ULI Austin

AUSTIN ADOPT-A-PARK PROGRAM

Technical Assistance Panel Report | ULI Cohort for Park Equity
January 17-19, 2023

This report is sponsored by:

Austin Parks Foundation
City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department

ON THE COVER: Colony Park District Park

About the Urban Land Institute

The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 45,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute's mission of 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 region, with members in 81 countries.

ULI's extraordinary impact on land use decision-making is based on its members' sharing expertise on a variety of factors affecting the built environment, including urbanization, demographic and population changes, new economic drivers, technology advancements, and environmental concerns. Peer-to-peer learning is achieved through the knowledge shared by members at thousands of convenings each year that reinforce ULI's position as a global authority on land use and real estate. Drawing on its members' work, the Institute recognizes and shares best practices in urban design and development for the benefit of communities around the globe.

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

About ULI Austin

The ULI Austin District Council brings together real estate professionals, civic leaders, and the Austin community for educational programs, initiatives affecting the region, and networking events, all in the pursuit of advancing responsible and equitable land use throughout the region. With over 1,200 members locally, ULI Austin provides a unique venue to convene and share best practices in the region. ULI Austin believes everyone needs to be at the table when the region's future is at stake, so ULI serves the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines—from architects to developers, CEOs to analysts, builders, property owners, investors, public officials, and everyone in between. Using this interdisciplinary approach, ULI examines land use issues, impartially reports findings, and convenes forums to find solutions.

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

ULI Austin District Council Leadership

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ULI Advisory Services: National and Global Programs

Since 1947, the ULI Advisory Services program has assembled well over 700 ULI-member teams to help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for complex land use challenges. A wide variety of public, private, and nonprofit organizations have contracted for ULI's advisory services. National and international panelists are specifically recruited to form a panel of independent and objective volunteer ULI member experts with the skills needed to address the identified land use challenge. The program is designed to help break through obstacles, jump-start conversations, and solve tough challenges that need an outside, independent perspective. Three- and five-day engagements are offered to ensure thorough consideration of relevant topics.

Learn more at americas.uli.org/programs/advisory-services.

Technical Assistance Panels (TAP)

Urban Land Institute (ULI) harnesses its members' technical expertise to help communities solve complex land use, development, and redevelopment challenges. Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) provide expert, multidisciplinary, unbiased advice to local governments, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations facing complex land use and real estate issues in the Austin region. Drawing from its professional membership base, ULI Austin offers objective and responsible guidance on various land use and real estate issues ranging from site-specific projects to public policy questions. The sponsoring organization is responsible for gathering the background information necessary to understand the project and present it to the panel. TAP panelists spend two days interviewing stakeholders, evaluating the challenges, and ultimately arriving at a set of recommendations that the sponsoring organization can use to guide development going forward.

ULI Cohort for Park Equity

In 2022, ULI's Building Healthy Places Initiative launched the District Council Cohort for Park Equity (CPE) program which is designed to help communities advance equitable action on park and open spaces over a 12-month period. Five ULI District Councils across the United States were selected to participate: Charlotte, Dallas-Fort Worth, New York, San Antonio, and Austin. Cohort participants, including District Council staff, members, and community partners, focus their work on a Technical Assistance Program (TAP) topic that advances equitable access to a park or open space in their community. In the second phase of the program, District Councils implement recommendations identified during the TAP process. ULI is grateful for the support of The JPB Foundation.

ULI Advisory Services identify creative, practical solutions for complex land use and development challenges.

TAP Sponsors and ULI Participants

Sponsors

Austin Parks Foundation
City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department

Panel Members

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ULI

Panelists touring Colony Park

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PANEL SCOPE & PROCESS

Panel Scope

Sponsored by Austin Parks Foundation (APF), in partnership with City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD), ULI Austin's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) was convened as part of the ULI Cohort for Park Equity to examine equity issues as they relate to the Adopt-A-Park program, which is co-managed by APF and PARD. ULI Austin convened a group of expert panelists to recommend solutions relating to inclusivity and equity, with the goal of increasing participation and representation among neighborhoods that have received a historic lack of investment in their parks.

The ULI panel was charged with identifying barriers to participation in the program and corresponding funding, project implementation programs, and programing/activation for low-income communities and communities of color. The work included developing recommendations to overcome and remove barriers to participation through program modifications and the identification of metrics to measure success over the short- and long-term. In 2023, there will be opportunities to apply for funding through ULI to implement the recommendations.

Guiding Questions

- Does the program need to be restructured? How should the City of Austin and APF formalize their agreement to make the program more official?

- How can it be more widely known that the program exists (reach more people) and how can this program increase the quantity and quality of public engagement? Efficiency for small staff and low funds needs to be considered.

- How could it be easier to participate in the program and activate the benefits of the program (including

park activation)? This includes process considerations such as identifying areas that are cumbersome.

- How can the program help build sustainable groups rather than the burden landing on one person or organization?

- How can the program include smaller projects and programing?

- What measures could help ensure the benefits of the program are serving the community where the park is located long term (including anti-displacement considerations)? How should this be quantified?

Panel Process

The ULI Austin District Council assembled a group of accomplished ULI professionals for their subject matter expertise in urban planning and design, community engagement, and park program management and development to provide objective, volunteer recommendations to address the challenges facing the Adopt-A-Park program.

