



GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

10 MINUTE WALK NATIONAL STUDY VISIT





Ottawa Hills Park, in the city's Third Ward, reopened in October 2018 with Grand Rapids' first universally accessible playground.





CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS PARKS AND RECREATION

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.

The extraordinary impact that ULI makes on land use decision-making is based on its members sharing expertise on a variety of factors affecting the built environment, including urbanization, demographic and population changes, new economic drivers, technology advancements, and environmental concerns.

Peer-to-peer learning is achieved through the knowledge shared by members at thousands of convenings each year that reinforce ULI's position as a global authority on land use and real estate. In 2018 alone, more than 2,200 events were held in about 330 cities around the world.

Drawing on the work of its members, the Institute recognizes and shares best practices in urban design and development for the benefit of communities around the globe.

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.

The 10 Minute Walk campaign has been endorsed by nearly 300 U.S. mayors 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.

Pleasant Park is a 2.4-acre neighborhood park that replaced a city-owned parking lot.



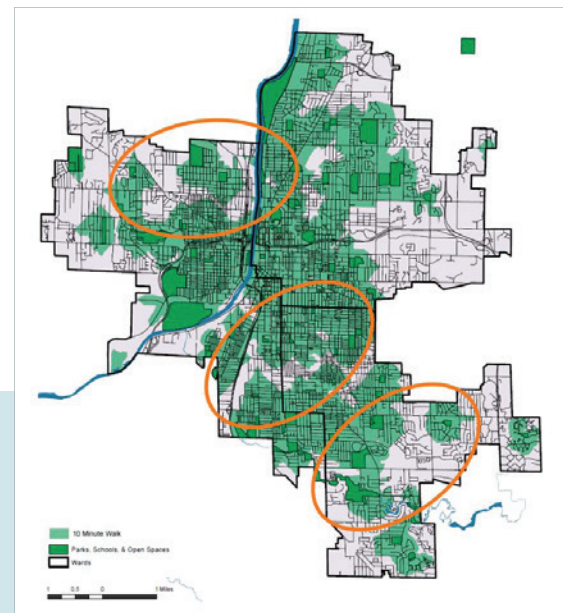
DRIVING EQUITABLE PARK ACCESS IN GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

The city of Grand Rapids, which holds one of the oldest joint-use agreements in the United States that governs the sharing of school yards as park space, continues to be an innovator in park access. Having recently completed a Parks and Recreation Strategic Master Plan—which encourages programs and projects that support the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of all Grand Rapids residents—the city is working to ensure that all residents have access to a park within a 10-minute walk from home. As one of the fastest-growing cities in the state of Michigan, Grand Rapids seeks to create additional public spaces to keep pace with current development and population growth, and to do so in a manner that addresses disparities and responds to residents of historically underserved neighborhoods.

Though nearly 80 percent of Grand Rapids residents have access to a park within a 10-minute walk of home, the park system still has significant deficits.

An equity study conducted in 2016 by the city of Grand Rapids during the master-planning process identified specific areas with limited park access, which became the focus areas for the parks department's 10 Minute Walk efforts. These areas, which are primarily populated by black and Hispanic families and individuals, included the Baxter, Roosevelt Park, Black Hills, Garfield Park, Southeast Community, and Southeast End neighborhoods.

The city identified these same neighborhoods as high in park need in its 2017 Parks and Recreation Strategic Master Plan. Grand Rapids is also lacking in adequate parkland acreage overall: the typical parks agency, as reported by the National Recreation and Park Association, oversees 10.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, and for cities of a similar size to Grand Rapids (ranging from 100,000 to 250,000 residents), the typical park agency oversees 8.5 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.¹ The city of Grand Rapids currently has only 5.5 accessible acres per 1,000 residents, and in the focus neighborhoods there are only 3.6 acres per 1,000 residents. Combined with the expected growth in population for the city overall, land acquisition for new parks—and ensuring the equitable distribution of these new parks—is a high priority for the parks department.

