FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-QUALITY PARKS

Urban Land Institute

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 shaping the future of the built environment for transformative impact in 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 80 countries.

ULI BUILDING HEALTHY PLACES INITIATIVE

Around the world, communities face pressing health challenges related to the built environment. Through the Building Healthy Places Initiative, launched in 2013, ULI is leveraging the power of ULI's global networks to shape projects and places in ways that improve the health of people and communities. Building Healthy Places is working to make health, social equity, and wellness mainstream considerations in real estate practice. Learn more and connect with Building Healthy Places: uli.org/health.

10 MINUTE WALK

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

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

What makes one park a success and another a disappointment, and how can that difference be remedied? The answers can be found by defining and measuring park quality at the site and system scales. Across the country, cities as well as parks and recreation departments are seeking to articulate what "high quality" means, particularly as it relates to the goal of the 10 Minute Walk movement to ensure that all people live within a 10-minute walk of a high-quality park or green space. Based on interviews with parks professionals and other experts from around the country, this report presents a framework for park quality that can help all park developers and managers systematically assess quality, park by park and systemwide, to make investments and address longstanding disparities in access to high-quality parks.

RESEARCH PROCESS

To kick off research for this report, ULI hosted a two-day workshop in Nashville in April 2019 to start conversations with nearly 30 leaders in parks and recreation on how to define "park quality." Attendees identified cities that had successful programs or processes in place to evaluate the quality of their park systems, and interviews were conducted with parks and recreation department employees in a number of these cities, along with other experts.

Findings from the interviews were analyzed to create a framework of five key characteristics of quality. The characteristics are based on best practices currently being applied in leading cities, as well as the recommendations of parks and recreation leaders on what should be measured as the field evolves.

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The Importance of High-Quality Parks

Evidence shows that park investment and quality vary among neighborhoods, with communities of color and low-income communities receiving less investment than more affluent, White communities and wielding less influence in shaping that investment. Evaluations of park quality can engage communities and address disparities by helping direct dollars and capacity to where they are most needed, creating equitable access to high-quality parks.

The design of Historic Fourth Ward Park in Atlanta incorporated stormwater control features to improve control of flooding that occurred during storm events.

Social distancing circles in Domino Park in Brooklyn allow visitors to safely relax and gather next to the river.

Enhanced pedestrian and cycling infrastructure connects Constitution Trail to The Circle, a plaza in Normal, Illinois.

EVERYONE DESERVES
A GREAT PARK

Parks make cities and towns pleasant places to live and work and are essential to the physical, social, environmental, and economic well-being of people and communities. They improve health by creating spaces for physical activity, play, enjoyment of nature, and mental respite. The closer people live to a park or green space, the less likely they are to experience stress and the more likely they are to walk or bike to that park and use it for physical activity.[1,2]

Parks help strengthen the economy by stabilizing neighborhoods, bolstering home values, drawing investment, and retaining and attracting residents, visitors, and businesses. They provide opportunities for workforce training, jobs, and youth development.

Parks and the trees and other green elements within them collect and treat stormwater, clean the air, soak up carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases to reduce the urban heat island effect, and mitigate storm surge and flooding. Parks are habitats for a wide array of plants and animals. They are venues for social interaction, community expression, and civic engagement. In short, they make individuals and communities healthier, happier, and more economically and environmentally sustainable and resilient.

Today, parks are more important than ever. As the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, people turned to their local parks and green spaces as safe places to gather, recreate, and relieve stress. When other community institutions were closed, parks served as sites for outdoor classrooms, remote learning, child care, meal programs, health care, and other essential services. The elevated role of parks in everyday life does not show any sign of receding post-pandemic.

Despite the importance and the benefits of parks, however, 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. Even in places where parks are available, inadequate maintenance, uninspiring facilities, and a lack of relevance to community members can erode their appeal and undermine their benefits.

To address this disparity, 10 Minute Walk, a national movement to ensure that all people live within a 10-minute walk of a high-quality park or green space, was launched in 2018 by The Trust for Public Land (TPL), in partnership with the Urban Land Institute and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). Foundational to 10 Minute Walk is the notion that the walk to the park is safe and accessible and the park itself is of high quality.

What is meant by "high quality" in the context of a park—defined generally as a degree of excellence—can be community- and neighborhood-specific, subjective, and difficult to measure.

In Lewisville, Texas, the mobile recreation unit Play Lewisville On Wheels (PLOW) brings games and activities to parks around the city.

Since the start of the 10 Minute Walk movement, the partners have sought to understand the attributes of high-quality parks and park systems.

What makes one park a success and another a disappointment, and how can that difference be remedied? The answers can be found by defining and measuring park quality at the site and system scales.

Across the country, public- and private-sector leaders are beginning to explore what "high quality" means for their parks and developing strategies for evaluating it to address longstanding inequities. This report presents a comprehensive framework, based on lessons learned through ongoing park quality evaluations in cities around the United States, to help park developers and operators evaluate and support high-quality parks and park systems in their communities.

GLOSSARY

Access: Quantity, proximity, and connections to quality parks and green space, recreation facilities, as well as programs that are safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming to everyone.[3]

Antiracism: Active, intentional actions toward racial justice and against all forms of racism.

Equity: Whereas equality means providing the same resources to each person or group, equity means providing the resources necessary for each person or group to reach the same outcome. *Distributive equity* refers to the distribution of burdens and benefits, and *procedural equity* refers to the ability to participate in decision-making processes. Equity has many dimensions, including race, gender, ability, income, ethnicity, immigration status, age, religion, sexual orientation, and more.

Green space: Land that is partly or completely covered with grass, trees, shrubs, or other vegetation, including parks, community gardens, and cemeteries.

Open space: Any open piece of land that is undeveloped (has no buildings or other built structures) and is accessible to the public. Open space can include green space, school yards, playgrounds, public plazas, and vacant lots.

Park: An outdoor space that is open to all for a variety of purposes and activities. This includes playgrounds, sports courts, natural areas, and trails.

Racism: Both individual acts of prejudice and discrimination and systemic and structural factors leading to inequitable outcomes on the basis of race.

Underserved: Provided with inadequate services. This report uses "underserved" rather than "disadvantaged" and other commonly used terms to highlight the unjust disparities in service provision. Other terms can inaccurately imply differences in community characteristics.

In Pittsburgh, Parks Listening Tours that began in late 2018 involved hundreds of community meetings to gather resident input on the quality of parks across the city.

An inclusive playground at Red-tailed Hawk Park in Aurora, Colorado, was designed with equipment and experiences for all abilities, including a wheelchair-only swing.

WHY EVALUATING QUALITY IS IMPORTANT

In too many communities, access to great parks is treated like a privilege when it should be a right. It is well documented that investment in neighborhood infrastructure, including parks, is inequitably distributed, with communities of color and low-income communities receiving less investment than more affluent, White communities and wielding less influence in shaping that investment.[4,5]

Understanding how quality varies across parks within a city is critical to equitably prioritizing parks for improvement and ensuring that their benefits accrue to everyone. Comprehensive, data-driven quality evaluations are powerful tools to sharpen decision-making, build momentum around park investment, develop partnerships, and obtain new resources.

Quality evaluations can inform city decisions on park development, design, renovation, maintenance, and programming, helping direct dollars and staff capacity to where they are needed most. They are effective communication tools, illustrating current conditions and needs to stakeholders and leaders and making

the case for investment in neighborhoods that are underserved. They are also opportunities to boost community engagement and show residents that their input is being applied. This broader involvement and awareness can fuel advocacy efforts that result in increased funding for parks and can equip city agencies to seek out private- and nonprofit-sector partners to address gaps.

Park Quality and Racial Equity

Park investment and quality have long varied among neighborhoods, with race and ethnicity a strong predictor of factors such as park size and available amenities. These inequities are rooted in America's long history of slavery, racial discrimination in public services and investments, and residential segregation. Black and Brown people, other people of color, and people with low incomes have less access to parks overall, and particularly parks that can be considered high quality.

For most of American history, parks and public spaces have been characterized by racial segregation. Although the 1964 Civil Rights Act made discrimination in public places based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin illegal, continued patterns of uneven public and private investment mean that Black communities and other communities of color tend to have fewer, smaller, and lower-quality parks.

Research shows that parks in Black and Brown neighborhoods are half the size yet have to serve five times as many people as parks accessible to people living in majority-White neighborhoods.[6] The former parks frequently contain aging amenities in need of repair and are designed and programmed in ways that do not resonate with residents' interests or that are intentionally discriminatory. These inequities perpetuate disparities in health and environmental outcomes.

Racism and discrimination continue to affect the experience of Black people and other groups in parks. For example, people of color are disproportionately subjected to unwarranted suspicion and confrontation by police and others, which can result in imprisonment or violence.

Harmful policies and practices and underinvestment can erode trust between city governments and communities. And the more recent trend of higher-income people returning to cities brings new concerns for longtime residents about displacement and continued access to improving public services like parks.

The lack of high-quality, accessible parks in many predominantly Black neighborhoods today contributes to disparities in health outcomes. Just as intentional policies and planning decisions created these inequities, fostering more equitable parks systems will require intentional, antiracist practices to work against structural racism and toward racial justice. Understanding and measuring park quality is one important part of this effort.


JESSE FRAZIER/KC PARKS

In summer 2020, the Kansas City parks department installed "expression walls" to give protesters a venue to express themselves.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

This report offers public- and private-sector leaders a framework for evaluating and supporting high-quality parks and park systems in their communities. Input from park stakeholders gathered through interviews, workshop discussions, and a scan of city practices, illuminated five broad characteristics of high-quality parks.

These characteristics are presented in Part 3. For each of these fundamental characteristics, key questions, examples of promising evaluation approaches from cities across the country, links to readily available assessment tools, and other practical tips for practitioners are highlighted to help park developers and managers operationalize these general concepts in ways that work locally. Part 4 provides more detailed descriptions of five U.S. cities' efforts to assess how well their parks exemplify these characteristics and use that information to strengthen park quality. Part 5 offers recommendations for applying the results of park quality evaluations to maximize their impact on parks, park systems, and community residents.