Prior to convening, TAP members received information on Austin Parks Foundation (APF), the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD), the Adopt-A-Park program, Community PARKnerships, and other supporting programs. Orientation on day one included an introductory discussion with APF and PARD members on the scope of work and the issues they see with respect to the Adopt-A-Park program followed by a tour of several parks in the targeted districts, including Parque Zaragoza, Colony Park District Park, and Patterson Neighborhood Park. Over the course of the two-day workshop, panelists conducted stakeholder interviews with seven city representatives (not including the sponsors), 16 representatives of intersecting organizations and community groups, 12 park adopters and four park planners.

Two-day panelist workshop

Day two included a follow-up discussion with APF and PARD members. The panel identified critical issues facing the Adopt-A-Park program, potential opportunities for improvement, and ways to further break down barriers to program participation for low-income residents and communities of color. Panelists formalized their observations and presented their findings and initial recommendations at the day's end to representatives from APF and PARD.

Outdoor Learning Space at Parque Zaragoza

Skate Ramps at Patterson Neighborhood Park

GaGa Ball Pit at Parque Zaragoza

Exercise Equipment at Colony Park

2022 César Chávez March at Parque Zaragoza

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Austin is a city known for its parks, trails, and green space. It also has been a city historically divided along racial lines with lasting effects that exist today in housing, poverty, homelessness, health care, and education. East Austin, which was where Austinites of color principally had to live, has suffered from neglect and disinvestment, including its parks, compared to other parts of the city. Partially in response to this history and the city's ongoing, rapid demographic and economic changes, the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) implemented an Equity Action Plan in 2021 to further equity for staff and the public.

Urban Land Institute (ULI) selected Austin as one of five cities to participate in its District Council Cohort for Park Equity program, which is designed to help communities advance equitable access to parks and open spaces. ULI Austin assembled a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to analyze the City of Austin's Adopt-A-Park program and offer recommendations to improve the program and remove barriers to participation among people of color.

Co-managed by Austin Parks Foundation (APF) and PARD, the Adopt-A-Park program is one of several programs that encourage volunteers to work with the city to improve and help maintain pocket, neighborhood, school and district parks included in Austin's large park system. The goal of the program is to build community pride and ownership around every local park throughout Austin. Park adopters serve as key community representatives for their park by organizing a community-based volunteer group and making an ongoing commitment to improving their park. They encourage engagement with neighbors and park users, and ultimately bring greater innovation and creativity to the park system.

Several themes emerged from the TAP's stakeholder interviews identifying barriers to Adopt-A-Park program participation. The themes included communication,

volunteer expectations, alignment with community needs, and the relationship between PARD and APF. Stakeholders revealed distrust of city government based on a history of neglect, an outreach and engagement approach that needs more resources and cultural relevance, and a perception of a bureaucratic city process that can result in long delays and adopter frustration. To help address these issues, the panel made the following recommendations.

Define and Formalize the PARD/APF Relationship

The delineation of respective roles and responsibilities between PARD and APF as co-managers of the Adopt-A-Park program is often unclear and both organizations have struggled with staffing challenges.

Community members seeking to engage with the program have felt these organizational struggles in the form of communication issues, program inefficiencies, and confusion about contact points, roles, and responsibilities.

Codifying the two organizations' co-management agreement will formalize shared responsibilities, communication and operational processes, and program goals. The panel recommended revisiting each organization's role, determining which organization is best positioned to execute the role efficiently and successfully. In addition, they recommended creating a communication process and reporting system to better coordinate internal and external needs.

The most pressing concerns about the program from participants were focused on bureaucratic process hold-ups, unresponsiveness, and the timeliness of action. To address these issues, the panel recommended that PARD and APF should determine where the bottlenecks typically occur in the process and why, eliminate unnecessary steps, add staffing capacity if needed, or have APF staff assume

responsibility for a task. The panel also recommends examining program goals and creating a cross-relationship working group to define metrics of success.

Strategic Community Outreach

A fresh approach to community outreach is needed within the prioritized Equity Analysis Zones, which have been identified as areas of Austin that have higher concentrations of historically marginalized populations. The potential of existing organizations and partnerships is not being fully leveraged, in part due to the program's current policies. Such organizations include local minority-owned businesses, houses of worship and faith-based groups, social clubs, District Council members, Austin Independent School District (AISD) Parent Support Specialists, local nonprofit organizations, and corporations with volunteer programs. The panel believes that excluding businesses and houses of worship from adopting parks (which is current policy) unnecessarily limits participation, particularly since these local groups include formal and informal trusted community leaders in places that may not have other sources of community capacity or traditional adopter groups.

It was clear to the panel that outreach cannot be one size fits all, as language, trust and digital divides exist in the community. They strongly recommended making communications more personal and targeted, such as by

engaging the community with food in culturally relevant settings. They recommended replacing the program handbook with a toolkit that is easier to understand and would include topic-specific fact sheets that are easy to read, culturally relevant, and available in multiple languages. The panel also suggested bringing the toolkit to life with personal stories, quotes, photos and videos, including more images of people of color. In addition, to make the Adopt-A-Park program more easily accessible on the PARD website, consideration should be given to adding a separate link on the department's home page to programs offering volunteer opportunities.

Given the community members' sentiment that the Adopt-A-Park program is associated with bureaucracy and unresponsiveness, a restructured, streamlined program might benefit from renaming and/or rebranding to overcome any negative perceptions and more accurately describe the wide range of park outcomes for community engagement with the program.