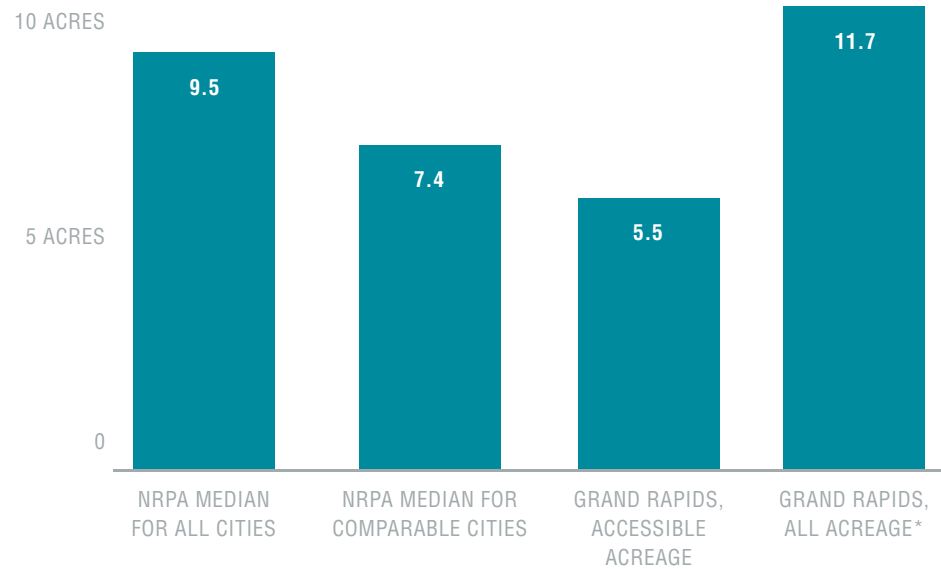


CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS PARKS AND RECREATION

The Grand Rapids park system with 10-minute walksheds. Circles indicate areas where the city is focusing efforts on closing the 10-minute walk gap. This study visit focused on the middle circle, which encompasses the city's neighborhoods of focus.

Compared with the national average of 8.5 acres per 1,000 residents, the city of Grand Rapids currently has only **5.5 accessible acres per 1,000 residents,** and in the focus neighborhoods there are only **3.6 acres per 1,000 residents.**

PARK AND OPEN SPACE IN ACRES PER 1,000 RESIDENTS



*Includes undeveloped and school-park sites

NATIONAL STUDY VISIT PROCESS

ULL's national study visits bring volunteer experts from across the country to a city or community to provide a set of recommendations to 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 and local 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

In March 2019, the city of Grand Rapids worked with the Urban Land Institute on a 10 Minute Walk national study visit where volunteer experts provided strategic guidance on a land acquisition strategy for equitable park access in priority high-park-need areas. The experts were asked to consider the following study questions when framing their recommendations:

- Taking into account the overall park system in Grand Rapids, where are the logical and creative locations for new parkland that would have the most significant impact on achieving 10 Minute Walk access goals in the neighborhoods of focus?
- What criteria should Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation consider when building a decision matrix and an equity-based prioritization process to evaluate parkland acquisition opportunities?
- Considering projected land values and growth patterns, what types of policies or financing structures and strategies should be developed to allow the city to quickly acquire land in park-deficient areas across the city?

During the course of the study visit, which occurred March 25 to 27, the experts toured local parks and green spaces, including Campau Park, the South Field and Silver Creek Drain Basin, and the Ottawa Hills playground. They conducted more than 30 interviews with local stakeholders and met with city staff from the mayor's office and the departments of Parks and Recreation, Planning, Community Development, Economic Development, and Engineering.

10 MINUTE WALK PLANNING GRANTS AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

As part of the 10 Minute Walk campaign, the National Recreation and Park Association is leading year-long 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 under-represented 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.