While every community has unique goals, needs, and challenges—and all approaches will not be universally applicable—the five characteristics of high-quality parks are intended to be broad enough to allow adaptation to different local contexts, resources and technical capacities, park types, and park sizes.
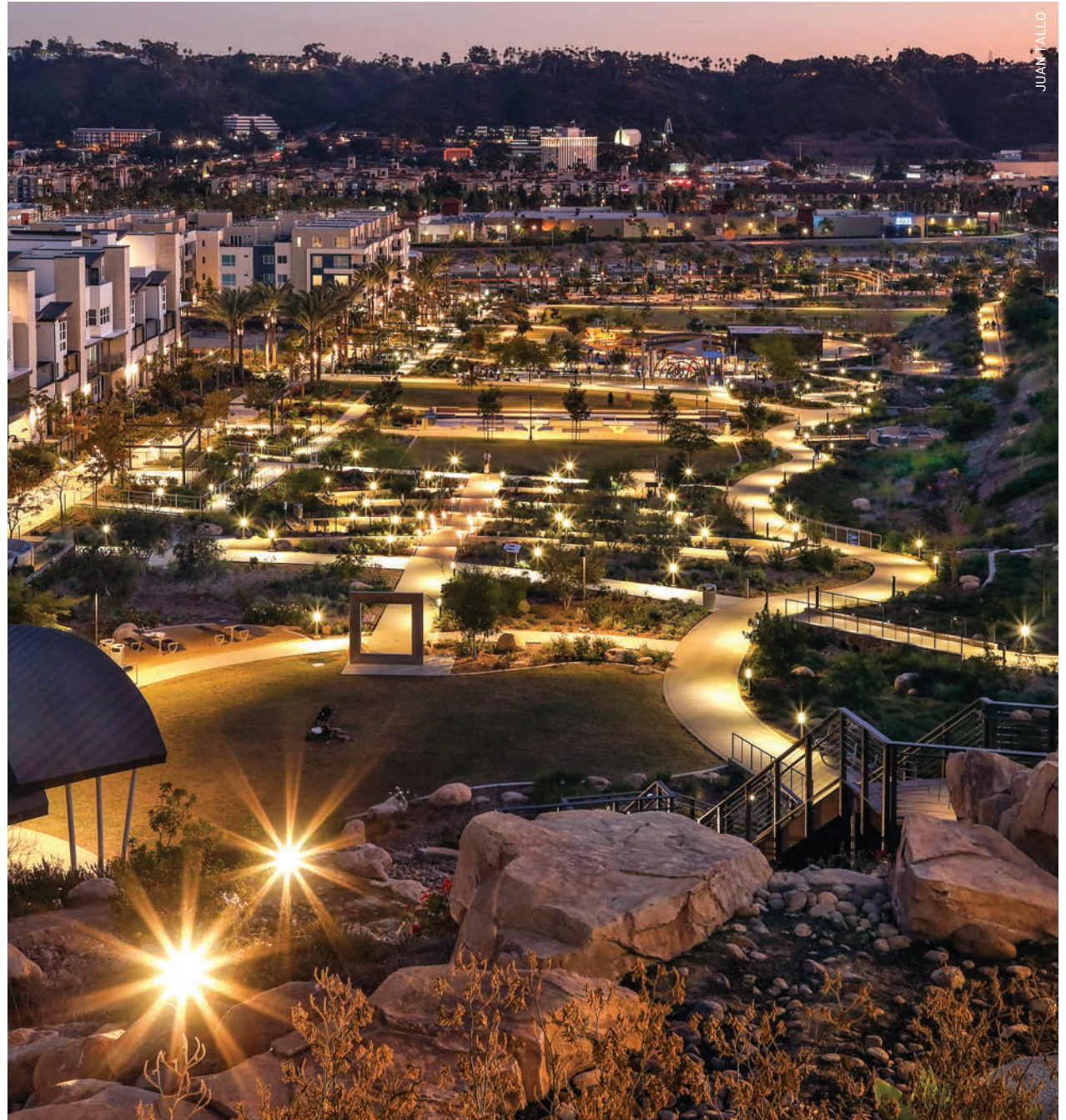
Civita Park in San Diego is illuminated with dark sky–friendly LED lighting along paths and in activity centers, making the park more accessible after dark.

Characteristics of High-Quality Parks and Key Evaluation Questions

Many cities are in the early stages of defining and evaluating park quality; this framework can help them refine their definitions, criteria, and assessment approaches. Other communities are further along, collecting data and measuring some aspects of park quality, and can take cues from this framework to make their evaluations more comprehensive and methodical.

1 HIGH-QUALITY PARKS ARE IN EXCELLENT PHYSICAL CONDITION

- ☐ Is the park well maintained?
- ☐ Are park amenities in good condition?

2 HIGH-QUALITY PARKS ARE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL POTENTIAL USERS

- ☐ Can people of all ages and abilities get to and around the park?
- ☐ Do people know about the facility and what they can do there?
- ☐ Is it free or affordable to use?

3 HIGH-QUALITY PARKS PROVIDE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES FOR PARK USERS

- ☐ Does the park provide a diverse range of amenities and activities?
- ☐ Do all community members feel welcome and safe in and around the park?
- ☐ Is the park comfortable to spend time in?

4 HIGH-QUALITY PARKS ARE RELEVANT TO THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE

- ☐ Does park design and programming reflect the culture and interests of community members?
- ☐ Does the surrounding community actively use the park?
- ☐ Do user demographics reflect the community?
- ☐ Are community-based organizations involved in park decisions and operations?

5 HIGH-QUALITY PARKS ARE FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE TO CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

- ☐ Does the park accommodate a variety of uses?
- ☐ Are park features adaptable to evolving circumstances?
- ☐ Does the park enhance environmental sustainability and resilience?

Considerations for Evaluating Park Quality

Action steps in getting started with park quality evaluations include customizing what "high quality" means for any given park system, planning for community engagement, gathering data, understanding the scale and applicability of the evaluation, and deciding what will be done with the evaluation results. Widespread disparities in park quality mean that equity must be central to all aspects of the evaluation.

The riverfront Promenade Park, in downtown Fort Wayne, Indiana, is the result of a robust community engagement process.

MJAMES PHOTOGRAPHY

The Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department has a renewed focus on addressing disparities in health and racial equity, which includes using a variety of resident engagement strategies.

Stakeholder engagement is critical when evaluating the quality of a park. In Memphis, the parks division engages youth to help the department determine how to improve city parks.

CENTERING EQUITY

Equity must be central to all aspects of the evaluation and implementation in order to address widespread disparities in park quality. For example, parks professionals should use data and community conversations to place quality evaluations in the context of demographic shifts, the local history and experiences of people of color, and how parks have been part of those experiences. This understanding can inform definitions of quality, evaluation metrics and techniques, and eventual investments and policy changes. In addition, evaluation and data collection teams should include people of color and residents of the communities served by the parks being evaluated.

GETTING STARTED

Since many local practitioners are seeking to better measure and track the quality of their *existing* parks, the framework is primarily geared toward that work. However, the five characteristics for high-quality parks can also support municipalities' efforts to ensure that new parks are high quality and can feed into the development of design standards, maintenance and operations plans and practices, partnerships, strategic plans, and other policies that govern how new parks are built and managed.

To evaluate parks against these characteristics of quality, parks and recreation leaders should first make decisions about evaluation methods, stakeholder and resident engagement in the assessment, and processes for institutionalizing evaluation practices and fixing the deficiencies uncovered. Key evaluation considerations that should be explored at the start of the process include defining what quality means locally, making a plan to engage residents, identifying available and needed data, determining the scale of the evaluation, and deciding who is responsible for conducting it.

The San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department describes a high-quality park as "safe, clean, and fun."

Define "High Quality" for Your Park System

City leaders should begin their efforts to assess the quality of their parks by articulating what "high quality" means in their park systems. The result can be a concise definition or a set of characteristics like those in this report. Although descriptions of quality can be used for internal evaluation purposes or shared with the public, the most effective ones are based on community input and publicly available to support transparency and accountability, particularly as evaluation efforts are underway.

Definitions of quality need to balance the aspiration to hold all parks to a consistent standard citywide with the differing challenges, priorities, and on-the-ground realities across facilities and neighborhoods. They should be flexible enough to fit diverse community contexts, residents' needs, and park types, from small pocket parks to downtown centerpieces to large natural areas.

Make a Plan to Engage the Community in the Evaluation

The most impactful quality evaluations proactively engage members of the communities served by the parks being evaluated. Effective measurement of most of the characteristics in this report relies heavily on resident input. This means that evaluators should intentionally seek out the perspectives of park users and nonusers how they assess the site condition, how they use the parks, and what they would like to see changed—data that are imperative to assessing how well a park measures up to the characteristics of quality.

Feedback should be obtained early enough in a city's capital prioritization process to influence decisions about repair and renovation across the system and should be gathered from a group that is representative of the demographics of the surrounding community. This input can be layered with maintenance, physical condition, and other data to show the effectiveness of current interventions and where changes need to be made.

Identify the Data You Have, the Data You Need, and the Tools You Will Use to Collect and Analyze It

Park quality evaluations should be data-driven. Park professionals are using a range of approaches to collect and analyze data on quality. The Trust for Public Land provides city-level park data through ParkServe and ParkScore that can be used as a starting point for quality evaluations (see sidebar). Some cities maintain geographic information system (GIS) databases containing relevant indicators, and additional quantitative and qualitative data can be gathered through on-site assessments and community engagement. This can be aided by standardized tools such as the Community Park Audit Tool[7] or customized ones (see tools matrix in Part 3 of this report).

Increasingly, cities are collecting information using cell phones and tablets, adding supporting documentation such as photographs and GPS coordinates, automating data integration into city databases and mapping platforms, and making these publicly available.

When formulating evaluation approaches, park practitioners must weigh the desire to include specific, objective indicators with staffing and resource constraints affecting assessment efforts. While many agencies are striving to include more quantitative information, many are successfully using measures such as rating systems that are subjective but consistent.

Levy Park in Houston is a public park maintained through a partnership between the city and Midway, a real estate and development firm that developed properties adjacent to the park.

Decide Who Will Conduct the Evaluation and How It Will Be Institutionalized into the Department's Work

Quality evaluations are most useful when they take place regularly as institutionalized parts of day-to-day procedures and park planning. They can be integrated into park planning and community engagement efforts, inspection programs, or ongoing condition assessment efforts.

Evaluations can be conducted by city staff—including those from parks and recreation departments, public works departments, city managers' offices, or interdisciplinary teams—as well as by consultants, partner organizations, volunteers, or a combination. Inviting field staff, recreation staff, nonprofit and private-sector partners, and users to the table can yield more informative results.

Even though parks are generally under the purview of the public sector, private and nonprofit entities can also use this framework for park quality to assess parks under their control. Residents do not always know who owns or operates the parks, natural areas, and public spaces they visit, but they know if the spaces are enjoyable. To ensure high-quality parks citywide, parks departments should conduct evaluations collaboratively with developers and business owners, nonprofit organizations, school districts, and other city, county, and state agencies that own or operate parks in or adjacent to city limits. Because urban parks can be developed, funded, owned, and operated by a variety of partners, supporting high-quality spaces requires working together across sectors.

Determine the Scale of the Evaluation

Cities must also determine whether to evaluate park quality and publish results at the individual site level, across facility categories (such as pools, recreation centers, and basketball courts), or across the entire system. Individual parks can be evaluated on a one-off basis, but it is best for cities to evaluate all parks across their systems to understand disparities and allocate capital and operations resources where they are most needed. Community-wide or systemwide evaluations also indicate how well park systems serve all residents equitably with a range of park types and facilities. Aggregate quality data are useful for understanding big-picture funding needs and advocating for more resources, and detailed site-level information can inform specific investment and staffing decisions.

Although evaluating the quality of every park across a system and publishing site-level data can be labor intensive, it will support the most informed resource allocation decisions. Community-wide evaluations also indicate whether residents' overall needs are met by a park system that provides a range of facilities.

Park Data for 14,000 Cities: ParkServe and ParkScore

ParkServe, a tool developed by The Trust for Public Land, compiles park data from 14,000 cities, towns, and communities. ParkServe analyzes the 10-minute walk serviceable areas for each park in the database, identifying physical barriers to access and providing cities with comprehensive data related to park access. ParkServe data can be accessed at tpl.org/parkserve.