Facilitate Volunteering

To facilitate the volunteer effort, the panel recommended that PARD and APF adjust expectations, encourage program participants ("adopters") to start small, and create a support network. Time is a valuable commodity for community members with many calls to answer in their lives and is the number one reason people do not

Patterson Park Wayfinding Map

volunteer. Establishing a sliding scale for the number of volunteer hours required and providing project management internally when needed would help address that challenge in the community. The panel suggested utilizing the city's Neighborhood Partnering Program as a resource or hiring a project management firm.

A quick win builds trust. Encouraging adopters to start with small projects like mulching or litter cleanup that can be successfully implemented will help avoid frustration with long delays that are more likely to occur with complex projects. The program could also support adopters' needs for additional volunteers by tapping into youth groups as a volunteer corps, as well as corporate volunteer programs, steering them to areas with greatest need.

Other ways to assist would-be adopters include creating a mentorship program or cohort model and networking database to enable groups to share best practices. Formalizing a pro-bono program to leverage local professional talent, like landscape architects and grant writers, could also provide much-needed capacity assistance and expertise not prevalent in the community. In addition, reinstating in-person meetings and educational opportunities that were halted during the COVID-19 pandemic would make it easier for adopters to share learnings and network to help each other. In-person meetings would also enable program partners to recognize successes. One way to help avoid volunteer burnout would be to establish a committee for succession so that adopters can step away feeling confident that work will continue after they have moved on.

Alternative Approach for Historically Underinvested Communities

To incentivize volunteer participation, program partners could provide an honorarium to neighborhood ambassadors and adopters who mentor newer groups. The panel also recommended providing childcare during meetings to help support parents with small children.

The panel thought it is important to utilize a tool like Park Score Cards to bring awareness to communities about their specific park needs and opportunities and provide an

objective source of comparative information. They also recommended focusing on specific people or groups not necessarily engaged today whose agendas can be aligned with the program, and more intentionally leveraging schools and recreation centers as community hubs.

To be sustainable, a program must be consistent. Underfunded and under-resourced programs send a negative message to the people they serve. The panel said it is important to explore resources to retain and expand positions that support organizing and outreach as a sign of value and consistency for the community.

The panel recommended applying a data-informed approach and identifying new metrics of success beyond the present emphasis on the number of adopted parks. Disaggregating data to gain a deeper understanding of the subset neighborhoods to gauge what works is crucial to any effort to improve equity outcomes.

Other Resources to Consider for the Program

AFP and PARD should tap into the rich social networks available for community outreach and volunteers, including schools, AISD Parent Support Specialists, and local employers. Work with other city departments to help fund some portions of the program, and formalize a pro bono program to leverage local professional talent to help with tasks like park planning and grant writing.

In conclusion, the panel stressed that the kinds of changes needed in the Adopt-A-Park program will take time but can result in a more flexible, efficient program that is more culturally relevant to people of color. The program, however, cannot fix the broader social equity challenges the city faces on its own. In fact, some of the challenges it faces and the feedback the panel heard are symptoms of those larger scale issues. Achieving the Adopt-A-Park program's goals is a journey that ultimately requires an integrated, cross-departmental approach by the city government and its partners in other sectors to tackle the related issues of housing, poverty, homelessness, health care, and education.

BACKGROUND

Austin was one of five ULI District Councils selected to participate in the Cohort for Park Equity (CPE) program, which is designed to advance equitable access to a park or open space in communities throughout the U.S.

Parks and open spaces are essential to physical, social, environmental, and economic health. And yet, more than one in three urban dwellers does not have access to a park within a 10-minute walk of home. Even where parks are available, inequities exist. People may live near parks that are unwelcoming, are in disrepair, lack culturally relevant programming, or do not meet their needs for other reasons.

Maximizing the potential of high-quality parks to improve conditions in communities requires the expertise, creativity, and close collaboration of leaders from all sectors—public, private, nonprofit, philanthropic, and community members. ULI members are essential to this effort. With the Cohort for Park Equity, ULI District Councils support local investments in high-quality parks by leveraging the knowledge, expertise, and advocacy of members.

ULI District Council Cohort for Park Equity Goals

- Promote and improve equitable access to parks;
- Identify opportunities for cities, residents, and real estate to support and benefit from park investments; and
- Support U.S. District Councils and members to engage locally in park and open space issues.

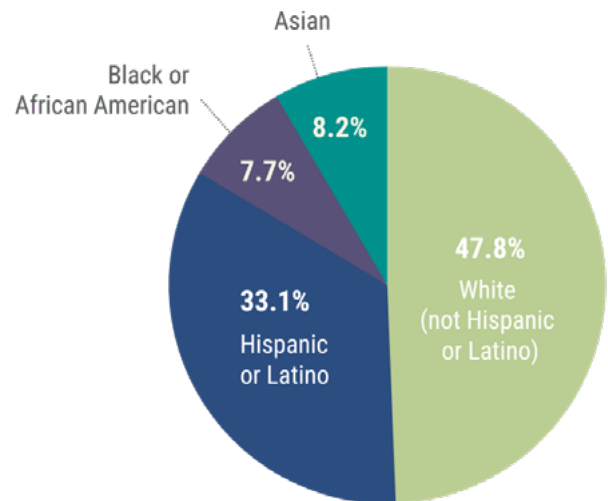## Austin: A City within a Park

With a population nearing one million, Austin is consistently among the fastest growing cities in the United States. Its population grew from nearly 816,000 in 2012 to more than 967,000 in 2022. A demographic breakdown shows Austin's population is 47.8% White (not Hispanic or Latino), 33.1% Hispanic or Latino, 7.7% Black or African American, and 8.2% Asian, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The city has become a tech mecca over the past 15 years, bringing an influx of high-paying jobs to the area. Strong draws include lower cost of living and no state income tax. As a result, Austin is going through a period of rapid socioeconomic change. Rising housing costs and gentrification have spurred displacement issues affecting the city's Black and Hispanic populations.