We will work to ensure that there
is a park within walking distance of
**every child who lives
in our city.”**

MAYOR ROSALYNN BLISS, STATE OF THE CITY 2016

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was clear to the experts that residents of Grand Rapids love their parks and have demonstrated commitment to funding the parks system through the parks millage. Though the parks department appears underfunded, the improvements that have been made to individual parks are impressive. There are dedicated and invested partnerships that the city can build upon moving forward.

In addition, the equity framework that is underpinning much of the city's decision-making across the board is creating a solid foundation for equitable park acquisition and prioritization. Identifying the areas of the city that need the most intervention, in terms of not only park access but also general services, is a priority in Grand Rapids to ensure equitable outcomes for residents. A great opportunity exists to align other planning efforts, such as the upcoming master plan update and bike system planning, with efforts to expand the parks system, building upon the new parks master plan. The widespread desire to create a livable and equitable Grand Rapids was very evident to the experts. The city's equity initiative has a strong action-oriented champion in Mayor Rosalynn Bliss, and her energy and passion should continue to be leveraged into action that has a good return for the parks system.

However, the experts also noted some key challenges that the parks department is facing, including the following:

- Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation Department is substantially underfunded and understaffed.
- Current millage funding is primarily for capital improvements and does not fund operations and maintenance beyond pool facilities.
- The existing park system has a substantial amount of deferred maintenance.
- The parks department is not well equipped to acquire and maintain new lands for parks and at this point does not have a clear partner organization to assist it.
- Neighborhoods with park deficiencies lack ownership and engagement in the park planning process.
- Historic mistrust exists between residents of color and the city.

To start to address these challenges and capitalize on the strong work of the city and the parks department to date, the experts proposed an integrated strategy of communication and engagement of residents and stakeholders, improvements to park access, funding strategies for capital improvements and operations and maintenance, and criteria for land acquisition that the city could use to address park disparities and work toward its goal of parks for all Grand Rapids residents.

COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The key to communicating with and engaging the community is ensuring that there is appropriate dialogue with residents. The experts highlighted several critical components that can help ensure that community engagement is an ongoing and sustained process, rather than a per-project conversation. Because the demographics of the city are changing, the experts believe that communications and engagement processes need to be responsive to these changes and reflect the diversity in Grand Rapids.

- **Dedicated community engagement staff:** Setting aside funding for a dedicated staff person in the parks department—whose job is to be the point of contact across all neighborhoods in Grand Rapids, to learn the key players in the communities, and to figure out which residents are not being heard—is integral to building relationships and building trust with the community. This is an important component to creating the ongoing community engagement process. Consider hiring staff who reflect the underserved communities in terms of languages spoken, or alternatively contracting with a community-based organization that is committed to helping to better engage residents in the study area to contribute to parks department plans and activities.
- **Transparent communications:** The city and the parks department need to communicate successes and celebrate accomplishments. There should be signage where projects are underway or are planned so that people coming to the parks are informed. For example, the city could better implement a “brought to you by” signage program as an extension of the millage and construction signs that are currently put up for new projects. This is an opportunity to clearly and directly inform the community how their tax dollars are being spent at their local parks.

- **Data gathering:** Part of a successful ongoing community engagement strategy is an annual survey designed to get out and ask questions of the community. As ongoing engagement happens, it is also important to map responses in order to see which residents the city was able to interact with and where, and also to see where the city might be having trouble reaching residents.

The experts encouraged the city and the parks department to always keep a customer service focus: make it easy for residents to know whom to contact and consistently be engaging with residents, in order to build trust between the community and the parks department. When working on a project, in order to ensure that there is deep engagement, the parks department should be asking three questions:

1. Have we talked to the community?
2. What are the community’s thoughts?
3. Has there been any back-and-forth conversation with the community, giving them a chance to really engage?

If the answer is no to any of these three items, this highlights a need to go back to the community for more engagement. Asking these questions ensures that the community has been informed about a project, they have had time to react, and they have had time to give feedback. Rather than predetermining amenities and programming for parks, relying on an ongoing engagement process will help the parks department uncover true community needs and desires. Engagement leads to good information from the community, which leads to spaces that residents love and actively use.

