

A light grey silhouette of the state of Tennessee is centered on the page. A small pink star is placed on the western border of the state, indicating the location of Memphis. The text 'MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE' is printed in a bold, dark red, sans-serif font across the middle of the state's outline.

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

10 MINUTE WALK NATIONAL STUDY VISIT





City of
Memphis
Park Services Division

**SOUTHSIDE
PARK**

The largest park in South Memphis, Gaston Park is adjacent to the Gaston Community Center and a branch of the Memphis Public Library.





RYAN CAMBRIDGE

ABOUT THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE

The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 45,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute's mission of providing leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. ULI's interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions, with members in 81 countries.

More information is available at uli.org. Follow ULI on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram.

ABOUT 10 MINUTE WALK

Parks are essential to the physical, environmental, and economic health of people and communities. Parks help expand the economy by attracting homebuyers, tourists, and highly talented workers. They protect the environment, provide space for the enjoyment of arts and nature, and make people healthier, happier, and more connected.

Despite these known benefits, research shows that one in three Americans—more than 100 million people—do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of their home. 10 Minute Walk is a movement dedicated to improving access to safe, high-quality parks and green spaces in cities—large and small—throughout the United States. Led by The Trust for Public Land (TPL), in partnership with the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and the Urban Land Institute and with support from The JPB Foundation, 10 Minute Walk is working to create a world in which, by 2050, all people live within a 10-minute walk of a park or green space. This partnership drives commitments from city leaders working to achieve this vision and transform their communities.

Nearly 300 U.S. mayors have endorsed 10 Minute Walk so far. ULI, TPL, and NRPA are working with partners in select cities on measurable policies and strategies to advance the 10 Minute Walk vision. Success in this work will require the expertise, creativity, and close collaboration of public- and private-sector leaders. ULI has a powerful role to play in catalyzing its members, networks, and partners around a vision of a green, sustainable, connected, and resilient future for all people.

Learn more and connect with 10 Minute Walk at 10minutewalk.org and uli.org/parks.



The experts hear from Parks Division staff at Texas Courts, a small neighborhood park with a recently installed playground.



SARA HAMMERSCHMIDT/JULI

PARKS AS A STRATEGY FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY COHESION IN SOUTH MEMPHIS

Memphis, Tennessee, is a city known for its music, barbecue, and critical role in advancing civil rights. Located along the banks of the Mississippi River, Memphis comprises over 5,000 acres of public parks and open space that add to the cultural fabric of the city. Established in 1900, the city's Division of Parks and Neighborhoods (originally the Memphis Park Commission) has played a key role in shaping the city's health and appearance through its network of neighborhood parks and regional green spaces.

Memphis has many of the same challenges affecting the use and management of parks and recreation facilities across the United States. These include generational poverty, a high incidence of chronic disease, population loss, and widespread crime and blight. Twenty-five percent of all Memphians and 40 percent of Memphis youth live in poverty.¹ Despite the city's diverse racial and ethnic makeup, neighborhoods remain largely divided among socioeconomic lines. There is little common space for racial and ethnic groups of all ages to assemble, exercise, and play together. In Memphis,

violent crime hovers at a rate of 1,286 per 100,000 individuals—a rate far higher than those for the state of Tennessee (621 per 100,000) and the United States (386 per 100,000).² Poverty, social segregation, a lack of health opportunity, crime, and other factors negatively affect a community's ability to thrive. In fact, individuals living in Memphis's poorest neighborhoods endure the burden of a life expectancy 10 years lower than that of their more affluent neighbors just a short distance away.³

Many of the neighborhood parks in South Memphis, such as Texas Courts Park, contain playground equipment.



SARA HAMMERSCHMIDT/ULI

The city of Memphis recognizes the role that parks can play in helping address these challenges. In 2017, to show support for enhancing the number and quality of parks in the city, Mayor Jim Strickland signed on to the 10 Minute Walk mission.

In January 2019, the city of Memphis was awarded a 10 Minute Walk grant and technical assistance opportunity by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). As a grantee, the city's Division of Parks and Neighborhoods (referred to herein as the Parks Division) is producing the city's first Parks Master Plan since 1999.

The city has leveraged several assets when preparing the Parks Master Plan. After a decades-long planning void in Memphis, 2019 brought the publication of the Memphis 3.0 Comprehensive Plan. As part of the process, "vibrant civic spaces" emerged as a strongly supported concept by both community members and civic institutions citywide. As this plan moves to implementation, the Parks Division sees the subsequent Parks Master Plan as further guiding the strategic development and maintenance of parks, community centers, athletic facilities, and other civic assets. As the Parks Master Plan process proceeds, the Parks Division wanted to further investigate the challenges and opportunities of smaller, underused neighborhood parks that exist in various neighborhoods across the city.

NATIONAL STUDY VISIT PROCESS

ULI's national study visits bring volunteer experts from across the United States to a city or community to provide a set of recommendations for priority areas identified by local stakeholders. Experts are identified based on areas of expertise needed by the community.

