

# Livable Places: How Protecting Land Benefits Us All

www.landtrust.org

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

by Edith Pepper Goltra

**T**oo often we hear that communities feel they must choose between economic growth and land conservation. In reality, protecting open space is a building block for economic growth, and it may be one of the smartest financial moves a community can make.

Increasing evidence suggests that parks and natural areas are an investment that yields important benefits, such as fiscal relief, improved public health, strengthened neighborhoods, environmental protection, and preservation of natural beauty—all of which makes communities more livable. Some of this evidence comes from academic circles.

Other evidence comes from the first-hand experience of community leaders and government officials who have found that open space protection does not “cost” but rather “pays.”

## Snapshot: Austin

Austin, Texas, is a modern-day boomtown. Drawn by the promise of high-paying jobs, natural beauty and a relaxed quality of life, people have flocked to the city in droves. Since 1990, the population of the metropolitan area has ballooned 78 percent to 1.5 million. Predictably, this growth has come at a cost. Traffic clogs the freeways; air and water pollution are rampant; new homes and shopping centers dot the once-majestic hillsides.

“It’s the classic growth scenario,” says George Cofer, director of the Hill Country Conservancy. “Austin was, and is, at risk of killing the goose that laid the golden egg.”

In the last decade, the city has mounted an admirable defense—the goal being to protect the quality of life that attracted people there in the first place. Austin voters have overwhelmingly passed eight separate bond measures, creating \$235 million in funding for open space conservation. The money is primarily being used to protect land connected to drinking water sources, but residents recognize that parks and open space have many other benefits that keep Austin a great place to live and work.

Cities and towns in other parts of the country are follow-



© William Poole

## NATURAL AREAS are integral to livability.

ing suit. They are working to guide and shape growth to minimize its negative environmental, economic and social impacts, and more importantly, to preserve the best aspects of life in their region. Voters in 45 states have approved conservation ballot measures, committing more than \$44 billion since 1988 to create parks and playgrounds, to protect farmland, and to preserve watersheds, forests and wildlife habitat. The message is clear: Americans want to manage their growth responsibly, and parks and open space are an integral part of the plan.

## Strengthening Communities

Open space shapes a community’s character and defines its natural beauty. Protecting farmland, old forests, scenic meadows and estuaries allows residents to embrace their natural heritage and maintain a true sense of place.

The need for parks in metropolitan areas, where 80 percent of Americans live, is critical. City parks are America’s everyday parks—fulfilling daily needs for community building and spiritual renewal in nature. Yet, as many as two in three city residents do not have access to a nearby park, playground or open space. Instead of grassy fields and soccer grounds, children in neighborhoods that lack parks play in streets, alleyways and vacant lots.

Having access to a park or a recreational facility has been strongly linked to reductions in crime and, in particu-

lar, juvenile delinquency. Recreational facilities keep at-risk youth off the streets and provide a safe environment in which kids can interact with their peers. In Austin, Texas, the Dove Springs neighborhood reported a 44 percent reduction in juvenile crime in 1998, following the opening of a recreation center and a special intervention program for drugs and alcohol abuse, truancy and gang activities.

## Supporting Public Health

The public health benefits of parks, trails and greenways are far-reaching. By stepping onto a park path or greenway trail, Americans can relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve mood and enhance psychological wellbeing. Not having a place to regularly exercise has been a major contributor to the epidemic of obesity among adults and children—an epidemic that is having serious consequences for public health and the economy. Studies show that low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately affected by higher rates of such health problems and often have less access to settings for physical activity.

By design, newer communities face their own public health challenges. Suburban landscapes can be a maze of freeways, strips malls and cul-de-sac housing developments, and residents often find themselves driving from place to place with few opportunities to walk. Building parks and greenways goes a long way toward encouraging physical activity and offering passageways for car-free commuting.

## Safeguarding the Environment

More than a third of the nation's streams, lakes and estuaries are impaired by some form of water pollution, most of it runoff from construction and industrial sites, agricultural lands, urban areas and failed septic tanks. Impervious surfaces—areas covered with roads, parking lots and rooftops—can send storm water (and waterborne pollutants) careening into rivers and streams.

Managing storm water runoff through open space translates into serious cost-savings for communities. The forestry organization American Forests estimates that trees in the nation's metropolitan areas contribute \$400 billion in storm water retention alone—by eliminating the need for expensive storm water retention facilities. In Georgia, officials estimate that protecting wetlands along a three-mile stretch of the Alchovy River has translated into \$3 million in water quality improvements.

Communities are investing in open space as a way to protect drinking water sources, as well. Facing billions of dollars in treatment costs, cities and towns are learning that keeping drinking water clean is almost always cheaper than cleaning it up.