Austin has been called "a city within a park." It boasts 348 parks, 253 miles of trails and nearly 20,000 acres of green space. Core elements of the system include four park types: metropolitan, greenbelt, district, and neighborhood. Of the 348 parks there are 107 neighborhood parks, 22 school parks, and 14 district parks.

Patterson Neighborhood Park

Colony Park District Park

Butler Metro Park
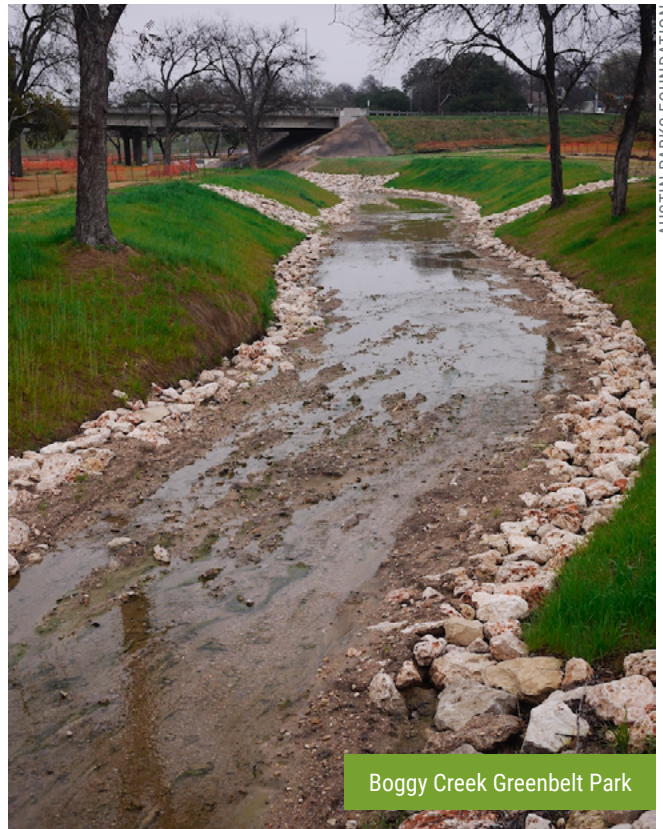
Boggy Creek Greenbelt Park

Austin's ParkScore Index®

56 out of 100 points

Acreage
The acreage score indicates the relative abundance of large 'destination' parks, which include large natural areas that provide critical mental health as well as climate and conservation benefits.

54 out of 100 points

Access
The access score indicates the percentage of a city's residents that live within a walkable half-mile of a park.

89 out of 100 points

Investment
The investment score indicates the relative financial health of a city's park system, which is essential to ensuring the park system is maintained at a high level. This value aggregates park and recreation spending across all agencies and organizations within the city, including monetized volunteer hours.

38 out of 100 points

Amenities
The amenities score indicates the relative abundance of six park activities popular among a diverse selection of user groups (kids, teenagers, adults, seniors).

43 out of 100 points

Equity
The equity score indicates the fairness in the distribution of parks and park space between neighborhoods by race and income.

In 2016, Austin City Council set a goal of providing parkland within a quarter-mile of urban core residents and half-mile for those outside the urban core. Austin added 30 new parks to its system in fiscal year 2021, and some 68% of Austin residents had access to parkland, according to the standard.

The Trust for Public Land Trust's annual ParkScore Index® is a national comparison of park systems across the 100 most populated cities in the United States. The index measures park systems according to five categories reflective of an excellent city park system: access, investment, amenities, acreage, and equity. In 2022 Austin ranked 39th and received a score of 55.9 points out of 100. The city's highest score was in the investment category—$178 per capita is spent each year on publicly accessible parks and recreation, among the highest for this category. Austin's lowest scores were for amenities followed by equity.

The City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) serves as the city's steward of public land, protecting and maintaining its parkland and urban forest. Residents can report maintenance issues such as lights not working to PARD using the city's 3-1-1 smart phone app. PARD also provides residents with a variety of sports, recreation, educational and art programs, cultural opportunities, nature and aquatic activities.

PARD was created in 1928 as part of a master city plan. The plan codified racial segregation and prompted city policies that drove Austin's minority populations east of what is now I-35. The racial and socioeconomic divide that was created has had lasting effects that persist today. East Austin, including its parks, has historically suffered from disinvestment and neglect. Council Districts 1 through 4 have fewer parks than West Austin, with District 4 having the least. In 2021, PARD implemented an Equity Action Plan to advance equity for staff and the public. Efforts have been made to improve park equity and access for residents along what is known as the eastern crescent that begins due north of downtown Austin, following U.S. Highway 183 south and ending south of downtown.