For the 10 Minute Walk national study visits, the parks departments (or similar entity) and local ULI district councils are engaged in setting priorities and planning the visit. These fast-paced, three-day study visits include a briefing to the experts on the study area and the questions to be addressed; a tour of local parks and neighborhoods; interviews with stakeholders; and a public presentation of recommendations. The recommendations serve as a guide to help each city create implementable and actionable plans and priorities for the parks departments moving forward.

NATIONAL STUDY VISIT ASSIGNMENT

To enhance their work as an NRPA grantee and to inform the development of the city’s Parks Master Plan, the Parks Division worked with ULI to identify volunteer experts from across the country with skills matched to address the needs of this national study visit. Their collective assignment was to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing a network of seven neighborhood parks located in South Memphis. These include Gaston Park and Community Center, Texas Courts Park, McNeill Park, Booth Park, Trigg Park, Patton Park, and Southside Park. While located in a culturally rich community, the parks are surrounded by neighborhoods that have suffered from decades of under investment.

Due to its proximity to downtown and the Mississippi River, South Memphis is starting to attract renewed interest and new investment, but vacancy and population loss in this neighborhood remain high at present. This leaves many area parks without a built-in population of likely users. As the overall population of Memphis has stabilized around 650,000⁴—and as the city prepares for potential future growth—the location of the South Memphis neighborhood and its existing assets make it attractive for new development. And recommendations for South Memphis are likely to apply to other neighborhoods in the city, specifically related to the role of small neighborhood parks in spurring community growth and providing attractive, high-quality parks to residents in under-invested neighborhoods.

A map showing the study area outlined at the bottom; the dashed lines represent the major streets connecting the study area to other parts of the city. The locations of key social and cultural assets are shown to the north and east of the study area.

The study visit experts were asked to consider the following questions when framing their recommendations:

Economic development: South Memphis is a neighborhood affected by generational poverty, blight, crime, and chronic disease. What opportunities are present for parks and park systems in future development?

- In light of depopulation and urban decay, what role should parks play overall and how might this be applied specifically to South Memphis (over the short term and long term)?
- How can the existing parks assist in spurring economic development for the neighborhood?
- With the current transportation infrastructure, how can connections be made between the neighborhood parks? What strategies would work best to connect South Memphis residents to recreation assets in the neighborhood and across the city? Is connection between parks valuable to this neighborhood?



RYAN CAMBRIDGE

Trigg Park, a nearly two-acre neighborhood park, is adjacent to several vacant and boarded-up properties.



RYAN CAMBRIDGE

Operations and programming: How might the city of Memphis—with limited resources—maintain, operate, and program small neighborhood parks in an efficient and cost-effective manner while maximizing the potential benefit of the park space itself?

- How can the Parks Division program (both structured and unstructured) existing parks for existing populations, with an eye toward the neighborhood's future needs if more growth occurs?
- What strategies can be employed to overcome current barriers to park use (including real and perceived threats to safety and low population of likely users within adjacent neighborhoods)?

Implementing success: What are the short-term strategies, case studies, and models that Memphis might consider now for positioning small neighborhood parks for financial and operational success?

During the study visit, between January 29 and 31, 2020, the group of experts was briefed by Parks Division staff and received a guided tour of the South Memphis neighborhood. They conducted small group interviews with nearly 30 local stakeholders at the Gaston Community Center, including residents, community and faith-based leaders, city staff, private developers, and representatives from local nonprofit organizations. Feedback gathered during these sessions, along with observations from the field, informed the development of recommendations prepared by the experts and shared at the public meeting held at the Gaston Community Center on January 31.

10 MINUTE WALK PLANNING GRANTS AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

As part of 10 Minute Walk, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is leading yearlong engagements with park and recreation departments from cities across the United States. NRPA is providing \$40,000 grants to support local efforts to incorporate 10-minute park access as a sustained planning and funding priority. Grantees, which receive technical assistance from NRPA, The Trust for Public Land, and the Urban Land Institute, work to:

- Establish and analyze baseline metrics for 10-minute-walk park access and park quality, ensuring that data and analysis include underrepresented populations.
- Identify priority areas and actions based on findings from assessments.
- Create equitable citywide policies that support achievement of 10-minute-walk park access.
- Incorporate 10-minute-walk park access into citywide planning documents.
- Identify funding to sustain continued investment in parks, operations, programming, and connections.

Booth Park, a 3.5-acre park whose only amenity is a basketball court, provides a blank slate for future amenities and programming.



SARA HAMMERSCHMIDT/ULI

IMPRESSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experts observed numerous community assets during their tour of South Memphis and through their conversations with local leaders. The team acknowledged that the city should capitalize upon these strengths to leverage the potential of neighborhood parks throughout the city of Memphis.

Within the South Memphis study area and throughout the rest of the city, the experts recognized that many of the building blocks necessary for great communities are already in place, including the neighborhood's grid layout that provides a connected network of streets, blocks, sidewalks, and parks. The connected grid is the foundation upon which a community is built and should not be taken for granted. In fact, many cities are looking to build this type of structure as they are developing and/or redeveloping their communities. The neighborhood grid is also critical for walkability and access to parks; Memphis is fortunate to have these "good bones" largely in place.