- In San Antonio, Texas, 10,000 acres have been protected atop the Edwards Aquifer, which provides drinking water for 1.5 million people.



- In Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, 1,300 acres have been protected around Mountain Island Lake, which is the water source for more than half a million people in and around Charlotte.

- A coalition of state and nonprofit partners spent \$65 million to permanently protect the Sterling Forest (once slated to hold 13,000 homes) on the New York–New Jersey border. Had the proposed development occurred, threatened public drinking water supplies would have required construction of a \$160 million water treatment plant.

**CHILDREN at the Louise A. Spencer School playground in Newark, New Jersey.**

Open space not only safeguards our waterways, it protects the air we breathe. In New York City, trees remove an estimated 1,821 metric tons of air pollution per year. Trees act as a natural air conditioner, keeping cities cooler, mitigating the effects of concrete and glass that can turn cities into ovens under the summer sun. They also play a key role in mitigating global warming by absorbing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

## Greenprint: Protecting Land for Clean Drinking Water

In North Carolina's Upper Neuse River Basin, nine water supply reservoirs supply drinking water to eight municipalities. Two of those municipalities, Raleigh and Durham, are among the top five fastest growing cities in the state. Continued growth is a given—an estimated 50 percent increase by 2025—and with it, the genuine possibility of water quality degradation. The municipalities in the watershed recognized that water throughout the basin is a shared and interconnected resource requiring a unified approach for its protection.

The Conservation Trust for North Carolina, with funding from the City of Raleigh, hired The Trust for Public Land (TPL)—together with local government, watershed association and land trust partners—to assist in creating a regional plan and implementation strategy for protecting drinking water supplies in the Upper Neuse River Basin.

TPL facilitated a public forum in which community leaders and stakeholders confirmed that water quality protection was their primary conservation priority. Protecting working lands, aquatic habitat connectivity, and terrestrial habitat connectivity were identified as secondary priorities. Working with local partners, TPL assembled a team of regional experts to develop a greenprint—a customized Geographic Information System (GIS) model—to identify parcels the partnership might conserve to best meet their goals.

Following completion of the greenprint, the partners are now working with landowners and local governments to facilitate voluntary acquisitions through the purchase or donation of land or conservation agreements.

Protection of air quality and water quality are services that our society would have to pay for, no matter what. Natural open space provides these services at a much lower cost in perpetuity. In this sense, protecting open space can be understood as a sound financial move.

### Preventing Flood Damage

Communities across the nation are learning the hard way that despite extensive levee and dike systems, building in floodplains is a recipe for disaster. Hurricane Katrina was a grim reminder of this fact. The human and financial costs of placing cities and towns in harm's way can be astronomical. In the heavily developed floodplain of New Jersey's Passaic River, for example, \$400 million in flood damages occurred in a single year.

Preserved floodplains and riparian corridors act as permanent "safety valves" for flooding. Protected floodplains offer communities many secondary benefits. They can double as wildlife refuges or recreation areas, thereby attracting hunters, birdwatchers and tourists.

Near Boston, more than 8,000 acres of wetlands along the Charles River were purchased as an alternative to a \$100 million system of dams and levees. Residents of Napa Valley, California—cognizant of the \$500 million in flood damage caused by the Napa River between 1960 and 1998—opted to spend \$160 million to restore the river to its natural, meandering condition.

### Attracting Investment

Parks and open space are increasingly recognized as vital to the quality of life that fuels economic health. Many of today's companies are relocating to more "livable" communities, such as Portland, Oregon, that have easy access to parks and trails. Indeed, 70 firms that moved to or expanded within Arizona chose the state for its "outdoor and recreation opportunities," according to the President's Commission on the Outdoors.

Parks and open space attract not only businesses. Younger, active retirees—increasingly seen as a desirable demographic—are choosing retirement locations that are rich in amenities, with recreational opportunities being among the most important. One hundred retired households, each with a retirement income of \$40,000, have an impact similar to a new business spending \$4 million annually. Communities wishing to attract this population segment are wisely focusing on the creation and maintenance of parks.

### Producing Fiscal Benefits

Conventional wisdom typically held that development is the "highest and best use" of land for increasing municipal revenues. The truth is that residential development generally translates into heightened financial burden for cities and towns.

According to a recent study by Dr. John L. Crompton at Texas A&M University, for every \$1 million received in residential development revenues, the median amount communities spent on public services was \$1.16 million. For every



Lynn Betts / NRCS

\$1 million in tax revenues from farm/forest/open space uses, the median amount spent on public services was \$350,000.

**PRESERVED FLOODPLAINS and riparian corridors act as permanent "safety valves" for flooding.**

"In our experience," says Nat Tupper, town manager for Yarmouth, Maine, "you cannot develop your way to prosperity."