2021 Census Distribution of Black and Hispanic Populations by Tract in the City of Austin
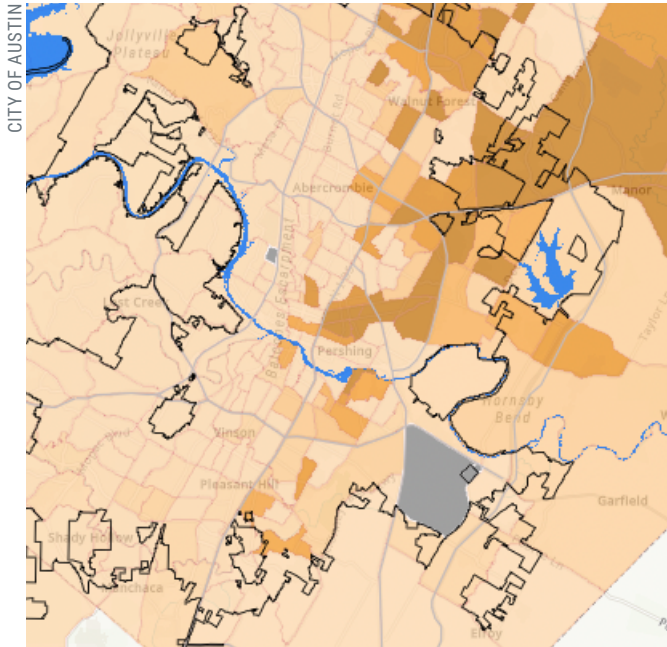
Dark yellow indicates heaviest density of
Black (Non-Hispanic) population
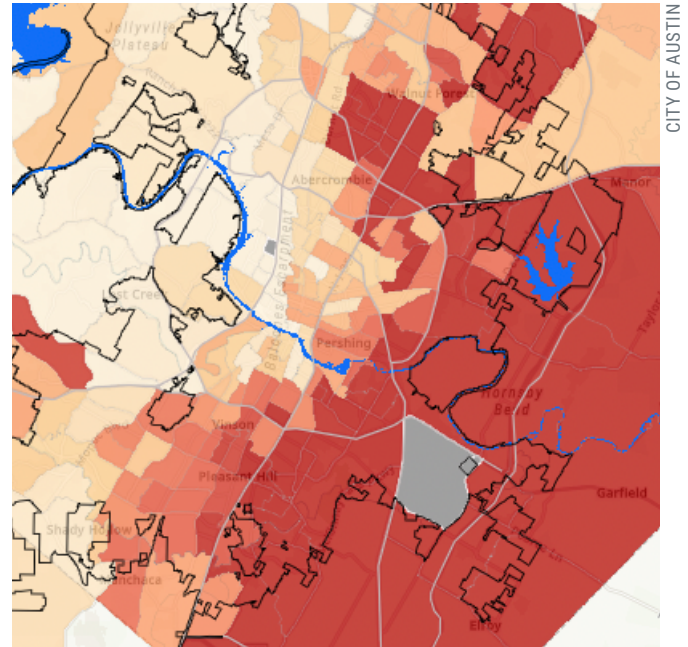
Dark red indicates heaviest density of
Hispanic population

"We will never have the resources to take care of our parks, and the only way we can do this is with people taking ownership of their local parks—even if it is picking up trash or calling someone if the water fountain isn't working."

– COLIN WALLIS, AUSTIN PARKS FOUNDATION CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Funding and financing for large scale park projects comes from bond funds. In addition, the city charges residential and commercial developers a parkland dedication fee that is used to purchase and develop land for new parks and park amenities. However, that funding cannot be used for park maintenance. The Austin Parks Foundation (APF) is helping to fill the city's funding and resource gap through volunteerism, innovative programming, advocacy, and financial support. APF was founded as a nonprofit in1992, dedicated to enhancing public parks, trails and green spaces and creating equitable access to great parks for all Austinites.

APF officially became the nonprofit partner for the Adopt-A-Park program in 2016. APF's nonprofit status is used as an umbrella for park adopter groups. About 15% of the APF annual budget is allocated for park improvements via community grants for park improvements. Adopters no longer need to match grant funding, which was previously a barrier for many groups. Since 2006 APF has distributed more than $3 million through community grants. In addition, APF's semiannual flagship volunteer event, It's My Park Day, results in an average of $650,000 in volunteer labor each year.

APF also fosters unique public/private partnerships. APF is the partner and beneficiary of the popular Austin City Limits Music Festival at Zilker Metropolitan Park since 2002. In 2021 the festival provided $6.8 million of APF's $10 million revenue. In addition to the maintenance and improvement of Zilker Park, funds generated from the festival pay for park improvements across the City of Austin and has generated more than $48 million for the public park system since 2005.

Austin City Limits Music Festival, Zilker Metropolitan Park

During the last few years APF has struggled with high employee turnover, which negatively affects the relationship with park adopters. The CEO of APF attributes the turnover to the COVID-19 pandemic and the influx of high-paying tech jobs in Austin, which makes it difficult for a nonprofit to compete for talent.

Austin's Adopt-A-Park Program

One of several programs that encourage volunteers to work with the city to improve and help maintain the park system, Adopt-A-Park is designed primarily for pocket parks, neighborhood parks, and district parks. Park adopters serve as key community representatives for the park, organizing an inclusive, community-based volunteer group, bringing technical expertise, in-kind donations, and private resources to the parks.

Adopters are required to hold only one volunteer project a year, and there are no membership fees to join a group. Businesses and faith-based groups can participate but are not eligible to become adopters under current program policy. The policy is based on the program's goal to build a sense of community pride and personal ownership around a park and avoid conflicts of interest. Metropolitan parks, greenbelts, and preserves are not included in the program as they are considered destination sites for the entire city.