For South Memphis in particular, the neighborhood's location is perhaps its greatest asset—minutes from downtown, Martin Luther King Jr. Riverside Park, and the river—and the connections between these places are important to consider. The experts acknowledged a culturally rich and close-knit community of residents and leaders in South Memphis who truly want to help the neighborhood and the entire city achieve a vision of health and equity for all.

The number and scale of parks in South Memphis are another strength, ranging from a historic community center to small pocket parks with playgrounds; there

is a wide variety of park uses and scales that could better serve a greater variety of park users in the future. Another strength identified was park maintenance. These neighborhood parks appear to be some of the best-maintained facilities in the neighborhood and they contribute greatly to the overall sense of place, identity, and pride. The biggest issue is that these spaces are largely surrounded by underused and vacant land with such a low population of built-in likely users.

In addition to the strengths, the experts observed and learned about challenges that will be important to acknowledge and address when defining the future for these neighborhood recreation and community facilities. The loss of population that Memphis has experienced citywide has led to fewer park users. Several of the parks are not very visible from major streets, which affects the perception of safety and security: how these parks are redesigned in the future and how they interface with the surrounding neighborhood as it develops both need consideration.

The experts also noted the lack of a tangible community brand or identity: what and where is "South Memphis" became familiar refrains. What the community collectively wants to become and how parks relate to that collective desire should be reflected in the community identity. Crime and poverty, health disparities, and access to healthy food were observed as key challenges within the neighborhood. Parks have a role in addressing these issues and should be considered integral and fundamental parts of holistically healthy communities.



The experts and staff from the Urban Land Institute, the National Recreation and Park Association, and the Memphis Parks Division in Southside Park.

SARA HAMMERSCHMIDT/ULI

RECOMMENDATIONS

Leverage existing city policies and priorities

The experts were impressed with the Memphis 3.0 Comprehensive Plan update, the first in almost 30 years, and particularly the engagement of so many Memphians in the process. There is now a great opportunity and responsibility to carry tenets and values—including valuing land as an asset, connected communities, and equity and opportunity—from this plan forward and weave them into the planning, priorities, and policies that will shape the development of the forthcoming parks master plan. The experts recommended building upon the success of Memphis 3.0—both process and recommendations—as the city embarks on the parks master-planning process.

During the study visit, the experts heard directly from stakeholders about the numerous challenges facing local parks. Challenges ranging from maintenance, policing, and lighting, to residents not feeling heard by the city, to sentiments that the best parks in Memphis are not city-owned can be translated into opportunities to prioritize equity through the Parks Master Plan, the park budget, and community engagement more broadly.

The experts provided some overarching values to help with the framing of their specific recommendations. First and foremost, parks are precious to communities—it is important to hold onto existing parks and make investments in them, because it is hard to get this type

of space back later. Connected networks of parks encourage more park use, so work with community members to gather input on the best mobility alternatives to foster these connections, such as bike lanes and sidewalks. Parks can also bring people to other neighborhoods they may not think of visiting. They can be great anchors for neighborhoods and help strengthen them: even when a strong market is not readily apparent, changes can be right around the corner and cities need to be prepared for that and work on strengthening communities even in a weak market.

There also is an opportunity now to tell the story of the value of parks. Good things are happening in the parks and there are people who love these spaces; their stories can be shared with the broader community. In addition, stories highlighting the importance of parks can be shared with other city departments—parks affect every aspect of city life and are therefore important for all city departments to contribute to, not just the Parks Division.

Through more intentional partnerships across the city, staff can amplify their impact to improve the lives of Memphians. The following suggestions and recommendations more specifically outline how the city can use the parks system—particularly the parks in South Memphis—to encourage equitable development and better connect people and places.

Community development

The experts emphasized that the city—and specifically the Parks Division—must keep doing what they are doing, including maintaining the high standards of park stewardship, including maintenance and investment in infrastructure and amenities. The experts considered what role parks play in community reinvestment when providing specific guidance:

Continue neighborhood stabilization efforts

The experts were encouraged by current efforts by the Parks Division to maintain its existing parks. Great parks are neighborhood anchors that drive community development, investment decisions, and, of greatest importance, quality of life for those who live nearby. While there are challenges in terms of usage and upkeep, the experts recommended maintaining this level of service by continuing to dedicate city resources for stabilizing municipal service delivery in South Memphis, including public safety, sanitation, code enforcement, and parks maintenance.

Create “shovel ready” parcels

It will take coordination with other city departments and agencies, but working to remove any barriers to development around the parks will create new opportunities to implement a community vision. With the land that the city has access to and is in control of, work on removing existing infrastructure and policy, financing, and entitlement barriers that may disincentivize redevelopment before the market turns around.