Another tool developed by TPL, ParkScore, measures how well the 100 most populous U.S. cities are meeting their residents' need for parks. In addition to providing ParkServe data, ParkScore evaluates park investment, acreage, amenities, and accessibility and ranks each of the 100 cities. ParkScore can be accessed at tpl.org/parkscore.
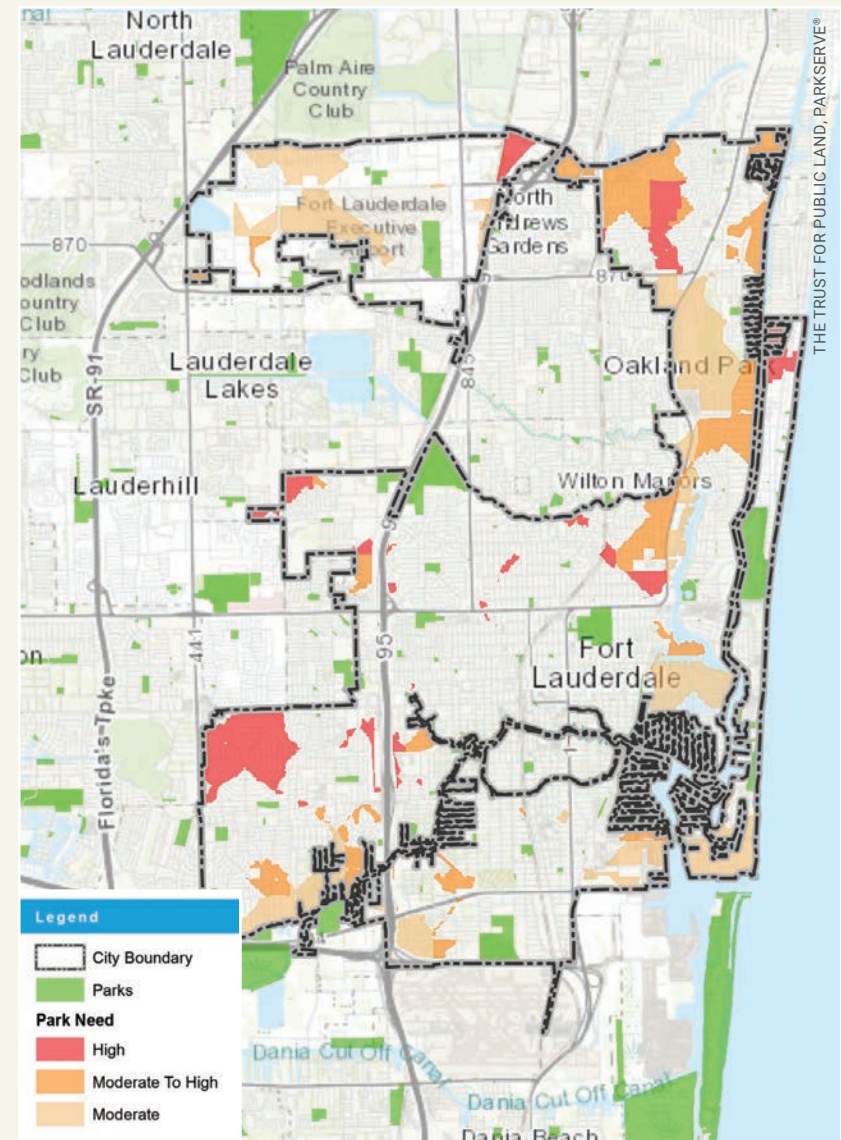
This ParkServe map of Fort Lauderdale shows which areas of the city are in need of new parks (https://www.tpl.org/city/fort-lauderdale-florida).

Characteristics of High-Quality Parks

The physical condition, accessibility, user experience, community relevance, and adaptability of a park are the five broad characteristics that determine a park's overall quality. The characteristics of high-quality parks are mainly applicable at the site level, but evaluations should be aggregated to the park-system level to get a full picture of the distribution of high-quality parks across a community.

The characteristics and key questions presented may not all be relevant for all types of parks (such as unprogrammed natural areas without built amenities), but evaluating all five of them whenever possible will produce the most comprehensive picture of park quality.

Five Characteristics of High-Quality Parks

1 **High-Quality Parks Are in Excellent Physical Condition**

2 **High-Quality Parks Are Accessible to All Potential Users**

3 **High-Quality Parks Provide Positive Experiences for Park Users**

4 **High-Quality Parks Are Relevant to the Communities They Serve**

5 **High-Quality Parks Are Flexible and Adaptable to Changing Circumstances**

MAX MCBRIDE

Meadowbrook Park in Prairie Village, Kansas, involved area residents—including children—in the process to select playground equipment for the park.

1

High-Quality Parks Are in Excellent Physical Condition

KEY QUESTIONS

☐ Is the park well maintained?

☐ Are park amenities in good condition?

Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy volunteers help keep the parks clean, healthy, and beautiful.

The condition of parks—including how they are maintained day-to-day and the state of the equipment and infrastructure they contain—is a fundamental building block of park quality. Playgrounds, trails, sports courts, pools, natural areas, and other types of spaces that are well cared for are welcoming, promote feelings of safety, encourage community stewardship, and boost civic trust.[8]

Maintenance has long been a key priority for parks and recreation departments, and some are testing new ways of tracking and evaluating it. Ongoing maintenance assessments allow agencies to shift dollars, personnel, and schedules to ensure equitable and consistent levels of upkeep across their systems. For many

departments, these evaluations are underscoring the critical difference between equally distributing maintenance resources and achieving an equitable level of maintenance across sites.

Quality is also determined by the structural condition of park infrastructure requiring capital investment. With constrained park budgets, the renovation and replacement of these assets is often put off. However, park professionals understand the detrimental impact broken swings, missing benches, and cracked pavement have on park users' experience, so many are systematically assessing the condition of the amenities in their parks and applying that information to prioritize improvements.

Is the Park Well Maintained?

To assess maintenance levels, parks and recreation departments are developing maintenance standards and evaluating how the upkeep of their parks measures up. These standards typically focus on the aspects of maintenance that most affect user experience—including the cleanliness of restrooms and other facilities, trash, landscaping, signage, paving, and graffiti—and define the frequencies of tasks or the outcomes of those tasks.

Measuring the frequency of care makes it easy to determine whether standards are being met. The **Lewisville, Texas**, Parks and Recreation Department classifies parks from AA to D and assigns each category specific frequencies for various maintenance tasks.

1 High-Quality Parks Are in Excellent Physical Condition

Denver Parks and Recreation staff is responsible for maintaining over 20,000 acres of urban parks and mountain parkland.

Regular condition assessments of park amenities, like the playground at Greenbriar Local Park in Potomac, Maryland, ensure that equipment remains in safe and usable condition.
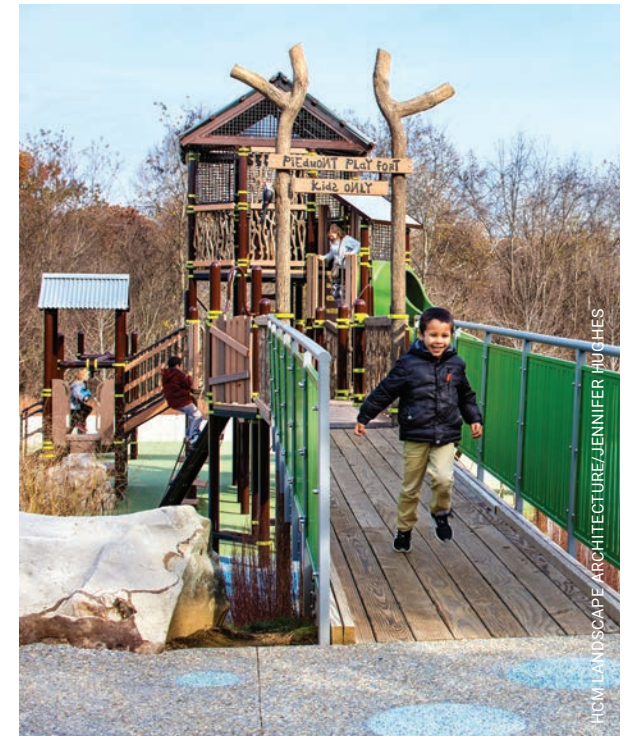
Outcome-based assessments, which can paint a more descriptive picture of conditions on the ground, require the setting of clear standards. These can be subjective measures, such as ratings on a scale of one to five, or objective ones, like the number of pieces of litter present. **San Francisco**'s park evaluation program uses specific, quantitative standards to assess the safety, cleanliness, and functionality of various park features. For example, athletic field turf is flagged as an issue if it is more than 4.5 inches high at any location.

Regardless of the method used, maintenance evaluations should allow staff to prioritize parks or projects for improvements, separate immediate issues from medium- and long-term ones, and distinguish needed changes in maintenance practices from needs for capital investment, park redesign, and activation.

Are Park Amenities in Good Condition?

Increasingly, parks and recreation departments are conducting regular condition assessments by developing evaluation criteria for each infrastructure type and rating the condition of each park feature against those criteria. This is typically done by visually evaluating each asset and assigning subjective ratings.

On-site assessments can be supplemented by objective data such as age or installation year, remaining useful life, rehabilitation or replacement cost, capital investment in recent years, compliance with codes and standards, and material type and durability. Asset ratings can be rolled up into composite scores for each

park and systemwide infrastructure category. Parks and recreation departments undertake these evaluations anywhere from quarterly to every five years, with many aiming to do them once per year.

In **Kansas City, Missouri**, the Safe Healthy Attractive Public Environments (S.H.A.P.E.) program is used to rate each park on 20 features across three categories: cleanliness, structural, and landscape. The ratings of Very Good, Good, Poor, and Unacceptable are subject to the judgment of the inspector, but are consistent, since a single inspector and defined parameters are used for examining each feature. Data are used to identify and prioritize projects, to tailor maintenance practices to the unique context of each site, and to give parks staff the information they need to better meet the needs of people and neighborhoods that are underserved.[9]

High-Quality Parks Are in Excellent Physical Condition

Signage at Brookside Park in Kansas City lets visitors know whom to call to report maintenance issues.

To assist park supervisors with often resource-intensive data collection activities for city parks in Memphis—including Southside Park, which contains numerous amenities—a new staff position was created.

Condition assessments can be used to identify safety hazards, such as exposed bolts on a slide, and flag those for immediate attention by operations staff; shorter-term fixes, such as illegible sign text, and enter those into a work order system; and medium- or longer-term problems, such as a broken retaining wall, and put those into the queue for capital projects, or perhaps into budget requests or bonds.

Depending on the size of the park system, these assessments can be resource-intensive, but there are ways to streamline the process. For example, instead of doing its condition evaluation in the field, the city of **Pittsburgh** and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy gathered their team around a table to share their expertise and reach consensus on condition scores for each park.

The **Memphis, Tennessee**, Division of Parks and Neighborhoods created a staff position to assist park supervisors with condition data collection once each year and do other operations work the rest of the year. Condition assessments can also be disaggregated, with departments tackling a few asset types or parks at a time.

A limitation of condition assessments is that they only account for the state of the infrastructure that is present at the time of the evaluation and not any missing elements. For instance, a playground that has received little investment and deteriorated to the point where most of its features have been removed could still score well in a condition assessment if the few remaining assets are in good condition. Comparing existing conditions to a standard, plan, or goal—or similar parks in other parts of the city—would address that shortcoming.

Inspection Programs as Tools for Comprehensive Conditions Assessment

New York City's Parks Inspection Program uses specific criteria to evaluate park features, such as those at Saw Mill Playground in the South Bronx.

DANIEL AVILA/NYC PARKS

Inspection programs are one of the most common tools for measuring the effectiveness of both day-to-day maintenance and asset condition. Parks and recreation departments are strengthening their programs by hiring independent inspectors, increasing the frequency of inspections, sharing the resulting data more widely within their agencies and with the public, and using it to shape decisions.

Inspections typically score park features according to evaluation criteria that assess their safety, cleanliness, and functionality. These criteria can range from narrative descriptions of desired conditions to quantitative metrics. In **New York City**, under the Parks Inspection Program, 17 park features are rated "acceptable" or "unacceptable" based on definitions of each feature. For example, safety surfacing around play equipment is checked for sections that are damaged, worn, or uplifted, and trees are checked for dead, dangling, or protruding limbs.

Departments often have established procedures for sharing inspection data. These include flagging immediate issues for field staff right away, sharing ratings across the agency on a weekly or monthly basis, holding regular meetings with leadership to review performance, and posting relevant information online for the public. The most effective programs make it easy to analyze data to inform specific interventions. For instance, **New York City** parks staff used their inspection data to identify the sites that received a poor rating for dog waste and install doggy bag dispensers in those locations.

2

High-Quality Parks Are Accessible to All Potential Users

KEY QUESTIONS

- ☐ Can people of all ages and abilities get to and around the park?
- ☐ Do people know about the facility and what they can do there?
- ☐ Is it free or affordable to use?

Accessibility for all ages and abilities was a key consideration for Butler Trail in Austin, Texas.