The presence of parks, greenways and trails typically bolsters nearby property values, sometimes up to 20 percent. Higher property values translate into higher property taxes. The additional property taxes may be sufficient, over time,

### Greenprint: A Strategy for Growth and Greenery

**T**ravis County, Texas—population 850,000—is one of the state's fastest growing counties and its natural beauty and rural landscapes are under siege. The Trust for Public Land led county and city agencies, regional and local conservation groups, and concerned citizens through a process that identified land conservation goals and key areas that need to be protected to meet those goals.

TPL used an interactive, stakeholder-driven GIS model to develop a greenprint for the county. First, stakeholders identified key goals: 1) protect water quality and quantity; 2) provide recreational opportunities; 3) enhance cultural resources; and 4) preserve sensitive environmental features. The analysis examined shortcomings in park availability and provided an assessment of park and open space needs. The resulting greenprint offers a composite picture of lands that, if protected, would best provide for equitable investments across the county to meet all four of the goals.

The county and city—in partnership with nonprofit organizations—are using a combination of public and private funds to implement the greenprint. One high-tech company, Advanced Micro Devices (AMD), has generously supported the greenprint and subsequent land acquisition efforts. "We believe that economic development and environmental responsibility are not mutually exclusive," says Allyson Peerman, AMD's director of global community affairs.

to pay for the costs of acquiring the park or open space.

Numerous studies over the years have confirmed that people prefer to buy homes close to parks, open space and greenery. In Boulder, Colorado, researchers determined that there was a \$4.20 *decrease* in the price of residential property for every foot one moved away from the greenbelt, and that the average value of homes next to the greenbelt was 32 percent higher than those 3,200 feet away. In Oakland, California, a three-mile greenbelt around Lake Merritt, near the city center, was found to add \$41 million to surrounding property values. Creating parks, therefore, clearly benefits the bottom line.

## Protecting Farms and Ranches

The nation's farms and ranches are often referred to as "working landscapes" because of the food and fiber they produce. The best of these lands are irreplaceable, their agricultural productivity the result of geologic and climatic factors that cannot be reproduced. Even though they also have value as developable land, their highest economic use derives from their long-term productivity as farms and ranches.

Many Americans are committed to saving farms and ranches because of a desire to protect their communities' quality of life, including scenic and cultural landscapes, farmer's markets, and local jobs and businesses. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, farm receipts reached \$239 billion in 2005, generating approximately \$74 billion in farm income that was cycled through local communities.

Unfortunately, the land that supports this valuable industry faces increasing pressure from suburban growth and construction of second homes. According to American Farmland Trust, every minute of every day, two acres of agricultural land is lost to development. Farmers and ranchers often need to pay for education, retirement or crushing inheritance taxes, and developers stand willing to offer a mighty pay-out.

## Boosting Tourism

The loss of farms and ranches is particularly intense in Colorado, where up to 90,000 acres are developed each year. Communities are scrambling to protect these lands, many of which are vital for tourism and economic growth.

"Colorado's scenic vistas, abundant wildlife and incredible recreational opportunities make the state a magnet for tourism," says Doug Robotham, deputy director for the Colorado Conservation Trust. "The loss of ranches and farms, many of them at the foothills of mountain ranges, definitely impacts the quality and character of our landscapes—and this is what draws people to Colorado from all over the world."

In urban areas, parks and open space play an equally important economic role. Organized events held in public parks, such as festivals, athletic events and musical events, often bring substantial economic benefits to their communities, filling hotel rooms and restaurants and bringing customers to local stores. In San Antonio, Texas, Riverwalk Park, which was created for \$425,000, has overtaken the Alamo as the most popular attraction for the city's \$3.5 billion tourism industry.

## Livable Communities

Parks and open space have many benefits that we can easily describe. They protect water quality and air quality, strengthen local economies, connect neighborhoods, and help safeguard public health. Other benefits are more difficult to capture, like how sitting by a river and watching a simple leaf float by can transform a single day. Being surrounded



© Alex Diekmann

**THE DEHAAN RANCH in Montana is protected by The Trust for Public Land and the Gallatin Valley Land Trust.**

by parks and natural areas makes such small moments possible.

Residents of Austin, Texas, understand this well, which is why they have consistently voted to tax themselves to protect valuable lands. "The region's population is expected to double by 2030," says Amy Wanamaker, project manager with The Trust for Public Land. "Austin residents really understand that by managing development and protecting natural resources, our community will continue to be livable in the future." 

*The Trust for Public Land proudly announces the publication of The Economic Benefits of Land Conservation (2007), which showcases original research from scientists and economists in a variety of sectors, including academia, government, nonprofits and industry. To obtain this and many other reports in our series on the benefits of parks and open space, visit [www.tpl.org/publications](http://www.tpl.org/publications).*