CO-BENEFITS OF PARKS

- Strengthen community bonds
- Reduce depression and anxiety
- Increase physical activity
- Manage stormwater
- Improve air quality
- Provide spaces for community gathering
- Reduce urban heat island effects
- Improve connectivity and mobility

Camelot Park, a neighborhood park in southeast Grand Rapids, functions as the recreational and social center of the East Beltline neighborhood.

ENHANCING PARK ACCESS

Before land is acquired to be developed into a new park space, it is important to think about accessibility to existing parks and build up tools and strategies that can also be implemented in new parks. Simple actions in existing parks can improve community trust so that when new land is acquired, there is a foundation of support.

The experts noted that there are three primary ways to think about access to parks: are there strong connections to the broader community (in terms of location and walking/biking access)? Are the parks welcoming and comfortable for all people? And does the park space itself provide the features and amenities that are desired by the community?

Based on conversations with residents and stakeholders, the experts recommended several strategies to improve access to existing parks and prepare for future acquisitions:

- **Improved connections to parks and between parks:** Ensure adequate and safe connections and visibility to and from parks and adjacent communities, through sidewalk enhancements, new pedestrian crossings, and traffic-calming strategies. This may also require new entry points to ensure that people of all abilities have access. Expanded mobility options and services, such as a bike-share system, should be implemented in proximity to existing and potential park spaces. New signage and wayfinding techniques can also strengthen connectivity. Safer and more direct access points between parks may be needed as well. In particular, stakeholders mentioned that organic and potentially dangerous routes between Roosevelt and Clemente parks have been established, and people wanted to see safer connections. The city is working through the Vital

Streets Program, established by voters in 2014, to improve the accessibility and safety of the street network in Grand Rapids, and a good opportunity remains to align street and sidewalk projects with park connectivity efforts.

- **Improved access within parks:** Create pathways that lead visitors to the nodes in the park that are the most desired. To ensure comfort and to improve safety, provide lighting to support evening community events and organized sports.
- **Accommodations and amenities for a wide range of populations:** In order to ensure that a wide range of people feel welcome within parks, consider prioritizing spaces for seniors (such as comfortable benches), more wheelchair-accessible picnic tables, and gender-neutral restrooms. Year-round accessible restrooms were mentioned by stakeholders as a priority, though the experts recognize that this could be a maintenance challenge.
- **Coordination of new parks with existing city plans:** When looking to acquire land for new parks, the parks department should look across existing plans (including the parks and recreation plans, environmental plans, and transportation plans) to ensure that future parks are accessible by bus and bike networks and are in appropriate locations from an ecological perspective.

The experts commented that in order for people to make the walk to a park, the destination needs to exist and the walk needs to be welcoming. Thinking about the various ways to access parks is a strategy that the city can work on now to build community momentum and excitement for future acquisitions and create an approach to connect these future acquisitions to the great parks that already exist in the system.

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ACQUIRING NEW LAND FOR PARKS

The experts encouraged the parks department to think creatively about land acquisition and to work with the community to prioritize acquisitions. While land acquisition is opportunistic and frequently requires quick responses to secure funding and purchase land, particularly in built-out communities, the parks department should begin a communication process with residents and community groups sooner rather than later, so that city staff has understanding from—and agreement with—the community on the parcels to target. The department should use mapping of potential opportunities to start conversations with neighbors about potential future opportunities and whether they should be pursued. Acquisition decisions should be driven by what the neighbors want, and staff should be open to hearing their needs rather than have predetermined ideas of what might work based on prior experience. The experts presented a set of criteria, based on a draft created by parks and recreations staff, for evaluating land for potential future parks, which included the following:

- Does the potential parcel have neighborhood support and buy-in?
- Is the parcel located in a place that will allow the community to access it by bike, on foot, and by bus?
- Does the acquisition of this parcel for a park further the vision or goals of other city departments (e.g., economic development, transportation)?
- Do income and health indicators (which can be obtained by working with other partners such as the health department) support the creation of a park in this location?
- Is the parcel in a visible location, like a corner or other place that would attract more use?
- Are there any historical or natural features on the site that may be important to the community to preserve?
- Is there an ability to leverage funders or create a complementary use with another partner?
- Is the land currently for sale?