A park, no matter how well designed and maintained, is of little use if potential users are not able to get to it, do not know about it, or cannot afford to enjoy its amenities. For this reason, park professionals around the country are paying increasing attention to the accessibility of their facilities to all members of the community. They are working to evaluate and improve physical access, access to information, and affordability.

Access is also related to who feels welcomed and comfortable in a space, which is explored in characteristics 3 and 4.

## Can People of All Ages and Abilities Get to and around the Park?

Physical access to parks should be well marked, safe, convenient, and attractive to users of all ages and abilities. Park practitioners are already working to meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility and universal design guidelines; some are going beyond the minimum requirements to ensure that users of accessible entrances do not have to go out of their way to get into the park, can access all features of the park, and can readily find information about it.

Points of connectivity with surrounding neighborhoods should be clearly signed, safe, convenient, and inviting. Accessibility is determined by the safety and convenience of street crossings, lighting, sight lines into the park, and other elements of adjacent neighborhoods.

Some cities are moving away from parks with single entry and exit points and toward sites that are more porous and interconnected with surrounding communities by opening up new access points, removing barriers, and reimagining park edges to make parks feel more like part of their neighborhoods.

2 | High-Quality Parks Are Accessible to All Potential Users
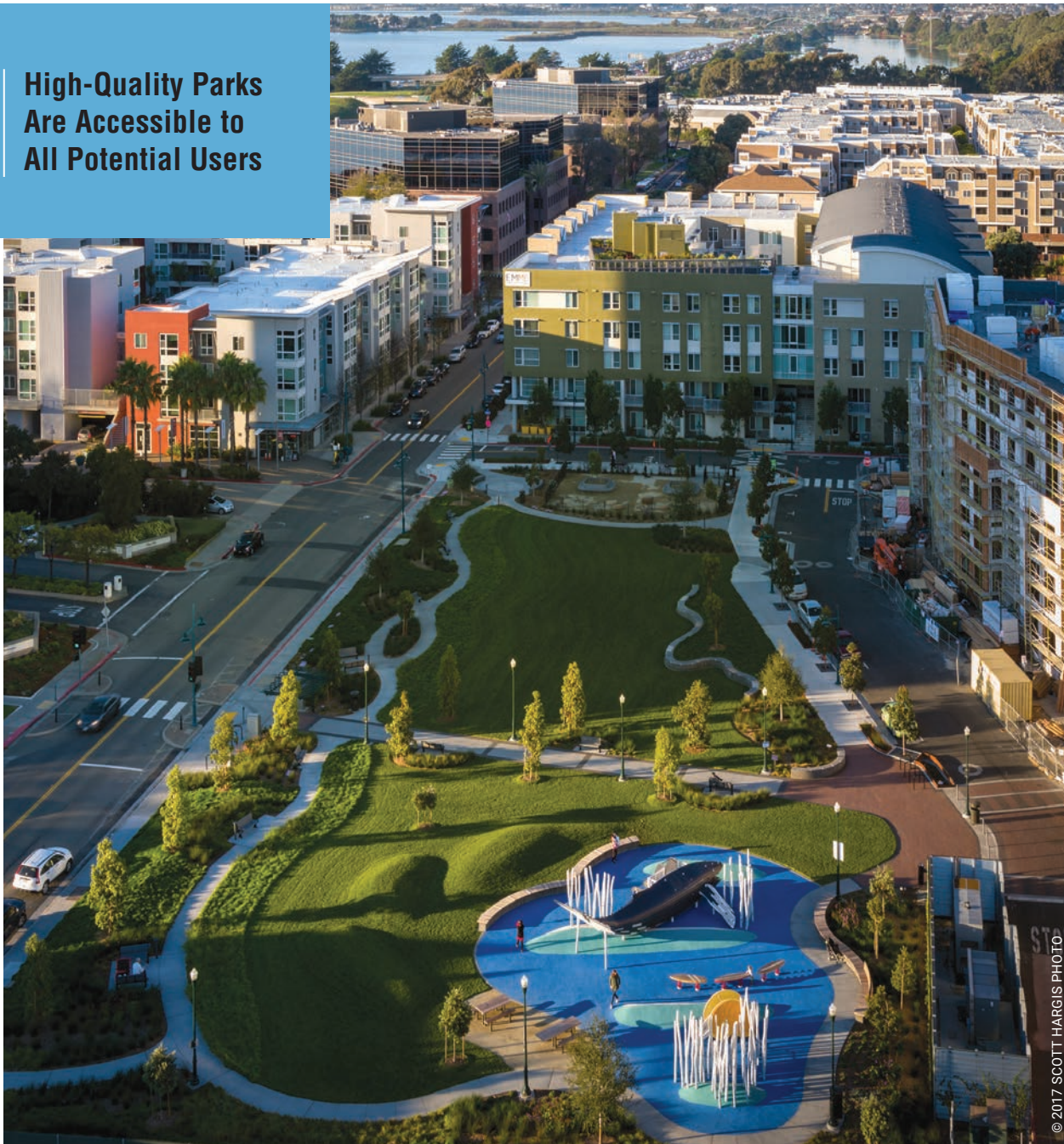
Christie Park in Emeryville, California, has numerous entry points to allow for easier access.

New York City's Parks Without Borders program is improving access by redesigning park entrances, edges, and park-adjacent spaces where parks meet the streets and sidewalks. Strategies include widening entrances and making sure they are well placed and easy to find; adding plants, trees, and benches to entrance areas; repairing paving or adding distinctive pavement; lowering or removing perimeter fencing; and activating underused spaces at park edges. This approach makes parks more accessible and welcoming to the communities they serve and transforms underused areas of the public realm. More-open park edges also allow better views into the park, which improves safety (discussed further in characteristic 3).

Multimodal connectivity is another critical element of access. Parks should be safely and easily reachable and navigable by all forms of transportation, including walking, rolling, scooting, bicycling, taking transit, and using vehicles. The presence of signage, markings on roads and paths, and bike parking can support this goal. Park practitioners may need to work with peers from other agencies—such as transportation, public works, and planning—to address access deficiencies outside park borders.

Consideration of not only access to parks but also access within them is important. Users should be able to make their way between amenities and entrances with clear, safe, and convenient connections, including pathways, sidewalks, roadways, and wayfinding signage. Signage and other directional cues should have clear symbols and markings and be written in the languages spoken in the surrounding community. Internal roads and paths should be kept clear of snow and leaves to allow people to safely navigate the park throughout the year.

When evaluating physical access, some communities are considering the level of development of their parks and the intent of their design. Parks and green spaces that were designed for purposes other than recreational ones—for instance, undeveloped utility corridors that were intended primarily for drainage—may face unique accessibility considerations or be held to different standards.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-QUALITY PARKS
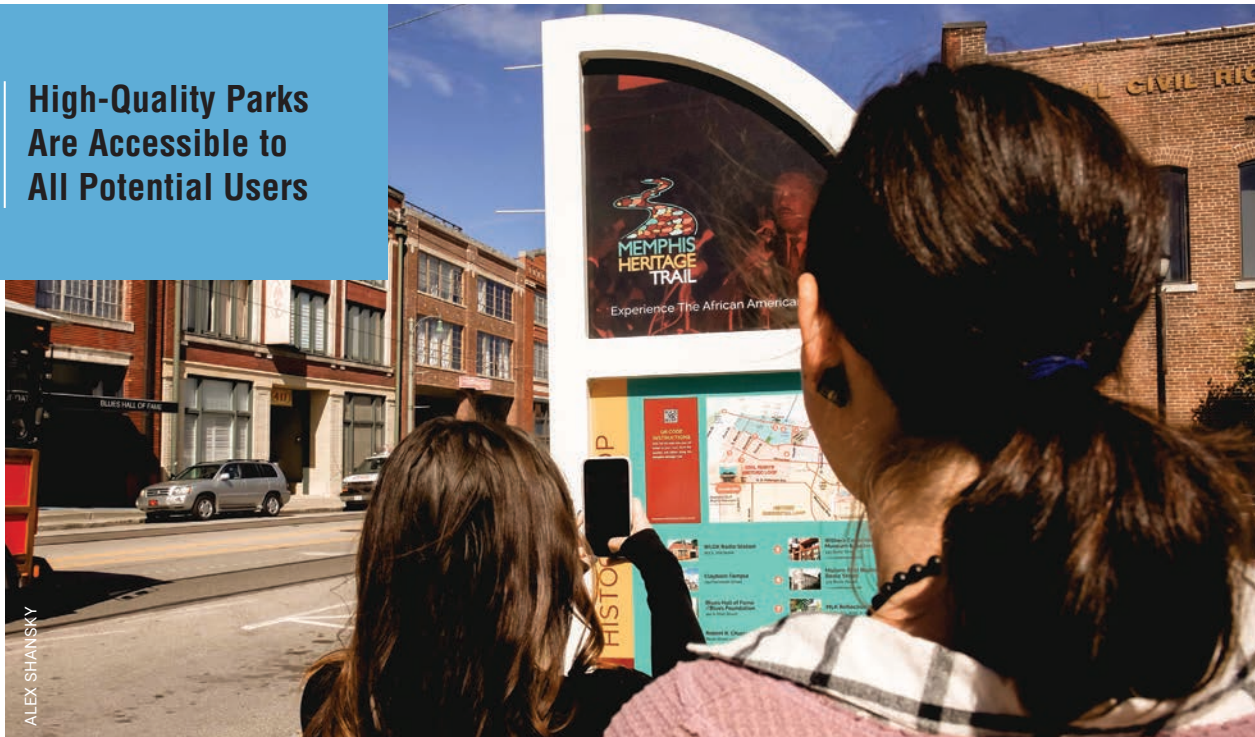
Information conveyed through signage and maps, in multiple languages, helps users navigate to and within parks. Above: Memphis Heritage Trail; right: Grand Park in Los Angeles; below: Eastern Market in Washington, D.C.

Do People Know about the Facility and What They Can Do There?

Users—and potential users—should be able to easily find and understand information about the park, its amenities, its programming, and how to use the facilities and participate in activities. Interpretive signage should be present in visible locations, in good condition, and written to follow plain language guidelines and at a basic literacy level. Signs, maps, brochures, websites, program schedules, and other information about the site should be offered in the languages spoken in the surrounding community.

In **Oakland, California**, for example, one of the most diverse cities in the nation, the parks and recreation department publishes materials in Spanish and Cantonese, along with additional languages spoken by the specific populations the resource is geared toward.

Information should be available through various channels, and access to a computer or the internet should not be a prerequisite for learning about facilities or signing up for programs and events. Partnerships between parks and recreation departments and community-based organizations can help spread information to broader audiences and present it in culturally relevant ways.

2 | High-Quality Parks Are Accessible to All Potential Users

Yanaguana Garden at Hemisfair in San Antonio holds free weekly and monthly programming for the community.

J. MILES WOLF © 2012

Washington Park in Cincinnati hosts free events for visitors of all ages and features a performance stage, a dog park, and a children's playground.

Is the Park Free or Affordable to Use?

The use of a park's facilities and participation in its programs should be affordable to all members of the community. Offering free programming or fees and memberships on a sliding scale can increase the number of community residents who can join in.

In **Kansas City, Missouri**, KC Parks' Life X program offers no-cost annual community center memberships, which include access to healthy lifestyle and fitness classes, to all residents of its target zip codes with high poverty and low life expectancy. To maintain their passes, participants must regularly join programming and complete surveys every few months.[10]

3

High-Quality Parks Provide Positive Experiences for Park Users

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KEY QUESTIONS

- ☐ **Does the park provide a diverse range of amenities and activities?**
- ☐ **Do all community members feel welcome and safe in and around the park?**
- ☐ **Is the park comfortable to spend time in?**

Swinging benches are some of the most sought-after park seating at the Greenway in Boston.

While the experience of users may be the most important indicator of park quality, it can be difficult and labor-intensive to accurately measure. However, understanding how people feel about their time in parks and how they perceive parks overall can help capture less tangible elements of quality. This section describes ways of evaluating park elements that strongly impact user experience: the amenities and activities available, safety, and comfort.