Basic maintenance projects undertaken by adopters can include mulching, weeding, landscaping, litter cleanup, painting, and graffiti removal. Community projects involve park improvements and can require groups to raise funds and in-kind contributions. Projects must align with PARD goals, meet community priorities, and can include installing park benches, a

park pavilion, or a playscape. An Adopt-A-Park handbook provides information adopters need to manage their groups.
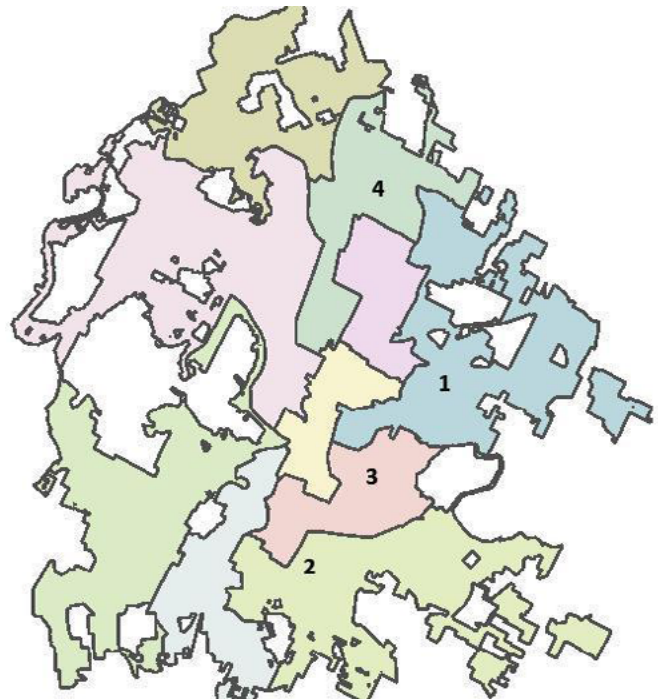
APF and PARD co-manage the Adopt-A-Park Program through APF's Senior Programs Manager and PARD's Community PARKnerships Program. The latter department also manages other similar community programs, including the PARKners Program, Community Activated Park Projects, Parkland Stewardship, and Cities Connecting Children to Nature.

APF is the point of entry for those interested in adopting a park. It holds an annual summit to provide interested parties with information on starting and growing a group. The summit is followed by quarterly meetings to foster the relationship and help sustain the groups. Due to COVID-19, meetings have been held virtually on Zoom. In addition to community outreach, APF helps groups seek funding and provides mulch, tools, and free park and landscape design services to grant applicants.

PARD oversees the Adopt-A-Park program, reviews, and collaborates on park projects, communicates future park plans, and helps adopters navigate city processes. Stewards of local parks that have not been adopted are offered the same access to resources through other PARD programs.

As part of the city's effort to address racial inequity in Austin, APF and PARD seek to increase the number of adopters and the capacity of existing groups in districts that have a historic lack of investment and activation, with a focus on Districts 1 through 4. PARD hired one temporary full-time employee in spring of 2022 who is tasked with Adopt-A-Park community outreach in order to build relationships in Austin's communities of color. In fiscal year 2021, the program grew 11% over the previous year, boasting 111 Adopt-A-Park groups of which 50 are in the targeted districts.

City of Austin Districts 1 – 4

Adopted Parks By District*

● Adopt-A-Park Groups by District ● Adoptable

● Park Stewards
* Some greenbelts are in multiple districts
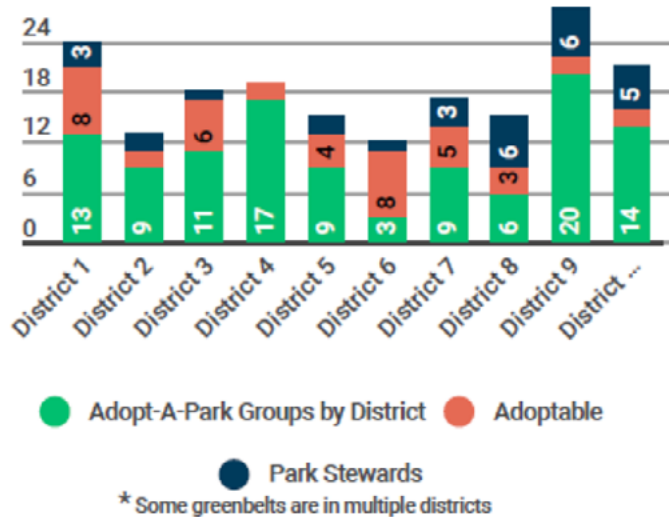
"For people considering adopting a park, this is an opportunity to not only build a park but meet new people and build a sense of community. Social capital is what can be important."