PARKS AND STORMWATER DETENTION: MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

The experts identified a site in Ward 3, owned by the Kent County Drain Commission, as having high potential for transformation into an open space that is both usable by the community and serves the utilitarian purpose of stormwater detention. The site, which was previously used to host football games for a nearby high school, is currently a vacant, grassy, 4.6-acre depressed drainage area surrounded by a six-foot-high fence. Residents and other stakeholders expressed serious interest in developing the site as new park space.

The use of design strategies to handle the same volume of stormwater (such as subsurface detention, or rain gardens and bioswales for pretreatment) provides the same infrastructural purpose to manage stormwater while also working to improve community health and restore habitat through green infrastructure and providing space for additional recreation (as illustrated at right). These types of improvements may also help spark additional redevelopment around the park, which can be an economic benefit to the community. The experts noted that while working with the drain commission may be a challenge, there are examples from across the country (such as Trails and Tails Park in Doral, Florida) where similar public parks have been created, and they encouraged the parks department to continue having conversations about development of this parcel.



The experts proposed a design (top) for the Ward 3 drain commission property (above) that combines stormwater retention with community green space.

The experts recommended rotating large-scale events across different parks in the city, including the study area, in order to draw residents to different parts of the city each year.



CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS PARKS AND RECREATION

The experts noted that while Grand Rapids is fairly built out, there is still land available and an opportunity to retrofit and think creatively about new park space. Pocket parks on very small parcels in park-deficient areas can be very effective in reaching a lot of people, and there is great value in providing spaces for people to connect with nature. There may also be opportunity with institutions—such as the land bank—that are holding land, or with tax-delinquent parcels. There are other tools that can be used to create new parks and open space that do not require parcel ownership that can be considered:

- **Easements:** Look at the utility lines that are often already owned by the local government, since they can be multipurposed as trail connections between parks or other destinations. Utility companies often grant parks and recreation agencies easements to property through which they run power, water, or sewer lines (often publicly owned), allowing residents the right to gather and recreate on their lands.
- **Licenses and leases:** Though there may be liability issues to investigate, a private landowner may allow some public use on a large piece of land that is not fully used.
- **Land swaps:** Other landholding institutions (e.g., educational institutions, health-focused institutions, land banks, land trusts, and housing commissions) may have a piece of land that they are not currently using, and the city may have a piece of land that it is interested in. Grand Rapids has historically used this strategy with Grand Rapids Public Schools and can look for opportunities with other local institutions.
- **Right of first refusal:** If a specific parcel would be an ideal location for a park, ask the seller for right of first refusal if it is put up for sale.

The experts applauded the city's joint use agreement with the school district to share park space and encouraged more policies that promote collaboration. They also strongly recommended looking at linear features in order to add park space, since such spaces often offer the most bang for the buck—linear parks and trails improve access and create connectivity, connecting neighborhoods and neighbors and linking people safely to bike lanes and transit. The city should consider approaching the railroad about its long-term plans to understand whether a rail-trail could be an option. Natural features in park-deficient areas like Plaster Creek could be enhanced by minimally invasive pathways. Regardless of the acquisition strategy used, a funding strategy must also be in place in order to be ready to acquire new properties.

FUNDING FOR EQUITABLE PARK ACCESS

In addition to funding levers for acquiring new parkland, the city must also examine funding for capital improvements, operations, and maintenance. Without sufficient dollars to maintain and program parks, underserved communities in Ward 1 and Ward 3 will continue to experience deficits in park access and quality. This will also negatively affect the ability of the city and the parks department to create trust and deepen relationships in the community. The experts provided guidance and recommendations about funding strategies, looking at both current revenue streams and funding mechanisms and opportunities for future projects.