To capture the whole story, park practitioners are making intentional efforts to consider the experiences of all users as well as community members who do not use their facilities. Analyses of park features and services should be accompanied by efforts to collect community feedback, both at the park and in other venues. Tactics for accomplishing this include

surveys, outreach at neighborhood meetings and events, and partnerships with churches, schools, libraries, local businesses, housing providers, and other institutions with relationships with residents.

Breaking data down by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability can expose gaps in quality, disparities in how services are provided, and challenges faced by specific populations. If the demographics of park users do not resemble those of the broader community, it is important to consider whether that mismatch is because of perceptions of being unwelcome or unsafe, a lack of culturally relevant activities or information, or some other issue. Assessments of experience can also be conducted using the methods for counting and directly observing park users described under characteristic 4.

Does the Park Provide a Diverse Range of Amenities and Activities?

A robust and diverse offering of amenities and activities is vital to fostering a positive user experience and to serving the community equitably. Answering the question "What is there to do there?" can shed light on how users feel about a park and how likely they are to return. At the same time, asking "What do you wish you could do there?" and "What is missing from this park?" allows community members to express their needs and desires.

Activities can be evaluated by counting the number of hours and types of programming. They can also be considered more subjectively to ensure that all offerings meet a minimum standard of quality across the system. The **Oakland** Department of

High-Quality Parks Provide Positive Experiences for Park Users

SKY DEFINITION

Experiential lighting enhances safety, and the reuse of a pavilion from the 1974 World's Fair celebrates history, at Riverfront Park in Spokane.

M-NCPPC LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE/ROGER FOLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

Montgomery Parks in Montgomery County, Maryland, scores its parks—including Takoma–Piney Branch Park in Takoma Park—based on the experiences the park provides.

Parks, Recreation, and Youth Development has worked to bring programming across all of its sites to the same level of quality, with uniform funding levels, meal programs, field trips for kids, private partnerships, and more. This has resulted in better opportunities for families in lower-income neighborhoods and more diverse sets of users at each facility.

To quantify park amenities, some parks and recreation departments inventory and map them, sometimes as part of condition assessments. Some go further to examine the breakdown of park features among different types of uses.

For example, Montgomery Parks in **Montgomery County, Maryland**, through its Energized Public Spaces Plan, created a GIS-based analysis to measure walking access and score three categories of experiences: active recreation, or outdoor exercise; contemplative recreation, or opportunities to relax

and enjoy nature; and social gathering, which is particularly important for mental health and in urban areas where residents may not have their own outdoor space. Staff members score each park facility on the experiences provided and compare them with the demand of nearby residents and workers, based on population estimates, to inform decisions about specific parks and identify neighborhoods in need of investment.[11]

The Energized Public Spaces Plan approach aligns with the Project for Public Spaces' Power of 10+—the idea that successful public spaces offer users at least 10 reasons to be there, such as places to sit, playgrounds to enjoy, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, and people to meet.[12] When assessing park amenities, it is worthwhile to consider how activated a space could become based on the features it has.

Do All Community Members Feel Welcome and Safe in and around the Park?

Assessments of park safety should consider whether all potential users feel safe in and around the site, including but not limited to residents of color, religious minorities, youth, seniors, and LGBTQ people. Strategies for improving safety extend beyond policing to the design, staffing, and programming of spaces. Evaluations should be placed in the context of the historical legacy of parks that were previously segregated or that memorialize polarizing or racist figures or events. Community conversations should explore these factors, which can exclude residents and make them feel uncomfortable.

High-Quality Parks Provide Positive Experiences for Park Users

At River Garden in Memphis, the River Garden Rangers are responsible for creating a welcoming environment for all visitors to the park.

Local police officers engage with community youth during a Junior NBA clinic at Trojan Park in Wellston, Missouri.

Park design and maintenance can facilitate unobstructed visibility by avoiding landscaping that blocks views and opting for tree species with high canopies. Lighting, signage, and emergency call boxes are other features that increase safety, and evenly distributing amenities and activities around the space and throughout the day can help eliminate deserted areas.

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) is an approach to improving the safety and livability of spaces through the design of built and natural environments.[13] This approach, which originated in the 1970s and has been refined over the decades, uses strategies such as maximizing visibility and distributing activity centers around a space to reduce crime and the potential for crime.

Some parks and recreation departments are rethinking how they approach public safety services at their facilities. This can entail taking advantage of their sites and programs to rebuild relationships among residents and public safety officials. Park practitioners can encourage police officers to spend time in parks and participate in events as community members. This can help establish connections, build trust, and overcome the fear that police can provoke, particularly among communities of color.

In another strategy, the **Minneapolis** Park and Recreation Board is shifting to relying on its own police and other partners instead of the local police department, differentiating their uniforms, and developing a safety plan in response to community concerns.[14]

Other cities are hiring park ambassadors to interface with the public and lessen the need for police presence during routine operation. Recruiting neighborhood residents for these jobs strengthens relationships and creates opportunities for local employment.

Memphis, Tennessee's River Parks Partnership created the River Garden Rangers—part park ranger, part greeter, and part maintenance staff—who are the public face of the park and responsible for creating a welcoming environment for visitors.

In addition, partnering with community-based organizations to provide regular activation, programming, and stewardship can keep parks busy and populated with a diverse group of users.

Movable furniture provides park users with options for arranging seating in ways that ensure their comfort.

Is the Park Comfortable to Spend Time In?

The comfort of a site is another dimension of user experience. It can be indicated by the presence of elements that make it easy and pleasant for users of all ages, abilities, and interests to spend time there. These can include a variety of seating, from traditional benches to movable café furniture to "porch swings"; protection from the elements; restrooms; drinking fountains; and wi-fi and mobile device charging stations.

Parks should also provide trees and other green infrastructure to offer cooling shade and lower temperatures, a necessity that will become even more important with the extreme heat brought by climate change.[15]

As part of its analysis of the experiences provided by its parks, Montgomery Parks in **Montgomery County, Maryland**, looks at the presence of trails, flexible seating, gazebos, picnic shelters, and shade trees.

Comfort is also related to the size of a park relative to the population it serves. Park acreage should be large enough to serve the adjacent community, and parks should not be overcrowded or unable to meet demand for space or amenities.

MEGAN MCCONVILLE

4 | High-Quality Parks Are Relevant to the Communities They Serve

3CDC

Ziegler Park in Cincinnati—a transformative renovation of a neglected park—was created after many community input sessions, and activities and amenities are affordable to all through the Everybody In program.

KEY QUESTIONS

☐ Does park design and programming reflect the culture and interests of community members?

☐ Does the surrounding community actively use the park?

☐ Do user demographics reflect the community?

☐ Are community-based organizations involved in park decisions and operations?

Underlying all the characteristics of high-quality parks described in this report is the need for facilities to be relevant, meaningful, and attractive to the communities they are in, meeting the needs of current and future users.

A high-quality park is created by and for the community it serves, and that relationship is evident in its design, operations, programming, and permitting. Community members should see their interests and identities reflected in the space itself, the activities it hosts, and how it is managed, and their voices should help to guide decision-making affecting the park. This characteristic is vital to addressing forms of racial and ethnic discrimination seeking to discourage communities of color from using parks, such as the intentional omission of desired park features and programming including public restrooms, basketball courts, and picnic pavilions.

Evaluation of this concept should be rooted in strong understandings of community history, demographics, culture, preferences, and visions for the neighborhood, so inclusive engagement is a necessary component. This outreach should be approached as a step in a longer process of relationship-building rather than a single transaction.

Reaching people who have been underrepresented in decision-making processes for decades—including people of color, people who have low incomes, people who speak languages other than English, youth, seniors, and disabled individuals—may require creativity, persistence, and partnerships, often with community-based organizations that have established relationships with residents.

Community relevance can be evaluated by gathering feedback on park design and programming, observing the use of the space, and examining the engagement of local businesses and community-based organizations representing different demographic groups.

4 High-Quality Parks Are Relevant to the Communities They Serve

Chicano Park in San Diego features more than 100 Chicano murals, the largest assemblage in the world.

Does Park Design and Programming Reflect the Culture and Interests of Community Members?

To examine how parks resonate with the people who live and work nearby, park professionals are seeking feedback on whether physical spaces and current programming support feelings of belonging and cultural connection. Considerations can include park design and amenities, the names of the park and surrounding streets and neighborhoods, and the public art, statues, monuments, and symbols present. Staff are having open and honest conversations with residents about whether site layout, features, and upkeep facilitate the desired uses of space.

In **Wenatchee, Washington**, TPL and city representatives working to renovate the disinvested Kiwanis Methow Park in a heavily Latino community learned through a grassroots process that residents wanted the park to be organized around a "kiosko" pavilion, a central gathering place found in many Mexican and Central American urban plazas. Other parks and recreation departments are taking a fresh look at whether the monuments, historical markers, and other signs and symbols at their facilities are respectful or present offensive or biased views.

Park practitioners are also looking at whether a variety of culturally relevant programming is offered that is informed by real community preferences and not based on stereotypes. Staff of the **Oakland** parks and recreation department learned from conversations with Muslim facility users that many

Muslim women do not feel comfortable swimming with men because of cultural and religious norms, so they were unable to participate in open swim opportunities. In response, the department began offering women-only open swim sessions.

These conversations, which can be uncomfortable for some, can be aided by staff training and partnerships with community leaders who can broker discussions. As part of its broader focus on racial equity, the **Minneapolis** Parks and Recreation Board brought in experts from the local community to train their staff on how to talk about racism, the role of race in the city and the park system, and approaches to address longstanding disparities. The agency is working toward full participation of its year-round staff in the intensive program over the next several years.[16]

Many parks and recreation departments have realized how critical youth involvement is to high-quality parks that are relevant to the community. Children and teens are major users of parks but are often missing from the table when decisions are being made. They can also play important roles as spokespeople and data collectors, broaching conversations about local parks with their parents, grandparents, and other members of their families and communities.

The parks and recreation department in **Lewisville, Texas**, worked with a City Council–appointed Youth Action Council to examine design options for a potential park in a predominantly Latino neighborhood that lacks open space. They were charged with conducting outreach to their families and other neighborhood residents, holding a pop-up park to test ideas, and providing a recommendation to the City Council.

The **Memphis, Tennessee**, Divisions of Parks and Neighborhoods has held several Design Your Park labs, where children and teens build their own 3D park models out of paper, clay, miniature trees, miniature playground and athletic equipment, popsicle sticks, and other hands-on materials. Inspired by the success of these labs, the department is considering how to adapt the approach to adults.

High-Quality Parks Are Relevant to the Communities They Serve

© JONNU SINGLETON/SWA GROUP

Park amenities and programming should reflect the desires of the surrounding community.

CITY OF RALEIGH

Automated trail counters help parks department staffers evaluate how often a park or trail is used.

Does the Surrounding Community Actively Use the Park?

Another strong indicator of relevance is the amount and type of park use. Practitioners should look for robust use, user demographics that resemble those of the community—the broader community for larger parks and the community within a 10-minute walk for neighborhood-scale parks—and activity that matches the interests expressed by community members.

Various methods exist for counting park users, including in-person counts, automated trail counters that track the number of people passing a particular point, and online sources such as Google Places, which captures relative peaks of visitation based on cell phone locations but is limited in the detail and time frame covered. Other metrics of use include numbers of permits, program registrations, and drop-in visits.

Additional detail can be gleaned by observing park users' behavior. The Measure What Matters toolkit available from Reimagining the Civic Commons helps on-site observers count visitors by gender, age, race, and whether they are engaged in active recreation or interacting with others.[17] Similarly, the System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities[18] supports the observation of participants' gender, age, race, activity type, and the contextual characteristics of the space.

Do User Demographics Reflect the Community?

