the coalition has become the preeminent locus for a conversation between many single-issue constituencies that normally don’t communicate with each other. After successfully integrating nearly two-thirds of its ideas into the region’s Framework Plan, the coalition continues to advocate for policies that strengthen both the social and environmental fabric of the metropolitan area.

While playing a major role in the 2007 voter-approved \$227 million parks referendum, the coalition also created an advocacy effort called Affordable Housing Now! that has increased funding for low-income residences. Along with this initiative, the coalition successfully advocated for the fair distribution of the Portland Development Commission’s tax increment financing revenue, with parks advocates agreeing to a 30 percent set-aside exclusively for affordable housing. According to Michael Houck, executive director of Portland’s Urban Greenspaces Institute and one of the coalition’s founders, the coalition’s existence headed off a fight between park and housing advocates. “It’s been a very powerful movement that’s led to a tight connection between the ‘greens’ and the ‘housers,’” notes Houck.



Friends of Patterson Park

Park improvement, neighborhood revitalization, and mixed-income housing preservation have been coupled together in and around Baltimore’s picturesque, 135-acre Patterson Park.

## KEY LESSONS

The September 2007 colloquium served as a kickoff to consider the role multipriced infill housing and a network of parks can play in the densification and strengthening of cities. The follow-up research has revealed many exciting examples of forward-thinking alliances and programs involving conservationists and housers. It is up to policy makers, researchers, and practitioners to take these ideas to the next level of effectiveness and implementation. Specifically, we have learned that:

- *States can promote or reward the construction of affordable housing through the offer of funding for parks.* There are numerous possible formulas for doing this, including direct rewards per bedroom constructed or per policy adopted. Moreover, other factors can be weighted, including poverty level, amount of parkland available, and percentage of affordable units. (If and when the federal government demonstrates interest in urban parks and affordable housing, a similar program could be adopted nationally.)
- *Cities can integrate the planning and creation of affordable housing and parks.* Housing and redevelopment agencies traditionally miss many potential connections with city park agencies, and vice versa. Aligning these agencies' planning would have major positive results. Moreover, cities can explore density flexibility so as to allow developers to profit from more affordable units and more parkland.
- *Private developers can build compact developments that allow for walking, affordable housing, and parkland.*
- *Community development corporations can expand their work beyond housing to include parks.* The range of options here is large, from cleanups to staffing an advocacy group, from donating land to creating a park plan to overseeing the construction.
- *Housing advocates and park advocates can come together in a broad coalition for neighborhood improvement.* Efforts like this have developed considerable political muscle, even resulting in major bond referendums that support parks and establish affordable housing set-aside requirements.



# APPENDIX

## COLLOQUIUM ATTENDEES

**Livable, Affordable, and Diverse: Can Parks Promote and Mitigate Increased Urban Density?**  
*Center for City Park Excellence, The Trust for Public Land, Washington, D.C., September, 2007*

Vicki Been	New York University Furman Center	New York
Marcos Beleche	Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corp.	Boston
Kaid Benfield	Natural Resources Defense Council	Washington, D.C.
Dana Bourland	Enterprise Community Partners	Columbia, Maryland
Don Chen	Smart Growth America	Washington, D.C.
Kathy Dickhut	Department of Planning	Chicago
Alexandra Elias	U.S. Navy Real Estate Division	San Diego
DeAnn Fordham	Home Depot Foundation	Atlanta
Ann Forsyth	Cornell University	Ithaca
Denise Gammon	Forest City Enterprises	Denver
Coleen Gentles	The Trust for Public Land	Washington, D.C.
Guy Hager	Parks and People Foundation	Baltimore
Peter Harnik	The Trust for Public Land	Washington, D.C.
Kelley Hart	The Trust for Public Land	Washington, D.C.
Mark Hinshaw	LMN Architects	Seattle
Terri Montague	Atlanta Beltline, Inc.	Atlanta
Oramenta Newsome	Local Initiatives Support Corporation	Washington, D.C.
Karen Nozik	Eco-Writer, Inc.	Boulder
Jennifer Peyser	Resolve, Inc.	Washington, D.C.
Will Rogers	The Trust for Public Land	San Francisco
Rachel Sohmer	Natural Resources Defense Council	Washington, D.C.
Ben Welle	The Trust for Public Land	Washington, D.C.
Riley Whitcomb	Portland Department of Parks and Recreation	Portland, Oregon
Tony Wood	Ittleson Foundation	New York





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