FUNDING CAPITAL INVESTMENTS

The experts were quick to praise the Grand Rapids parks millage and the improvements that have been made to the park system due to the millage. Approved by voters in 2013, the millage—providing \$30 million over seven years—has been instrumental in the creation of new parks, playgrounds, and amenities for the system, particularly in underserved areas. The Ottawa Hills playground with its universally accessible design was lifted up as a great local success. Of the approximately \$4 million that the millage produces annually, \$3 million is dedicated to capital park projects, with \$1 million for pool operations and maintenance. The millage is obviously a critical tool for the city, and the experts were thrilled that a permanent millage was passed in late 2019 with 70 percent of the vote.

In terms of future capital funding and to augment the millage dollars, the experts highlighted the strong partnerships that already exist in Grand Rapids between the city and foundations and other entities in the region to help fund parks and other projects. Fostering and strengthening these relationships moving forward will help create a partnership model that will allow the parks department to do new projects and acquire new

land, but not have to do it alone. However, the experts noted that when cultivating these relationships—particularly when seeking funding—it is important to be specific about the ask; it should align with the mission of the foundation and focus on projects that are visionary or game-changing that will excite the potential donor.

The experts also challenged the city on its current allocation of funding for parks. At present, allocation by ward is loosely distributed per acre and based on deferred maintenance needs, which makes it challenging for districts such as Ward 3, which are underserved in park acreage, to get their fair share of funding. As an alternative, Grand Rapids could look at not just park characteristics (e.g., acres and types of park by ward) but also community characteristics (such as income levels and chronic underfunding over time) and put in place catch-up provisions to focus on equitable improvements moving forward. The city of Minneapolis recently established equity metrics for selecting priority projects in neighborhood parks,² which could be a good best practice for Grand Rapids to investigate.

RECOMMENDATIONS



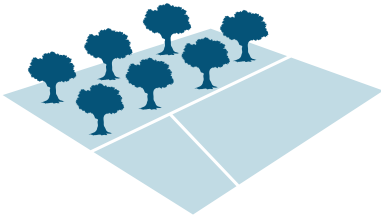
\$5.4K

National average spending/acre
of cities pop. 100K–250K



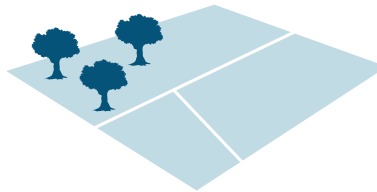
~\$4K

Grand Rapids systemwide
average spending/acre



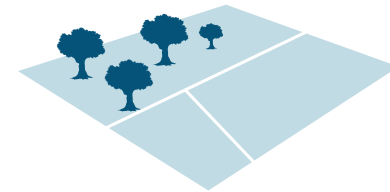
\$7K

Martin Luther King Jr. Park
spending/acre



\$3K

Plaster Creek Family Park
spending/acre



\$3.5K

Dickinson Park
spending/acre

FUNDING OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE

The experts acknowledged that all the recommendations put forward cost money, and the parks department is already doing a lot of work without a lot of resources. In terms of funding operations and maintenance, the department is already thinking about this: the strategic master plan for parks set a goal of enhancing operations and maintenance across parks and enhancing the maintenance levels of services to class A and B across the system. While the millage has been a great asset for operations and maintenance, it is still deficient, and the \$1 million annually is used solely for maintaining the three city pools. The parks department has estimated that it is underfunded by \$3.25 million per year, and this is just to meet the goals in the strategic master plan—this does not include any new restrooms, other facilities, or the new staff proposed by the experts, or any funding for expanding the park system.