Regardless of the approach used, data collectors should make sure to time their observations to achieve an accurate representation of park use. Practitioners should be conscious of the fact that these methods only capture those who use parks, not those who do not. Data collected should be compared with community demographic information to understand which populations are not visiting the park and to reach out to those groups to understand why. Interviews and surveys can shed further light on whether users are coming from adjacent neighborhoods.

To understand users' and nonusers' perspectives on their parks, **San Francisco** Recreation and Parks worked with a consultant to interview people inside targeted parks and at the corner stores, laundromats, and other spots nearby. This approach yielded hundreds of survey responses from a critical audience— people who do not go to their nearest neighborhood park—about why they do not use the facilities and what would change that. In this way, staff learned that small, proactive fixes matter, and they are prioritizing tasks such as repainting curbs, repainting basketball courts, and putting in spring plantings.

High-Quality Parks Are Relevant to the Communities They Serve

ABBIGALE VANAMAN

The Memphis Heritage Trail sees engagement with community members and organizations as essential to the success of the trail.

RENEE ROSENSTEEL

Engaging community members in park cleanup days and other volunteer opportunities helps build a sense of ownership.

Are Community-Based Organizations Involved in Park Decisions and Operations?

The involvement of community-based organizations in park development and management is another indicator of relevance. In many cities, neighborhood associations, community development corporations, youth organizations, workforce training providers, churches, scout troops, local businesses, arts organizations, and park friends groups are playing active roles in park planning and design, maintenance and operations, and programming and activation.

The more engaged these entities are, the more likely the park is to be relevant to the community. This engagement can be in a volunteer or informal advisory capacity, but since many community-based organizations lack the staff resources to dedicate unpaid time, partnering through contracts or other paid arrangements can be a helpful strategy for city governments hoping to secure the support of these groups.

Staff capacity and resources devoted to community engagement can provide a critical boost, like the full-time community engagement officers at the **Memphis** and **Kansas City, Missouri**, parks and recreation departments. Along with providing input on park quality, residents can be invited to join family fun days, park cleanup and stewardship events, advisory boards, ambassador teams, and other activities that strengthen relationships with parks department staff and build a sense of ownership for the park.

Parks and recreation departments should map the community-based organizations that serve the areas around public parks—particularly parks that are under-resourced—and prioritize their engagement in order to fully reach and understand the needs of residents of adjacent communities.

5

High-Quality Parks Are Flexible and Adaptable to Changing Circumstances

JIM WATKINS

Boeddeker Park in San Francisco has seating adjacent to the playground.

KEY QUESTIONS

☐ **Does the park accommodate a variety of uses?**

☐ **Are park features adaptable to evolving circumstances?**

☐ **Does the park support or enhance environmental sustainability and resilience?**

It has always been important for parks to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of uses and activities and to serve people with a range of interests and abilities. But today, flexibility and adaptability are becoming even more important indicators of park quality.

With tight budgets, parks and recreation departments often cannot afford to make major changes to their facilities when disasters strike or situations change in the community. They need to design their parks to be resilient and responsive to new recreation trends, demographic shifts, natural disasters and climate change, public health crises, neighborhood development, economic shocks, and other unexpected issues that can arise.

Evaluating the diversity of uses parks support and the flexibility of their physical features can indicate how adaptable they are to changing circumstances.

Does the Park Accommodate a Variety of Uses?

Parks that support a variety of uses and activities are inherently more flexible. Through its Energized Public Spaces Plan, Montgomery Parks in **Montgomery County, Maryland**, evaluates how well its sites accommodate active recreation, contemplative recreation, and social gathering, with the goal of supporting multiple types of experiences and users, especially in urbanizing areas where the diversity of users is high.

San Francisco's Recreation and Parks department assesses its facilities with an eye to intergenerational needs. Instead of providing single amenities that cater to a limited slice of the population, like traditional playgrounds, the department is moving toward dense, multipurpose spaces, such as playgrounds with plentiful seating and adjacent gathering space for grandparents accompanying their grandchildren.

CIVITAS INC.

Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park in Tampa offers activities such as ping-pong and chess.

5 High-Quality Parks Are Flexible and Adaptable to Changing Circumstances

To create more flexible space, park practitioners can focus on programming and activation rather than permanent assets.

Amenities such as adult fitness equipment and dog parks can be added in underused spaces.

Are Park Features Adaptable to Evolving Circumstances?

Features that are mobile and not permanent, like movable furniture, increase the ability of sites to adapt to new purposes. Some parks and recreation departments are installing temporary, "pop-up" amenities in place of costly permanent infrastructure. The **San Francisco** Recreation and Parks department is adding natural playground features, outdoor gym equipment, and small dog areas to underused spaces in their sites. This approach promotes flexibility while reinvigorating existing parks, serving more people, and providing a less expensive and faster alternative to acquiring new land or undertaking big renovations.

Providing flexible indoor and outdoor spaces that are not designed for single, set uses also allows parks to accommodate new activities as needs arise. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, parks are hosting open-air fitness classes, mobile clinics offering COVID-19 testing and other health care services, food distribution, and virtual learning for schoolchildren. On a more informal basis, they are serving as outdoor living rooms where people can gather and recreate while distancing physically. Parks with plentiful open space, grassy play areas, mobile seating, and space to play lower-contact sports are meeting those needs.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-QUALITY PARKS

5 | High-Quality Parks Are Flexible and Adaptable to Changing Circumstances

FERNANDO AGUILA

FERNANDO AGUILA

Locally sourced eucalyptus (above) and redwood logs (right) at Jean Sweeney Open Space Park in Alameda, California, provide opportunities for nature play.

The use of natural materials in parks can create interesting experiences, provide equitable access to nature, and improve resilience in urban areas. According to Cities Connecting Children to Nature, a joint initiative of the National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network, playing in nature can make children healthier, happier, and smarter and can improve social skills and academic success.

Nature play spaces that facilitate access to nature for children are emerging in cities across the country, including in public parks. These spaces include natural features as playscapes, such as boulders, logs, stumps, and sticks, which can be sourced locally from park and forestry departments. Nature play spaces that include small ponds and streams also provide wildlife habitats and can help with stormwater management and improved resilience.

To be prepared for future changes, some park practitioners are focusing on activation over investment in fixed assets. University City District in **Philadelphia** calls its approach "iterative placemaking," starting with planters, tables, landscaping, and programming to draw people, and modifying spaces and offerings as circumstances evolve and they learn what works.

High-Quality Parks Are Flexible and Adaptable to Changing Circumstances

G. LYON PHOTOGRAPHY

G. LYON PHOTOGRAPHY

Buffalo Bayou Park in Houston is built in a floodway; during major rain events, much of the park is submerged.

Does the Park Enhance Environmental Sustainability and Resilience?

Attributes that allow parks and the surrounding communities to weather and bounce back from natural disasters and climate change are also important, particularly in areas that are prone to flooding, severe storms, extreme heat, drought, and other disaster and climate impacts. For instance, green infrastructure absorbs stormwater while increasing park attractiveness, augmenting recreational opportunities, protecting water quality, providing wildlife habitat, and reducing maintenance. With an increase in extreme weather events across the country, parks departments must ensure that parks provide maximum benefit to people and the environment.

Buffalo Bayou Park in **Houston** was designed and built to manage floodwater and debris, protecting surrounding neighborhoods and minimizing damage to the park itself. Wetlands, tributaries, and other open spaces were restored to increase flood capacity. Structures were sited above the path of potential floods, and lower-lying park elements were designed to be submerged, requiring cleanup, rather than reconstruction, after the inevitable floods.[19]

Highlights from the Field: Promising Practices for Evaluating Park Quality

Parks and recreation departments across the country, in cities of all sizes, are using various approaches to evaluate how well their parks and park systems exemplify the characteristics of high quality described in this report. This chapter provides a deeper look at park quality evaluation practices being applied in five U.S. cities of various sizes and geographies. Each example is labeled with the characteristics of quality being evaluated.

A common theme underlies most of these case studies: their park quality evaluations rely on robust community engagement and data collection. The information and perspectives gathered are driving decisions that are improving the quality of these cities' parks and the experiences of residents.

These promising practices can inspire other cities across the country as they assess how well their parks and park systems perform on the characteristics of park quality presented in this framework.

East Norbeck Local Park in Silver Spring, Maryland, features walking paths around its playgrounds.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-QUALITY PARKS

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Developing a park rating system to assess maintenance and condition

RELATED PARK QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS

1 2 3 4 5

GRAND RAPIDS PARKS BY THE NUMBERS

CITY POPULATION:
201,000[20]

NUMBER OF ACRES MAINTAINED:
1,548 (1,640 including Indian Trails Golf Course)

NUMBER OF PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES:
76

LARGEST PARK:
Aman Park, 339 acres

SMALLEST PARK:
Hosken Park, 0.06 acres

https://www.grandrapidsmi.gov/Government/
Departments/Parks-and-Recreation

https://www.grandrapidsmi.gov/Residents/My-
Neighborhood/Parks-Directory

The splash pad at Mary Waters Park is rated by Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation as being in "excellent condition."

Grand Rapids has focused on strong maintenance as a foundation for improving park quality. The Parks and Recreation Department created maintenance level-of-service (LOS) standards, which will be rolled into a new park rating system that will also assess the condition of capital facilities and be used to direct the funding from a 2019 citywide bond initiative.

Like many parks departments with tight budgets and limited staff capacity, Grand Rapids Parks and Recreation was looking for ways to improve efficiency while elevating the quality of its parks and addressing residents' needs. The department settled on a set of maintenance LOS standards to gauge the impact of its day-to-day maintenance efforts.

The standards define four levels of service from A to D and specify the frequency with which tasks must be performed for each level, including mowing, litter control, facility cleaning, the clearing and care of surfaces, and the repair of assets. For example, for LOS A, which applies to high-traffic "showpiece facilities," litter must be picked up a minimum of once per day, seven days per week; for LOS D, known as reactive management, litter is picked up once per week or less.

Staff use these standards to track the current levels of service in their parks based on data from their inspection program, as well as to set goals for the future. For instance, about 24 percent of parks are currently in "comprehensive stewardship" (LOS B), and the city would like to move to 60 percent. The department has conducted a gap analysis of the staffing and resources needed to move from actual to desired levels of service. These data helped make the case for additional operations funding, and in 2019, a new millage was passed with 70 percent of the vote that included funding for maintenance.

Participants at a community meeting in March 2019 brainstormed what "high quality" means for Grand Rapids parks.

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

The maintenance LOS assessment will provide baseline information for the park rating program that the department will roll out with the new millage and use to direct the funding. These ratings will combine the levels of service for each park with a condition assessment of its capital facilities. This facilities evaluation will score the asset categories in each park, including athletic fields, courts, playgrounds, picnic shelters, pools, and lighting, from A to D. Parks will be rated on an annual basis, and the results will help the department track and report how the millage funding is affecting quality.

Along with these evaluations, the department has gathered information on park quality through community engagement, holding meetings, conducting surveys, and inviting residents to "walk their parks" with agency leadership. Some of this took place as part of parks master planning efforts and influenced spending on capital projects. Staff have focused conversations on how parks can amplify community culture, create an authentic sense of place, and activate parks as community centers by incorporating art, adding gathering spaces, and integrating unique natural features and green infrastructure. In addition,

the parks advisory board hosted a community meeting to explore what "high-quality" means in Grand Rapids. At this family-friendly event, participants enjoyed a meal and visited various activity stations to brainstorm about different elements of park quality.

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

Addressing park inequity through new engagement strategies

RELATED PARK QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS

1 2 **3** **4** 5

KANSAS CITY PARKS BY THE NUMBERS

CITY POPULATION:
495,000[21]

NUMBER OF ACRES MAINTAINED:
12,242

NUMBER OF PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES:
221

LARGEST PARK:
Swope Park, 1,805 acres

SMALLEST PARK:
Murray Davis Park, 0.09 acres

https://kcparks.org/

The Grove Park is one of 38 Kansas City parks that is part of the city's Quality of Life Investment District project.