Embrace comprehensive community development planning

Parks are often found at the intersection of numerous different city systems and agencies. As such, community redevelopment that involves parks needs to be approached in a cross-agency way. As the Parks Division thinks about moving forward and embracing a progressive view of the power of parks within communities and the city overall, working hand-in-hand with other city agencies and community organizations will be critical—not just on the policy level, but also on the design, planning, and operations levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Catalyze reinvestment

The experts recognized that South Memphis holds a lot of potential, but the market is only now beginning to realize it. This affords the opportunity to protect the neighborhood in that process while also working to catalyze the type of redevelopment that the South Memphis community desires. The city can identify opportunities to match available properties with developers or investors who may be interested in investing in the neighborhood and provide incentives to ensure that the development matches what the community needs and values. High-impact areas in South Memphis, such as vacant properties surrounding Southside Park and Gaston Community Center, are ideal locations to incentivize a critical mass of new housing. Emerging neighborhoods elsewhere in the city have had success with high-quality affordable infill housing that could be a model for South Memphis. Creating enough new housing where it starts to feel like there are tangible changes in the neighborhood—especially when coupled with adjacency to park space—is beneficial for both existing and new residents. Early identification of the priority locations for new housing and communicating the opportunity to developers are tasks that the city can do now.

Link parks and cultural assets via a network of complete streets

While infrastructure and existing conditions may pose some challenges, a strength of South Memphis is its wide array of park types and sizes—close to each other—along

streets with decent connectivity. The experts emphasized that the experience of a park user does not begin at the park—it begins the moment that he or she tries to get to the park. Ensuring that people can move safely and freely, on foot or bike or in a motor vehicle, is really important and aligns with many of the recommendations from the Memphis 3.0 Transit Vision and the Big Jump Project, designed to improve mobility in the city. Figure 1 illustrates the study area's existing components and opportunities for streetscape enhancements that can knit together homes, churches, schools, neighborhood commercial uses, and parks. The experts recommended prioritizing streetscape improvements on South Parkway, Third Street, and Walker Avenue.

Connect to existing regional assets

The experts recommended strengthening connections between the South Memphis neighborhood and key economic, social, and cultural assets nearby, including the river, downtown, Martin Luther King Jr. Riverside Park, LeMoyné-Owen College, Stax Music Academy, and the Soulsville neighborhood. One proposed idea for connecting nearby assets included a South Memphis multiuse heritage trail, where those on foot or bike could travel from station to station to learn about the history of the community while getting exercise. Connectivity within the neighborhood as well as to regional assets is important to increase the use of the neighborhood's parks.