– A NEIGHBORHOOD PARK ADOPTER

Community PARKnerships Programs

This PARKners Program

The Austin Parks and Recreation Department is committed to partnerships that align with their overall mission, vision, values, and that provide benefit to the public and the Austin parks system. They actively seek partnerships with non-profit organizations, conservancies and businesses for park development, maintenance, management, and programming. Partnerships are organized into four categories:

- **Configuration A: Programming, Operations, and Maintenance Partnerships** – Partnership A, otherwise known as Partner Operations and Management Agreement (POMA) partners, are guided by a POMA document that outlines the roles, responsibilities, and rights of the owners and managers of a partnership. These partnerships successfully combine the assets of the public and private sectors in novel ways to create new and refurbished parks, greenways, trails, and other public assets in our community.
- **Configuration B: Community Non-Profit Partnerships** – Partnership B involves a partnership between community non-profit partners and the City of Austin. These partnerships help conduct ecological improvements or other community initiated projects in addition to the coordination of volunteers on parkland. These non-profit partners may have a formal agreement with the City of Austin, but it is not required for the partnership.
- **Configuration C: Neighborhood/Community Partnerships** – Partnership C involves Neighborhood, Community, and "Friends of" groups that serve as advocates and stewards for their local park or facility.
- **Configuration D: National and Local partnerships –** Partnership D includes foundations, individual gifts, local businesses, and one-time funding donations that provide a wide range of activities including: park improvements, maintenance and management; programs and services; and donations and sponsorships. Examples include City Parks Alliance, US Soccer Association, and St. David's Foundation.

Community Activated Park Projects (CAPP)

CAPP streamlines the proposal process for neighbors, community groups, and partners seeking to initiate improvements on city-owned parkland. Park improvement projects must reflect community and PARD priorities and can include anything from invasive species removal and signage to new benches and nature play features. Proposals do not need to be fully formed before submission. After the CAPP is reviewed internally, proposers and city staff meet at the site to discuss feasibility and determine next steps.

Parkland Stewardship

This program connects groups and individuals who wish to participate in environmental stewardship on their local parkland with volunteer organizations, including Austin Parks Foundation, Ecology Action, Shoal Creek Conservancy, The Trail Conservancy, TreeFolks, and Pease Park Conservancy.

Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN)

CCCN is a national initiative that seeks to create more equitable and abundant access to nature in cities through a partnership between The National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families and the Children & Nature Network. Austin is one of 18 cities that is part of the CCCN national cohort. The Austin program is designed with a specific focus on children in low-income communities and children of color.

FINDINGS

Stakeholder Interviews: What We Heard

- Appreciation for APF and their work
- Fan love for Barry and Alejandro, but wish there were more
- Need for relationship building that takes place over several years
- Concern related to staff turnover
- Distinct experiences working with APF and PARD
- Unclear communication between PARD and APF
- Staff contacts do not match the community
- Lack of understanding as to why businesses and religious organizations are unable to adopt
- Proposals seem to come from the same 50 parks
- Need grassroots organizing (help people lift up) instead of engagement (singe effort)
- Program feels too complex to navigate; potential adopters need help

- Adopt-a-Park is a necessary requirement to get grants
- Seeking grants seems too difficult / intimidating
- Language is a real barrier
- Projects take too long and require too much volunteer time
- Lack of park successors to continue efforts
- Disinvestment in certain parks
- "Just" mulching: Uncertainty about the benefit of the program
- Safety in the park is a big concern
- Trust issues in government and institutions
- Concern that neighborhoods will become too expensive, so no reason to become active in local park efforts

The Adopt-A-Park program is a worthy endeavor. The program helps to improve city parks for the benefit of Austin's residents, fills gaps in the city's ability to maintain the ever-growing park system, and engages the community in directing the future of their parks with a sense of ownership. Further, the movement to provide greater focus on parks in historically underserved areas serves to help correct the racial inequities brought on through past disinvestment and neglect of area parks. The program can engender pride in ownership and a greater ability to push the levers of government.

However, the panel heard that community members share a distrust in government and institutions because of historical, racially motivated decisions and broken promises to people of color. Some community members do not volunteer out of fear due to their immigration status or feel that they are not welcome. Others do not believe that their efforts can truly make a difference. Numerous studies have shown that socioeconomic status is the largest factor in determining those who volunteer and those who do not. Many who are struggling economically, some with two jobs to make ends meet, lack the time or energy needed to volunteer. "They are in survival mode," as one adopter noted.

There also are concerns as to the expectations placed on park adopters as well as the Adopt-A-Park program itself. The efforts of APF and its staff are appreciated by many adopters. However, frustration with city bureaucracy and the processes involved with the Adopt-A-Park program was quite apparent. Some adopters feel overwhelmed, especially long-term adopters who lament that no one is coming forward to succeed them. Volunteer burnout and lack of support with succession planning are key issues.

From the stakeholder interviews, several barriers were clear involving communication, volunteer expectations, alignment with community needs, and the relationship between PARD and APF.

Communication

The panel observed that both APF and PARD's Community PARKnerships Program currently lack sufficient funding or staffing to engage communities and bring awareness of the Adopt-A-Park program to parts of the city where program participation is lacking. These neighborhoods require more intervention and resources than wealthier communities. In addition, staff positions left vacant for periods of time or with high turnover have led to adopters feeling frustrated with slow responsiveness and changing liaisons. Community organizing and program support require constant attention and effort to build trust and be successful in the long term.

PARD's role in the Adopt-A-Park program is more focused on oversight, while APF serves as the "boots on the ground." There appears to be a greater need to build relationships with existing neighborhood champions, both formal and informal leaders, and align the goals of the Adopt-A-Park program with their broader community development agendas. Previously, Go Austin/Vamos Austin (GAVA) was officially involved in bringing their groups to the Adopt-A-Park program. Although that agreement has ended, APF still works with GAVA on an informal basis for park adoptions and stewardship. GAVA is an example of the type of partner that could bring capacity and expertise to the program if they were better aligned with more intentional relationship building by the program partners.