Kansas City is working to address a history of racist land use practices by renewing its approach to community engagement, reaching more residents and gaining a deeper understanding of their needs and interests.

With a community engagement officer on staff and a renewed focus on addressing disparities in health and racial equity, the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department (KC Parks) has been taking a fresh look at its outreach toolbox. The department is shifting away from traditional public meetings and toward more interactive and organic events that foster meaningful conversations.

KC Parks has found particular success with its series of community-building barbecues, called Neighborhood Connects, which bring music, games, and information on city services to neighborhood parks. These events are also opportunities to activate park spaces and see firsthand what people like. This kind of feedback is invaluable since staff know if a park passes inspection but do not always know what makes people want to be there.

KC Parks is also harnessing community engagement to solve problems, using the "world café" model. This collaborative approach puts participants together in small groups to work through discussion questions. Staff have found that this method results in broader representation and more honest feedback than conventional meetings, and they have used the ideas generated to inform programming decisions, renovation projects, and master planning. In addition, the department has created a volunteer ambassador program, whose participants serve as sounding boards for new ideas as well as work on the ground in parks to support safety and cleanliness.

KC Parks has seen success using the "world café" model for community engagement.

"Happy or Not" kiosks allow visitors to the Kansas City's recreation centers to quickly evaluate their experiences.

The department also collects input on its parks and programming using various surveys, including evaluations of specific programs, an annual survey of the entire contact database, and a citizen satisfaction survey of 6,000 randomly selected residents administered by the City Manager's office, which includes a few parks-related questions. Although the annual KC Parks survey, distributed via email, only covers users, the citywide survey includes users and nonusers.

The department also sets up "Happy or Not" kiosks in recreation centers, where visitors can stop and answer a few questions about their experience that day on topics such as the helpfulness of the staff and the cleanliness of the facility. In addition, KC Parks uses "secret shoppers" to rate customer service at their sites.

This range of outreach tools allows KC Parks to get input from a broad set of community members, provides a multidimensional picture of user experience, and enables the department to go beyond one-size-fits-all models to provide high-quality, welcoming, and appealing parks across the city. In combination with data from its Safe Healthy Attractive Public Environments (S.H.A.P.E.) inspection program, which rates parks across the categories of cleanliness, structural, and landscape, the robust community feedback helps the department better serve the six city zip codes with very high poverty and low life expectancy that are

the focus of the department's Life X program. These six zip codes and the 38 parks within them are also the focus of the department's Quality of Life Investment District (QLID) project, which created a parks maintenance district to make physical improvements to the parks. Through QLID, KC Parks has partnered with the Center for Neighborhoods at the University of Missouri–Kansas City to train, engage, and build capacity with residents around local leadership for parks and capital improvements, creating new opportunities for resident-led advocacy and planning.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

A community-focused initiative to improve park equity

RELATED PARK QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

NEW YORK CITY PARKS BY THE NUMBERS

CITY POPULATION:
8,300,000[22]

NUMBER OF ACRES MAINTAINED:
29,000

NUMBER OF PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES:
1,700

LARGEST PARK:
Pelham Bay Park, Bronx, 2,765 acres

SMALLEST PARK:
Septuagesimo Uno, Manhattan, 0.04 acres[23]

https://www.nycgovparks.org/

NYC Parks makes a variety of capital investments in its parks annually. Seth Low Playground in Brooklyn was upgraded with a new synthetic turf field in 2017.

Through a parks and recreation department initiative that systematically assesses capital investments, New York City is focusing on improving the quality of parks located in dense, growing, low-income communities but that have not received significant investment.

NYC Parks is the steward of one of the largest urban park systems in the country, but like so many other parks agencies, the department has limited resources and faces tough choices about how to spend them.

In 2014, the department took a new look at how capital investments had been allocated over the past 20 years. The data revealed that too often, low-income, dense, and growing communities had received little parks investment and had neighborhood parks in need of significant repair and upgrade.

To address this underinvestment in parks and make sure that all New Yorkers could benefit from urban parks, NYC Parks developed the Community Parks Initiative (CPI), which is guiding investment of $318 million to reimagine 67 parks in high-need areas.

To make the case for this new approach and the dollars to support it, CPI had to be rooted in the numbers. NYC Parks staff started by identifying parks that were underinvested, defined as having received less than $250,000 in capital funding over 20 years. More than 200 city parks fit this description. To further focus the list, the department reviewed inspection data, dug into maintenance reports, consulted with field staff, and conducted site visits and on-the-ground surveys.

In parallel, staff examined demographic data, including population density, recent population growth, and percentage of residents living below the poverty line. This process resulted in a list of 67 sites with the greatest need and potential for transformation through CPI.
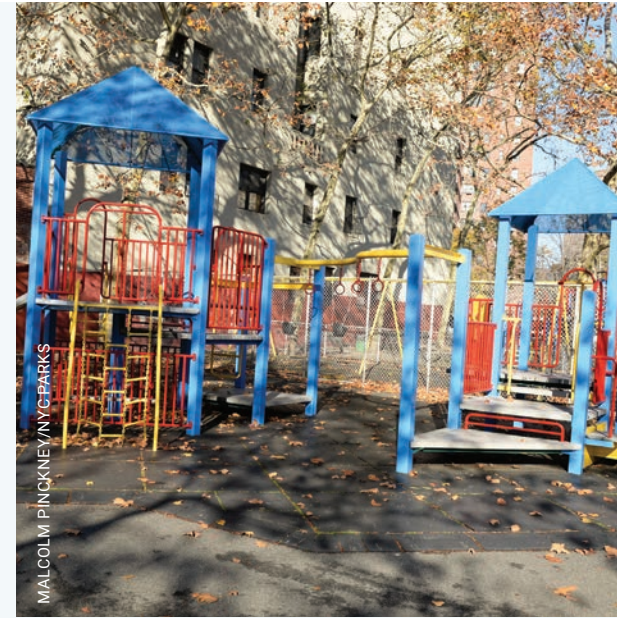
Before (right) and after views of Sol Lain Playground, a schoolyard serving over 200 public school students during the day and open to the public during nonschool hours. Renovated with $3.6 million, it now boasts new play equipment, a spray shower, basketball courts, and a track.

The scope of projects in these 67 sites is based on community engagement and goes beyond simple repair to holistically redesign the parks in ways that transform recreational opportunities, increase park access, and promote a sense of place. The New York City Department of Environmental Protection committed additional funding to build green infrastructure elements into CPI projects, thereby reducing stormwater runoff.

NYC Parks recognizes that capital investment is not the only ingredient of high-quality parks. CPI has also increased maintenance staffing and extended recreational programming and park activation. Furthermore, NYC Parks worked with its nonprofit affiliate Partnerships for Parks to hire outreach coordinators to cultivate local park stewards. Community-led park groups have been developed at many of the 67 renovation sites.

With its data-driven, equity-based, and holistic approach, the Community Parks Initiative has been able to prioritize investment dollars to improve the quality of parks in neighborhoods that need it most.[24]

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

Pairing broad-based engagement and data collection to prioritize park quality improvements

RELATED PARK QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS

1 2 **3** **4** 5

PITTSBURGH PARKS BY THE NUMBERS

CITY POPULATION:
300,000[25]

NUMBER OF ACRES MAINTAINED:
3,647

NUMBER OF PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES:
165

LARGEST PARK:
Frick Park, 644 acres

SMALLEST PARK:
Shalane's Play Yard Park, 0.1 acres

https://pittsburghpa.gov/citiparks
https://pittsburghparks.org/

Pittsburgh's Parks Listening Tour involved hundreds of community meetings and conversations, gathering input from more than 10,000 people.

Pittsburgh launched a comprehensive campaign driven by data and community engagement to elevate park investment needs and prioritize improvements in quality.

The beauty, size, and reach of Pittsburgh's park system make it an important part of every neighborhood, but aging facilities and dwindling resources for upkeep have resulted in deteriorating conditions at many sites. The system needs more than $400 million just to fix existing park amenities, modernize recreation facilities, and implement existing park master plans, and it faces an annual maintenance funding shortfall of more than $13 million.

To address this incredible need, the city of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy launched the Restoring Pittsburgh Parks campaign in 2018. Their long-term goal is to bring all parks in all city neighborhoods up to a high level of quality, which they have defined as restoring existing parks and open spaces that have fallen into disrepair; modernizing facilities to meet contemporary preferences, standards, and changing demographics; and providing the resources to maintain all assets in a timely manner.[26,27]

The Restoring Pittsburgh Parks campaign was grounded in the Parks Listening Tour, which involved hundreds of community meetings and informal conversations and gathered input from 3,000 completed surveys. Staff shared information at the meetings of a wide variety of organizations, from neighborhood groups and homeless service providers to veterans' groups and LGBTQ organizations. They also knocked on doors, set up tables at community events and venues such as the library and the food bank, and more—anything they could do to get a broad swath of perspectives.

Information gathered during the Parks Listening Tour and other data collection informed a new parks plan, which provides an equitable investment strategy for maintenance, programming, and capital projects.

Residents indicated that park maintenance is their number-one priority, followed by rehabilitation, capital investments, and programming. The expenditures of proposed new funds will be weighted based directly on this feedback.

In addition, the city and conservancy developed a data-driven methodology to inform capital investments, ranking each park for investment priority based on its Community Need Score and Site Need Score. The Community Need Scores were derived from indicators of poverty, populations of color, youth and senior populations, vacancy and violent crime, and health for 10-minute walksheds of the parks.[28]

The Site Need Scores were based on assessments of site condition and investment need. Conservancy staff convened a group of park foremen, landscape and facility maintenance crews, park supervisors, and department management around a table to discuss each park in detail. Rather than using a specific checklist, the team had organic conversations about recent investments, maintenance practices, and problems, classifying each site's condition as excellent, good, fair, or poor.[29]

Based on the listening tour and data collection, the conservancy and the city created a new parks plan that set goals for improved safety, equitable funding and access, and upgraded maintenance and facilities for all existing city parks. Voters passed a parks tax referendum in 2019 that is expected to generate $10 million annually and provide the baseline funding to implement the plan. When the tax is implemented, the city and the conservancy will build on Restoring Pittsburgh Parks by creating a more detailed strategy for allocating the dollars.

RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

Initiatives to strengthen park access and level of maintenance

RELATED PARK QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS

1 **2** 3 4 5

RALEIGH PARKS BY THE NUMBERS

CITY POPULATION:
474,000[30]

NUMBER OF ACRES MAINTAINED:
10,018

NUMBER OF PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES:
199

LARGEST PARK:
Dorothea Dix Park, 308 acres

SMALLEST PARK:
Raymond G. Lanier Park, 0.05 acres

https://raleighnc.gov/parks-recreation-and-cultural-resources

A new sidewalk and crosswalk were installed at Lake Lynn Park to create direct pedestrian access to the park from an adjacent neighborhood. Before this installation, neighborhood residents had to walk along a busy road with no sidewalk—or drive—to reach the park.

Raleigh is focusing on evaluating access and maintenance in order to bring parks across the city up to a high level of quality.

The vision of Raleigh's parks, recreation, and cultural resources department is to "bring people to parks and parks to people," so it is only fitting that they launched a Neighborhood and Community Connections Program funded by a bond referendum to improve access to parks. The program focuses on strengthening walkable access to existing parks to support health equity, a major priority for the department.

Neighborhood and Community Connections uses data to indicate how well each census block in the city is served by the park system. Staff look at the distance to the closest park, the distance to the closest greenway trail, the number of park acres nearby, and the number and variety of park amenities—drawn from an inventory of 150 features such as rinks, benches, and playgrounds; swimming pools; and athletic fields—within close proximity.