FIGURE 1

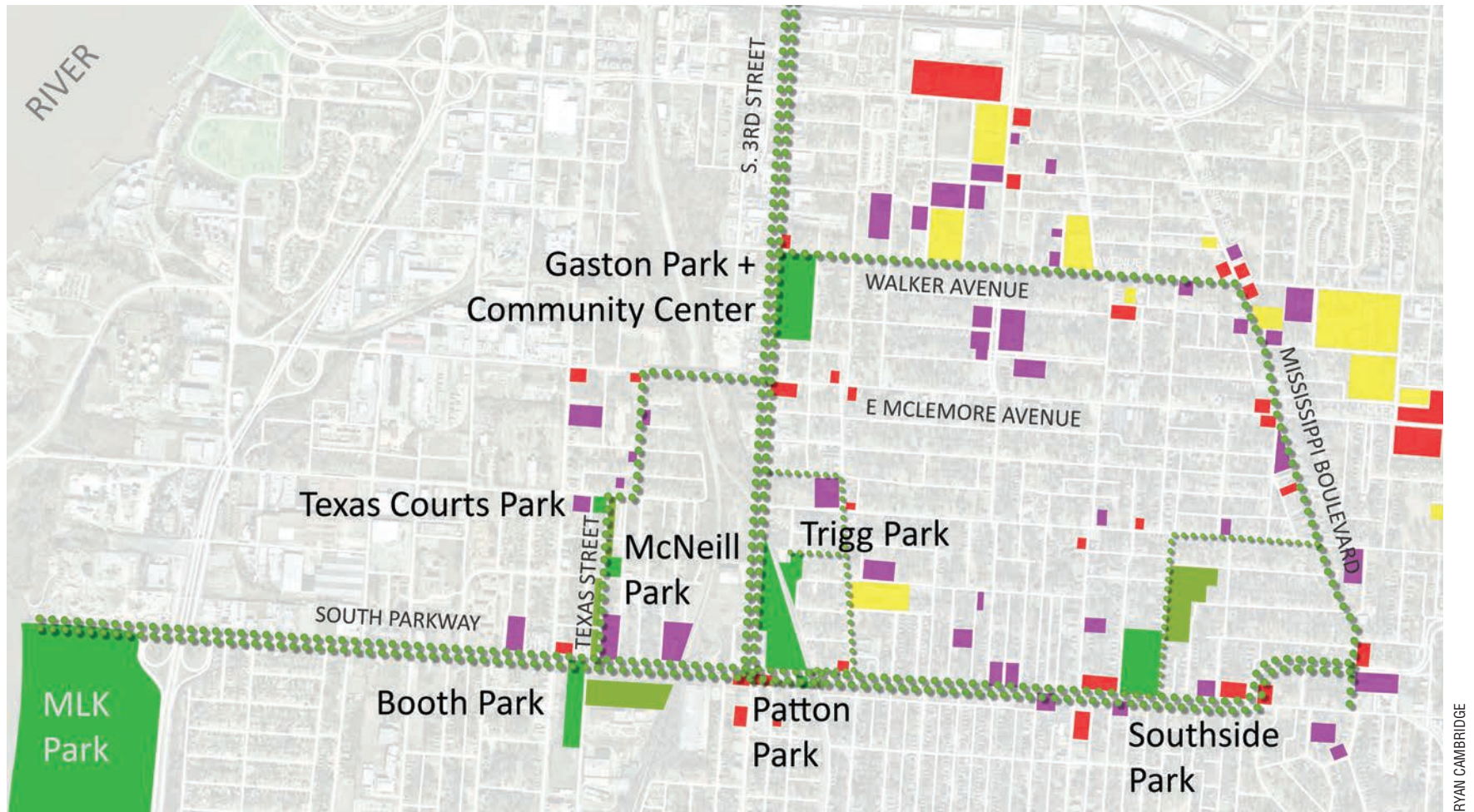


Figure 1 shows the location of the seven parks in the study area and the streets recommended for improvements (in green) to enhance connectivity between the parks and to other parts of the neighborhood and to the city at large. Places of worship are shown in purple, neighborhood commercial is shown in red, and schools are shown in yellow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Build from strength and make parks integral to the city's economic development strategy

The experts highlighted the evidence that real estate value is correlated with proximity to parks. Downtown Memphis is growing tremendously, and that growth is expected to extend south. Suggestions for steering development into South Memphis include building upon the strengths of the existing park system, and prioritizing development opportunities on land surrounding and adjacent to the study area parks. This proactive approach will help South Memphis shape future development in ways that best meet the community's needs today and tomorrow. Leveraging parks as a building block for development can generate economic, social, and community activity. One way for neighborhood parks to help spur revitalization is to make them hubs of community-oriented programming and activation through partnerships with existing local, citywide, and regional organizations, including those that help increase access to and participation in the arts as well as educational and recreational activities. When community residents have a voice in how these local parks are programmed and operated, parks benefit from increased community "ownership" and stewardship of these shared places. They become more resilient community assets. The South Memphis network of neighborhood parks is already a tremendous community asset to build upon and strengthen.

From an economic standpoint, the experts highlighted that the nation's local parks can spur more than \$166 billion in economic activity and generate 1.1 million jobs annually.⁵

The impact of local park and recreation agencies on the U.S. economy (2017).

Parks matter to communities by contributing to their mental, physical, economic, and environmental health. Too often, parks are seen as an add-on or something extra, but these community cornerstones must be reprioritized, starting with city and county budget allocations. Parks must be valued as a practical financial asset, and the benefits of investing in them must be communicated to local elected officials, staff, community leaders, and neighborhood residents. City leaders should recognize and fund parks as critical infrastructure and encourage the Parks Division to partner with other city agencies to align priorities and needs for the park system with other priority initiatives.



NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION

Sources: IMPLAN, Center for Regional Analysis—George Mason University for the National Recreation and Park Association, U.S. Census Bureau.

Creating equitable opportunities to support small business development in South Memphis

Parks need active, lively neighborhoods surrounding them to thrive, and one of the best ways to do that is through fostering entrepreneurship and small-business opportunities. The experts noted that Memphis has an opportunity to prepare now, by anticipating reinvestment, to curb the effects of displacement felt in peer communities across the United States. The experts identified several strategies to help the community prepare for anticipated future economic development in South Memphis:

- Increase access to real estate opportunities.
 - To address prospective purchasers' challenges in getting a clean title, the city could purchase properties that have delinquent titles, land bank them, and prepare them so that the investor can get a clean title. The cities of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Durham, North Carolina, have established land trusts (for example, the Durham Community Land Trustees [dclt.org]) that could serve as models for South Memphis. These programs work to ensure that developable properties are readily available to investors and that their redevelopment aligns with community desires.
 - Increasing micro retail opportunities adjacent to parks is a good way for small businesses, such as food trucks, operating at a small scale to thrive. Offering them space to operate can improve park use and help small businesses. In Atlanta, a program called microATL (atlantaga.gov/government/departments/city-planning/microatl) is helping reinvigorate the public realm. In Jersey City, New Jersey, a multi-organizational collaborative of city departments and local business improvement districts created PopUP Jackson Hill (innovatejc.org/pop-up-jackson-hill/), a micro-entrepreneurship venture that creates a temporary pop-up venue by converting shipping containers into a community-centered retail and art hub. The hub offers businesses free rent and utilities for roughly six months and connects the selected businesses to ongoing technical assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase access to financing.
 - Increase microlending through community development financial institutions (CDFIs). Small businesses in particular have a challenge getting lending opportunities at \$25,000 and below, so CDFIs can help provide these resources (see sidebar on microlending).
- Look for additional inclusive procurement opportunities.
 - The experts noted that Memphis is doing a great job with inclusive procurement and encouraged the city to keep up with what it is currently doing, including increasing public spending with minority- and women-owned business enterprises (MWBs). Specific to the Parks Division, look for opportunities to increase the dollars spent using MWBs on parks- and public realm–related projects, including leveraging partnerships with the Memphis Medical District, Union Row in downtown Memphis, and other large-scale developments.
- Provide networks and technical assistance.
 - Small enterprises require support with business acumen, and many cities, including Detroit, Michigan, and Charlotte and Durham, North Carolina, have had success encouraging cohort-based trainings. In Memphis, the Urban Land Institute leads a Real Estate Diversity Initiative (REDi) to help emerging developers—with priority on women and people of color—navigate the process of putting together successful developments.⁶ The experts encouraged more cohort-based programs that connect and promote small and independent businesses.