The experts noted that operations and maintenance spending per acre, averaged across the entire parks system in Grand Rapids, is significantly less than the national average for

spending on neighborhood parks in similarly sized cities: an estimated \$4,000 per acre compared with the national average of \$5,400 per acre. Not only is the spending per acre lower than average, but also the per-acre spending is not the same across the parks in the Grand Rapids system, mostly due to the facilities in each park. In 2018, \$7,000 per acre was spent in Martin Luther King Jr. Park and \$6,000 per acre in Campau Park. By comparison, Plaster Creek Family Park and Dickinson Park each had approximately \$3,000 per acre in spending. The experts underscored the urgent need to increase the revenue stream for operations and maintenance funding not only to bring maintenance up to class A and B levels, as described in the parks department's 2017 strategic master plan,³ but also to ensure equitable support for operating and maintaining future parks. The experts outlined four main revenue streams to grow operations and maintenance funding, and strategies to consider under each:

1. Earned income: Beyond being a revenue source, earned income is often tied to important activation strategies to enliven parks and open spaces. Types of earned income include the following:

- a. Concessions.** Concessions are already noted in the strategic master plan as an opportunity. Department staff should review if there are parks that have current needs for concessions and if an opportunity exists for more concessions in some of the parks in the First and Third Wards.
- b. Events.** Specifically determine if an opportunity exists to rotate large-scale events across different parks in the city. This would draw residents to different parts of the city each year.
- c. Parking.** An authority in the city already manages parking, but there may be a way to connect this with parks. The experts noted that there may be state laws or restrictions to explore.

When one is thinking about earned income for revenue and operating budgets while also considering park equity, a key consideration is the ramifications of both increasing fees and paid concessions and the desire to create spaces for

people from all socioeconomic levels. The experts cautioned against creating a substantial earned income program in the parks, since this will not balance all the goals for creating a welcoming and safe space for all residents.

2. Contributed income: Friends of Grand Rapids Parks—a community nonprofit organization whose mission is to protect, enhance, and expand parks and public spaces in the city—provides opportunities for residents to contribute to park spaces through volunteerism and fundraising. However, opportunity may be limited to obtain operations and maintenance funding from other philanthropic organizations. Two specific opportunities to obtain philanthropic resources to consider are the following:

- Creating specific programs that tie into a foundation's mission—for example, environmental education classes; and
- Corporate sponsorship for events or seasonal uses, such as an ice-skating rink or summer concert series.

It is challenging—but not impossible—to make a compelling story to donors to cover general maintenance costs for parks. Strategize about what will inspire donations.

It is challenging—but not impossible—to make a compelling story to donors to cover general maintenance costs for parks. **Strategize about what will inspire donations.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Value capture: While value capture most commonly relates to real estate value, parks also spur economic growth and create value related to non–real estate uses, such as increased retail sales or tourism dollars. As the city continues to grow, staff should investigate ways to capture some of the investment to put back into the park system. Currently, state law does not allow for park impact fees, which would require new developments to pay for park creation and maintenance. However, other developer incentives to consider include the following:

- Neighborhood association fees that can help fund park maintenance.
- Setting up a business improvement district (BID), park improvement district (PID), or neighborhood improvement district (NID) structure. This is similar to a neighborhood association fee, but property types other than housing could be included in the assessment.
- Tax increment financing (TIF), as part of the developer package when a new development is approved, to help pay for infrastructure, including parks.
- Density bonuses to developers can be leveraged in exchange for providing community benefits, such as parks or open space. This already exists in Grand Rapids for developments of a certain size, but this could be expanded as the market grows.

It is important to keep equity in mind when exploring these different incentives. The city will need to balance economic development priorities with goals for inclusive growth and parks; sometimes they will be contradictory.

4. Public funding: The experts emphasized that the millage has been great for the parks system. They concluded that, given some challenges that may exist for other types of funding, public funding will likely need to be a significant driver for operations revenue for the parks. If there is enough broad public support, the city and parks department should:

- Grow the millage specially for more funding for operations and maintenance; and
- If possible, create flexibility with the split between capital and operations and maintenance dollars, depending on year-over-year needs.

General funds and designated taxes, such as hotel and sales taxes, are often used to pay for parks. There are various ways, from a public funding perspective, that communities pay for parks that could be considered to increase funding for operations and maintenance in Grand Rapids.



The experts recommended more signage letting residents know that millage dollars are helping to fund improvements to parks across the city.