Where improvement is needed, the department is opening up new park access points to enable more people to walk to parks. Staff can project the number of additional people who will be served by each park with these changes. This was their first foray into using data to make decisions. Using geospatial data and modeling park access in this way has helped identify more efficient, cost-effective interventions that improve access in areas where it is not necessarily feasible to acquire land for new park development. Seeing the results has spurred the department to shift away from designing parks with single access points and toward porous sites that are interconnected with the neighborhood and that offer multimodal transportation options.[31]

As they conducted their analysis of access, staff noticed that parts of the city seemed well served, but in reality only had very small parks with few amenities or parks that were not in good physical condition. These factors prompted staff to develop a set of maintenance standards and a parks scorecard to delineate the desired level of maintenance for each park and assess conditions on the ground. The standards provide

CITY OF RALEIGH

At Laurel Hills Park, conversion of a traffic lane into a dedicated bike and pedestrian lane created a new access point where previously no sidewalks existed. The new one-way circulation pattern for vehicles doubles as a traffic-calming and speed-reduction measure.

The parks department uses data to analyze needed improvements to parks facilities and access points. A new project at Peach Road Park will provide direct pedestrian access for an adjacent neighborhood previously cut off from the park, putting about 1,000 additional households within a 10-minute walk of the park.

detailed definitions of levels of service from one to six for all maintenance tasks. These definitions lay out expectations for how the tasks should be performed, the outcomes of the work, and the frequencies of service. The levels of service for each park are mapped using GIS.

To evaluate how their parks measure up to the standards, the department uses the parks scorecard. To create it, staff had to reach consensus on acceptable and unacceptable conditions for each aspect of maintenance, which they did by taking and discussing photos from their facilities. Staff use this visual tool to score each park.

The department overlays the park access scores, park maintenance scores, and its Community Vulnerability Index to target census blocks with vulnerable populations, parks in need of improvement, and low park access. The results of this process inform maintenance practices, bond requests, and land acquisitions and support the department's goal to serve all residents equitably. For example, if a small neighborhood park consistently receives a low score, staff might adjust its level of service so they can spend more time there than they otherwise would. The evaluation process also flags problems that present immediate safety issues and helps prioritize small capital improvements for plans and budgets, such as pavement and turf issues that can be hard to rank in a big urban park system.[32]

As a next step, the department would like to work with its parks advisory board to add a more subjective layer to the park quality assessment. As part of their work plans, each of the 15 parks advisory board members would be assigned a number of park sites to visit and evaluate over the course of a year. This survey would offer a different perspective on the perceived quality and user experience within each park and could capture some of the more intangible elements of quality, including feelings of safety, accessibility, or the draw of the experiences offered. Eventually, this could be adapted into a park user survey that would provide a measure of park quality based on the responses of citizens and volunteers, in addition to the maintenance surveys currently used by city staff.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-QUALITY PARKS

Toward Ensuring High-Quality Parks for Everyone

Ongoing efforts to evaluate the quality of parks in cities around the country make one thing clear: to make a meaningful difference in park quality and residents' lives, equity considerations must be front and center.

To meet the goal that so many cities have set through the 10 Minute Walk movement—that all residents live within a 10-minute walk of a high-quality park or green space—parks in underserved neighborhoods need to be prioritized for investment, in partnership with community residents. The framework in this report can help target, inform, and make the case for that investment.

The playground at Domino Park in Brooklyn features reclaimed materials from the original sugar factory and an inventive design that resembles part of the factory.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-QUALITY PARKS

To address longstanding disparities and maximize their impact on parks, park systems, and peoples' lives, park quality evaluations should be conducted in collaboration with partners and stakeholders, and results should be aggregated across an entire system and used to implement equitable changes to parks. The following three recommendations, related to how to best leverage opportunities to evaluate park quality in ways that positively affect communities, emerged as best practices from this research.

WORK COLLABORATIVELY TO EVALUATE AND CREATE HIGH-QUALITY PARKS

Evaluating and supporting high-quality parks across communities requires partnership among public and private park developers and managers. What community members identify as a park might not be managed by the local parks department; it might be a schoolyard, a regional nature area, or a privately owned but publicly accessible green space. Collaborating with other open-space owners and operators ensures consistent quality across a community's entire public realm.

Parks departments can lay solid foundations by setting clear definitions of quality, collaboratively developing evaluation standards and tools, engaging partners in the assessment process, and building capacity to interpret and implement results. For example, **San Francisco** Recreation and Parks works closely with other landowning agencies and the planning department to define standards for high-quality city-owned parks and green space.

Tapping into partners' unique capacities strengthens efforts to improve quality. For instance, friends of the park and other nonprofit organizations can be strongly connected with the community and might be leading complementary volunteer, fundraising, and public engagement programs.

Private-sector partners are supporting high-quality parks in their roles as park developers, owners, operators, and funders. They have the ability to attract capital and interest in offering appealing amenities that increase the value of their developments. Becoming involved in park development and management can give them some control over the long-term quality of park spaces.

Efforts can include collaboration with public agencies to set design and operating guidelines, conduct community outreach, develop site plans, and identify funding sources. There are many different models for these partnerships, but the most successful ones clearly define "high quality" from the start and agree on how to achieve and sustain it over time.

Friends of Grand Rapids Parks, founded in 2008, works alongside the city to coordinate volunteers and educate community members on the benefits of parks.

The Midtown Redevelopment Authority in Houston led the transformation of a vacant parcel into Midtown Park, a three-acre public park that includes a great lawn, wetland stream and trail, and playground.

PUT PARK QUALITY EVALUATIONS IN CONTEXT

As park professionals evaluate the quality of their facilities, they must situate the evaluation in the context of the broader park system and community.

Measuring the quality of all parks across a system is vital to understanding disparities between neighborhoods and effectively targeting resources. Citywide park-by-park analyses can reveal differences in park size, maintenance outcomes, the availability and condition of amenities, use, and other indicators that should influence resource allocation among sites.

When formulating interventions, park practitioners should also consider the neighborhood scale and whether deficiencies in individual parks are being addressed by other parks nearby or elsewhere in the community. Taken collectively, high-quality park systems should exemplify all the characteristics in this report, meeting residents' needs with a range of facilities and features. For example, if a neighborhood park offers only active recreation, but adjacent ones provide opportunities for social gathering and contemplative recreation, renovations of the neighborhood park may not need to expand available activities.

If park systems cannot meet standards of quality, even with upgrades—for instance, if they are overcrowded or provide inadequate green infrastructure to address climate change impacts—park professionals may need to explore the development of new parks or the integration of green infrastructure into other neighborhood spaces.

Practitioners are conducting additional layers of data analysis to place parks in the context of the vulnerabilities and needs of the surrounding community. Common metrics include the

The Denver Department of Parks and Recreation created a Neighborhood Equity Index to help identify to which parks to direct capital investment.

percentages of the population of color, with low incomes, or overweight or obese; population density; projected population growth; and housing vacancy rates.

Park professionals are also examining environmental factors such as tree canopy, heat island effects, and vulnerability to extreme weather. Other neighborhood-level indicators include the existence of sidewalks or bike lanes that allow people to safely access parks and the distance to other nearby parks and public spaces in the system.

These evaluations are being used to identify the neighborhoods that face disparities when it comes to health, environmental quality, natural disaster and climate resilience, economic opportunity, and public and private investment and to prioritize them for capital and operations spending.

In many cities, this approach underlies a major shift in policymaking—away from distributing resources equally across neighborhoods and toward allocating them equitably, to address the enormous unmet needs in communities of color and low-income communities that have been underserved for decades.

In **Denver**, for example, the Department of Parks and Recreation created a Neighborhood Equity Index map to show which areas of the city are most in need of park investment. The analysis was based on eight indicators including park access, acreage, and investment as well as socioeconomic variables such as the percentages of the population that are of color, youth, and overweight or obese. This index, which is available to the public, will influence capital planning and budgeting.

EVAN SEMON, DENVER PARKS & RECREATION

In response to data collected by the Memphis Division of Parks and Neighborhoods, the city has installed new benches and trash cans in parks in one of its council districts.

The Rings Fountain on the Greenway in Boston has been called "the most unconditionally happy spot in all of Boston" by the *Boston Globe*.

APPLY PARK QUALITY EVALUATIONS TO MAKE REAL CHANGE ON THE GROUND

Parks departments are using quality evaluations to shape their decisions on park development, design, renovation, maintenance, and programming. Depending on the type of analysis conducted, the scores or rankings produced might identify neighborhoods or parks where investment is needed, highlight red flags to be addressed immediately, or inform specific decisions in individual parks.

While park quality evaluations often influence longer-term budgeting and capital planning, they can also be applied right away. For instance, the **Memphis** Division of Parks and Neighborhoods was able to quickly pull data from its quality evaluation to report to the City Council the number of trash cans rated as "poor" and request the funding to replace them. Other departments have made rapid adjustments to their maintenance practices to devote more attention where quality falls short.

In addition, park quality evaluations can equip city agencies to seek out private- and nonprofit-sector partners to address gaps that they themselves cannot quickly fill. The **Grand Rapids** parks department is creating a sponsorship program through which private entities will support programs, events, and capital projects that are needed to elevate park quality. In Texas, **Lewisville** Parks and Recreation is seeking funding partners and volunteers to help meet maintenance standards and enable the city to focus its limited resources on neighborhoods with less private-sector capacity.

Everyone deserves access to a high-quality park. Conducting park quality evaluations in a comprehensive way, using the five characteristics of quality as a framework for the evaluation, helps ensure an equitable distribution of parks that are in excellent condition and accessible, provide positive experiences, and are relevant to the surrounding community and adaptable in the face of change.

Park Quality Evaluation Tools

Park Quality Evaluation Tools	1 High-quality parks are in excellent physical condition	2 High-quality parks are accessible to all potential users	3 High-quality parks provide positive experiences for park users	4 High-quality parks are relevant to the communities they serve	5 High-quality parks are flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances
STANDARDIZED TOOLS					
Community Park Audit Tool (CPAT) https://activelivingresearch.org/community-park-audit-tool-cpat	X	X	X		
Bridging the Gap, Comprehensive Park Observation Form, 2012 http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/vnb0e7/BTGCOMP_Park_2012.pdf	X	X	X		
BRAT-Direct Observation https://publichealth.lsuhsc.edu/Faculty_Pages/rung/index_files/page0004.htm	X	X	X		
Environmental Assessment of Public Recreation Spaces Tool https://activelivingresearch.org/environmental-assessment-public-recreation-spaces-eaprs-tool	X	X	X		
System for Observing Play and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) https://activelivingresearch.org/soparc-system-observing-play-and-recreation-communities				X	
Reimagining the Civic Commons Measure What Matters Toolkit https://civiccommons.us/2019/01/measure-matters-diy-toolkit/		X	X	X	X
LOCALLY DEVELOPED TOOLS					
Kansas City Parks S.H.A.P.E Program https://kcparks.org/s-h-a-p-e-program/#:~:text=Program,-S.H.A.P.E.%20Mission&text=The%20S.H.A.P.E.,and%20Parks%20and%20Recreation%20facilities	X				
New York City Parks Inspection Program https://www.nycgovparks.org/park-features/parks-inspection-program/parks-inspection-ratings-determinations	X				
Restore Pittsburgh Parks Park Rankings https://pittsburghparks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Park-Ranking-Sheet-2019-07-31.pdf **Data Sources** https://pittsburghparks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Data-Sources-for-Park-Walkshed-Information-FINAL-07122019-HS-1.pdf	X				X
Montgomery Parks Energized Public Spaces Plan Interactive Story Map http://bit.ly/EnergizedPublicSpaces			X		X

To evaluate park quality against certain characteristics, cities can use a combination of existing standardized evaluation tools or adapt tools that have been created by other municipalities. Parks departments and other organizations or groups involved in evaluating park quality can use these tools as is or use them to inform development of a more comprehensive rubric or checklist, depending on local need.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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