MICROLENDING

Microloans are oftentimes considered too difficult or cumbersome for many banks to make. In response, the organization Kiva has created KivaHubs to help cities increase microlending to very small businesses. Kiva partners with cities or other local organizations to operationalize the Kiva loan product in their local geography. Historically, Kiva loans have had a very high repayment rate, at 97 percent worldwide. Kiva also has a track record of lending to women-owned and minority-owned businesses at a higher rate than traditional lending institutions; 68 percent of Kiva borrowers are women, and 71 percent of borrowers are minorities.

For more information, visit kivaushub.org/hubs.

- Encourage area workforce development.
 - To engage the large youth population in South Memphis, the city might encourage a public/private youth employment program. Cities including Cincinnati,⁷ Durham, and Washington, D.C., partner with hundreds of students annually to match them with summer jobs. The program provides both income and skills development to participating students. Epicenter Memphis already operates a similar program, and the experts encourage them to expand the program into South Memphis.

In order to enhance the use of the park system in South Memphis, the experts discussed several broad strategies for improving opportunities for community development, including stabilizing the neighborhood and preparing park-adjacent parcels for development, enhancing street-level connectivity between the parks and key community assets, and improving opportunities for small businesses to thrive throughout the South Memphis neighborhood.

RECOMMENDATION HIGHLIGHTS: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- The Parks Division should work closely with other city agencies, especially to remove barriers to redevelopment of parcels near parks, and work with the development community to match them to priority parcels in South Memphis.
- The Parks Division should continue maintenance strategies for existing parks.
- In partnership with other city agencies, the Parks Division should create connections, among parks and between South Memphis and adjacent neighborhoods, using complete-streets principles.
- The Parks Division should think of parks as hubs of community-oriented programming and plan future programming with this in mind.
- City leaders should continue to fund parks and consider opportunities for parks alongside other city priorities.
- City leaders should work with community partners to foster entrepreneurship and small-business opportunities in South Memphis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Making it work

The experts underscored the notion that livable communities do not just happen—it takes those who live and work there to care enough to act. This is important when launching a new citywide initiative, such as a new parks master-planning process. The experts encouraged city staff to actively listen to residents with a meaningful community engagement process. This includes building from the success of the Memphis 3.0 plan, which involved more than 15,000 Memphians in the process. Continuing the momentum while launching the parks master-plan process will take leadership at all levels and from multiple city divisions to underscore the importance of parks, strong community engagement, and strategic partnerships. Tactical solutions for day-to-day operations of existing and future parks—including facilities and maintenance strategies, finance options, and additional resources—are also important for getting started and making it work.



McNeill Park, a one-acre passive park consisting of green space and a circular walking trail, is located just two blocks from Texas Courts Park.

SARA HAMMERSCHMIDT/ULI



Patton Park is a small neighborhood park but is located adjacent to a looming highway overpass. The experts recommended a creative placemaking intervention under the overpass to improve conditions around the park and engage local artists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Community engagement

The experts discussed the importance of designing an inclusive community engagement process to bring together a very broad and diverse community of existing and potential future park users. The experts were impressed that the Parks Division has made an investment in community engagement and has hired dedicated staff to be a point of contact for residents. Specific recommendations to continue the engagement momentum from Memphis 3.0 and improve usability and safety of parks include the following:

- Use the parks master-plan process as an opportunity to talk about parks as economic drivers.
 - Talk to residents about opportunities to redesign existing recreational facilities to accommodate multigenerational and multifunctional programming.
 - Explore how other cities have established local park advisory councils and “friends of parks” groups to engage residents, as well as park ambassador or park steward programs that can employ area residents and youth.
 - Conduct intensive and collaborative social service program outreach to those in need who often spend extended periods of time within the parks.
- Engage local faith-based organizations to use the parks for programmatic and maintenance activities, including hands-on projects that community members can participate in.
 - Reestablish relationships with public safety, public health, and human services agencies in parks and community centers to build stronger relationships with the community. Parks are places where police and other public safety officials can connect with youth and begin building genuine, long-lasting relationships with the community. Police officers should consider being part of neighborhood events *without* their uniforms. Having officers dress in plain clothes helps establish a connection and diminish some of the fear that arises, particularly within marginalized communities, from seeing uniformed police. While this may not always be an option, it should be encouraged as much as possible. Police officers, particularly those who reside in Memphis, should also be invited to help plan and attend community events as community members, to get to know residents of the neighborhoods they serve. Parks are places that play a critical role in making communities safer; the parks in South Memphis must not only feel safe, but *be* safe.

Parks are places where the community can come together and for local leaders to listen to and learn from their community. If the Parks Division can serve as a connector between the community and the resources they need, the result will be a safer, more engaged, and more connected community.