PRIORITY NEXT STEPS TO CREATE AN EQUITABLE PARKS SYSTEM

The experts agreed that the Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation Department does a tremendous amount of great work on the park system across the city with very little, particularly following the Great Recession, during which the department experienced drastic cuts. Since that time and despite these cuts, Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation has seen a number of impactful wins, including the passing of the parks millage, hiring new management for the department, and completing a strategic master plan in 2017. The experts highlighted several key action items—to be accomplished in the short, medium, and long terms—that can be done to explore a more equitable park system, today and in the future.

These action items are aligned with the integrated approach to park access that was developed during the study visit, which considers strategies for resident engagement, enhanced park access, comprehensive funding strategies, and criteria for land acquisition. This approach, outlined in this report, should help the Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation Department and the city as a whole meet equity goals related to park access and inclusion.

First, the experts felt strongly that the parks department should do more self-promotion of its accomplishments and successes through simple and clear signage and marketing materials in order to raise awareness in the parks themselves of what has been done and what new projects are coming.

Focusing on creating strong partnerships for both land acquisition and funding streams is another priority, and the experts encouraged the city to think broadly and creatively about new partners and partnerships (for example, with utility companies, land banks, or land trusts) as well as what types of asks could motivate partners to provide more resources for parks.

The experts also underscored that equity needs to be considered in all work moving forward. There needs to be equity not only in terms of outcomes and ensuring that parks are equitably distributed, safe for all types of people to access, and include amenities that the community needs, but also equity in the process to achieve these outcomes. Changing the process to be more equitable entails that residents who have not been part of the engagement process to date are able to have their voices heard, especially residents who will be most affected by the changes in their communities. Hiring a community engagement specialist who is sensitive to the changing demographics in the city is a needed first step toward an equitable engagement process for the parks system. Grand Rapids is a fast-growing city: some residents may be excited about that and some may feel insecure and worried, and all voices should be heard moving forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Martin Luther King Jr. Park in Ward 3 is the largest and most popular park on the southeast side of Grand Rapids. Amenities include a playground, basketball courts, tennis courts, restrooms, and a pool.

Photos courtesy of the City of Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation and Sara Hammerschmidt

ON BEHALF OF THE URBAN LAND INSTITUTE,

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ULI EXPERTS AND PROJECT STAFF**EXPERTS**

MELANI V. SMITH (Chair)
Senior Director, Transit Oriented Communities
LA Metro
Los Angeles, California

RACHEL BANNER
Senior Program Manager
National Recreation and Park Association
Ashburn, Virginia

RYAN P. CAMBRIDGE
Planning Practice Leader
Browning Day Mullins Dierdorf
Indianapolis, Indiana

JUAN CANO
Founder
Cano Development
San Antonio, Texas

DARRYL FORD
Senior Management Analyst
City of Los Angeles Parks & Recreation
Los Angeles, California

DOUGLAS W. HATTAWAY
Senior Project Manager of Florida Program
The Trust for Public Land
Tallahassee, Florida

ERIN LONOFF
Principal
HR&A
New York, New York

JON TREMENTOZZI
Principal
Landwise
Watertown, Massachusetts

ULI PROJECT STAFF

BRIDGET STESNEY
Senior Director, Content

SARA HAMMERSCHMIDT
Senior Director, Content

VIOLETA DUNCAN
Senior Associate, Content

SHANNON SCLAFANI
Senior Director, ULI Michigan

CORISSA GREEN
Senior Associate, ULI Michigan

JAMES A. MULLIGAN
Senior Editor

DAVID JAMES ROSE
Editor/Manager

BRANDON WEIL
Art Director

SONIA RICHARDSON
Designer

CRAIG CHAPMAN
Senior Director, Publishing Operations

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In June 2019, Grand Rapids held a groundbreaking to celebrate planned improvements to Plaster Creek Family Park, including an outdoor classroom and natural playscape.



Urban Land Institute **Building Healthy Places Initiative**

2001 L Street, NW
Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036-4948