New strategic partnerships

Intentional and deep engagement with residents and community organizations can lead to more formalized strategic partnerships. The experts recommended several opportunities for new partnerships, including the following:

- Engaging with the arts community and commissioning local artists to participate in park design processes and create art that celebrates what is important to community members. In Chicago, the 606 trail project helped assemble residents from vastly different neighborhoods that were touched by the project by engaging with the arts community. The experts identified an immediate opportunity for a creative placemaking installation below the overpass adjacent to Patton Park.
- Reaching out to nontraditional funders to support cultural programs in the neighborhoods surrounding the parks and within the parks themselves.
- Establishing a formalized volunteer program in partnership with area businesses and institutions to address maintenance and programming of area parks and civic spaces. This could include partnerships with sport teams such as the Memphis Grizzlies.
- Developing formal, strategic partnerships with community-serving groups (through agreements with libraries, schools, public safety agencies, and neighborhood groups) to leverage limited neighborhood resources. For example, a joint use agreement with the entire school district to allow the use of school playgrounds after school hours. The CapitalSpace plan (ncpc.gov/plans/capitalspace) for Washington, D.C., not only was created in partnership with several stakeholders but also outlines opportunities to build partnerships and new agreements in an effort to improve collaboration for the parks system across the nation's capital.
- Encouraging corporate or business partnerships. In Houston, the 50/50 Parks Partners program is matching 50 companies with 50 neighborhood parks in need of upgrading, with the primary purpose of engagement and volunteerism but also financial contributions; the company and the city each cover half the cost of improvements.
- Serving the senior community through partnering with AARP. For seniors, programs in parks that encourage walking and interacting with neighbors can have great impacts on physical and mental health.
- Exploring partnership opportunities with medical institutions. In Houston, the Texas Medical Center provides small challenge grants to the Houston Parks Board for park programming, and doctors are involved in “walk with a doc” programs to interact with the community and teach them about the value of parks to their health. St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital could consider similar tactics.

Removing unnecessary physical and visual barriers, including this fence surrounding Gaston Park and the obscured windows at Gaston Community Center (at right in photo), can make these facilities feel more welcoming to the community.



RYAN CAMBRIDGE

Near-term facilities and maintenance

Community engagement and building partnerships are long-term investments in a community's future. Success may take a while, and experts provided a series of shorter-term recommendations for incrementally improving conditions in and around the existing parks throughout South Memphis.

- Push existing partners, such as Knowledge Quest, to do more programming at park facilities.
- Develop and improve standards for regular maintenance and cleaning of parks and park facilities.
- Consider modifying the “open dawn to dusk” policy for operating hours; the experts noted that most people do not understand the concept of dawn to dusk, but they do understand specific hours. The experts also acknowledged that even with a specific closing time, park users will likely still be in the parks past that time, but by building trusted relationships through community-based public safety programs, user-friendly signage, and overall good relationships with residents using the parks, people will begin honoring the operating hours.
- Incorporate lighting into the parks as part of an overall neighborhood public safety strategy, along with expanded programming at night, particularly targeted at neighborhood youth.
- Market and program the South Memphis parks as a unified network, through improved streetscapes between the parks (see Figure 1 on page 17). Within the larger parks, the team also recommends developing a network of lighted loop trails for use day and night. Gaston Park has an existing loop trail, but it could benefit from improvement. Other area parks provide ample opportunity for similar trails and multiuse pathways.
- Remove real and perceived barriers to entry into parks and community centers. In particular, experts were struck by the fence surrounding Gaston Park and the obscured windows at the historic community center. Unnecessary fences and signage should be removed and visual obstructions such as the window coverings removed in order to make these facilities feel more inviting and welcoming to the community.
- Do an assessment of the current parks and their amenities and, through community engagement, determine whether they meet the current needs of the surrounding neighborhood. Based on community needs identified through ongoing engagement processes, remove and/or replace equipment that is no longer being used in parks. Specifically, the experts noted caging in Gaston Park surrounding a former baseball diamond that could be removed at any time to create extra opportunities for that space. The Parks Division should place a priority on how best to preserve, protect, and use existing acreage while keeping the parks within their system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Finance and resources

Through the new parks master-plan process, Memphis should conduct audits of individual parks to better understand resource distribution. The experts underscored that equality of resource distribution does not equal equitable resource distribution. A larger portion of constrained budgets may be required to bring parks located in lower-income neighborhoods like South Memphis up to the high quality standards that residents demand and need to combat the poverty and health disparities that disproportionately affect them.

Noting that the prioritization of resource distribution is often political, the experts recommended documenting capital needs—including what it would take to bring things to a better state in each park and suggestions for prioritization—and, along with the data and documentation, telling the story of the parks in greatest need to city leadership to help them better understand why investment in certain parks and neighborhoods is critical to the overall health of the city.

While South Memphis comprises a number of existing parks, the Parks Division is monitoring new opportunity sites in anticipation of population growth. When the city is looking to purchase or obtain any new land to expand the park system, the experts emphasized the need to have capital and operating budgets in place before taking on new parkland obligations. They cautioned particularly against taking on any new land without having a plan and the resources to maintain and sustain any new parks, which can sometimes be achieved through private or nonprofit partnerships.

The experts also recommended reviewing the fee matrix for the entire park system. Memphis should solicit feedback on fee structures and taxation methods from community members. Many park systems across the country are recognizing that they may need to start charging fees for service or raising existing fees to meet market rates. Setting even small membership fees for certain park amenities would provide needed revenue to the Parks Division. The city could also consider a dedicated funding source for parks to reduce the reliance on general funds, such as fees from parking, impact and development fees, and transfer of title fees. Many cities across the country, including Los Angeles and Grand Rapids, Michigan, are finding success with tax referendums and millages specifically for parks; Memphis should explore the implementation of a tax levy to bring in additional funding for parks—including land acquisition, construction, operations, and maintenance.

Operationally, the experts had numerous recommendations for how the Parks Division can better engage the community, develop strategic partnerships, and equitably fund improvements, maintenance, and programs. Specifically, the Parks Division should leverage the great success of the Memphis 3.0 community engagement process to connect with the community on their parks' needs, starting with South Memphis. The search for new partners can feel like a slow process, but finding an influential partner can make a tremendous difference. Find ways to engage new partners in programs and activities in parks. Use community engagement and partnerships to help prioritize maintenance and improvements. And consider new sources of revenue to expand the ability of the Parks Division to equitably meet the needs of all Memphians.

RECOMMENDATION HIGHLIGHTS: MAKING IT WORK

- The Parks Division should serve as a community connector: continue the community engagement momentum from Memphis 3.0 into the parks master-plan process; and get input on redesigning existing parks and facilities to meet community needs.
- The Parks Division and city partners should look at expanding existing and building new relationships with public safety and public health organizations, human services agencies, faith-based organizations, the arts community, local corporations, local sports teams, and medical institutions; engage these partners in programming opportunities in the parks.
- The Parks Division should create new park-focused advisory councils and/or ambassador programs to engage residents as employees and volunteers.
- The Parks Division should update and/or modify park standards, including policies for regular maintenance and cleaning, assessing whether to keep underused park equipment, hours of operation, and physical features such as lighting, fencing, and signage.
- The Parks Division should document the capital needs of all city parks and recommend a priority order for implementation, potentially based on the impacts that improved parks would have on residents of low-income neighborhoods.
- The Parks Division should review and modify the fee system for the entire park system, considering options such as millages, fees for service, and parking and other impact fees.



The experts hear thoughts from a neighborhood resident visiting Gaston Park.

CALL TO ACTION: “GETTING TO YES”

The experts provided many recommendations to the Division of Parks and Neighborhoods, and to the city of Memphis as a whole, to address their questions on parks as a driver of equitable development, and operations and programming strategies for the small system of seven parks in South Memphis. While many recommendations will take planning and work over the long term, they recommended some short-term, low-cost, place-based improvements to help foster a sense of community, build excitement for neighborhood parks, and create building blocks for engagement and partnerships:

- Incorporate public art, including pop-up art and events.
- Paint sidewalks and crosswalks to enliven the built environment around the parks and emphasize safety measures.
- Continue programs to bring music and movies into parks; consider rotating events between parks or implementing them in more parks.
- Encourage food trucks and ensure adequate spaces for them to locate near highly visible parks.
- Focus on youth and community engagement through diversifying programming; for example, bring in other types of sports programs like lacrosse or tennis and create fun competitions.
- Look at existing corporate and civic partnerships to help fund and sponsor art, music, movies, food, and sports programming, and park cleanup and maintenance efforts.

The experts also strongly recommended benchmarking the efforts of peer cities and potentially engaging in friendly competition to help strengthen the impact of park departments in other midsized cities. Find ways to tell stories of success to inspire city leaders, residents, stakeholders, and even other cities. Parks matter tremendously in cities, and particularly in cities like Memphis where there is a great opportunity to shape neighborhood development. Parks directly enhance quality of life for residents, and the Parks Division should feel empowered to assume a leadership role in improving conditions in an equitable way for Memphians in all neighborhoods.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE MEMPHIS DIVISION OF PARKS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

The Parks Division will continue work on the Parks Master Plan throughout 2020. Community engagement efforts were expanded in early 2020 to include additional neighborhood meetings and youth engagement opportunities. Community feedback will be solicited throughout 2020 via surveying and community events.

A large portion of recommendations in this report are systemic in nature and will be further analyzed in the upcoming Parks Master Plan. In addition, the Parks Division is committed to advocating for the essential services provided by parks and to seek beneficial collaborations for improving park outcomes in Memphis.

The experts recommended a creative placemaking project under the highway near Patton Park to help create a better sense of community; this graphic shows the potential transformation (see page 23 for current conditions).



RYAN CAMBRIDGE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



WILL HERBIG/JULI

The experts presented recommendations at the Gaston Community Center to a large group of community residents and stakeholders.



WILL HERBIG/JULI

ON BEHALF OF THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE,

the experts would like to thank the city of Memphis Division of Parks and Neighborhoods for inviting the team to Memphis to provide strategic guidance for equitable access to high-quality parks in South Memphis and beyond.

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The experts developed the recommendations during a daylong work session.



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