Businesses, merchant organizations, and faith-based organizations should be embraced as part of community engagement efforts. In neighborhoods where there is not

enough capacity for traditional neighborhood associations, these institutions play a key role in their place. A Greater Austin Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (GAHCC) survey conducted as part of a 2018 class project of the Hispanic Austin Leadership Civic Engagement Team found that the three main ways respondents were learning about volunteer opportunities were through colleagues at work, faith-based organizations, and word-of-mouth from their friends.

The panel believes APF and PARD should leverage the full potential of community leaders and groups, such as small minority-owned businesses and churches that are the fabric of the community. The program policy that excludes them

Barriers to Volunteering

- Not being asked
- Fear of being used as a token
- Not feeling connected to the mainstream community
- Lack of personal time
- Cultural emphasis on family involvement over community involvement
- Lack of identification with agencies serving communities of color
- Lack of knowledge about volunteer opportunities
- Belief that input from communities of color is not taken seriously
- Uncertainty about the benefits of involvement
- Economic hardship

Source: The Denver Foundation Inclusiveness Project

> *"Engagement is not the same as grass roots organizing. Grass roots organizing is a deeper connection."*
>
> – LOCAL COMMUNITY ACTIVATION GROUP REPRESENTATIVE

from adopting parks limits its expansion in the targeted area. A PARD peer review of five other cities with park adopter programs, specifically, Los Angeles, Houston, Detroit, New York City, and Denver, found that Austin is the only city to explicitly state that a business cannot be a park adopter.

City of Austin Council members could be called upon to play an advocacy role in support of their District constituents if they do not already do so. In an Atlanta Park Pride Friends of Parks survey, 74% of respondents cited communicating with public officials as an effective advocacy and civic engagement strategy. It is noteworthy that those Austin stakeholders who said they received support from their elected leaders in their park efforts were from Districts other than 1 through 4, where community members cited a lack of support. This may indicate a need to educate council members from those parts of the city about how the program aligns and fits in with broader community development needs and empowerment strategies.

Another potentially valuable resource that does not seem to be utilized strategically includes the Austin Independent School District (AISD) Parent Support Specialists. They work in Title I schools and engage directly with families, campus staff, and community members. Parent Support Specialists provide counseling and connect families with needed city resources. Engaging them as advocates for the Adopt-A-Park program offers an opportunity to raise awareness and encourage interested parents in taking a leadership role in their school or neighborhood park.

Organizations connecting with a marginalized population need to understand why community members may be less likely to volunteer and to enact strategies to overcome them. Public notices on signs and social media can never replace intentional outreach or one-on-one engagement. "Never asked" is often cited in surveys as a reason for not volunteering. Several park adopters noted a lack of a personal approach to engagement. They said organizations used to "knock on doors" to interact with community members, whereas today communication is predominantly electronic—a shift that was already underway but accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Communicating electronically ignores the digital divide that exists in communities of color. A 2019 survey conducted by the City of Austin in collaboration with the University of Texas at Austin found that people who identified as Hispanics in particular were most likely to be non-users of the internet. See *www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Telecommunications/DigitalInclusion/Digital_Inclusion_Final_Report_8.13.2019.pdf*

Respondents without Internet by Zip Code
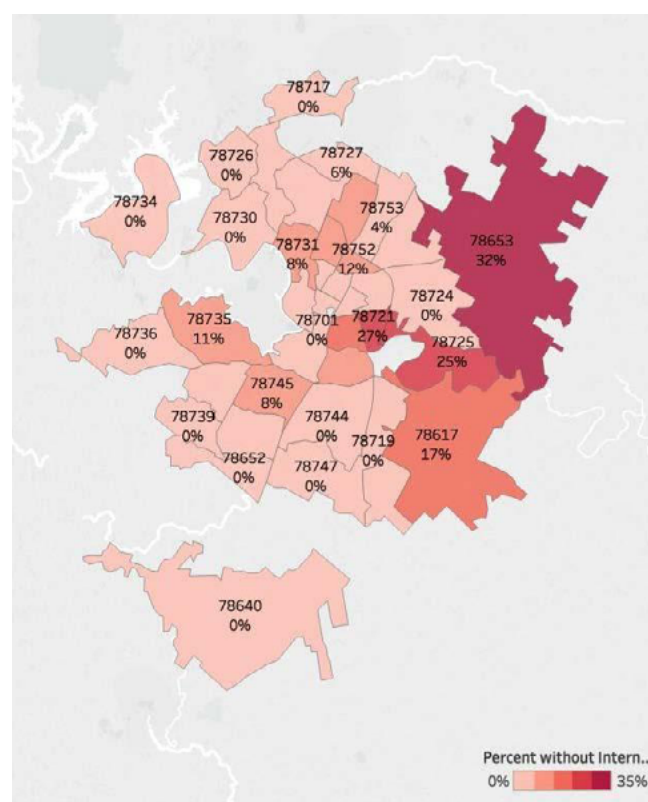
Source: 2019 Digital Inclusion in Austin Report

Even those who use the internet could be hard pressed to find information about Adopt-A-Park if they are not familiar with the name of the program. While APF is the point of contact for Adopt-A-Park, that is not intuitive or well understood by community members. An individual seeking information on PARD's website would be challenged to find a link to the Adopt-A-Park program. In addition, there are a number of programs within PARD that (at least to the layperson or uninitiated) appear to overlap, such as

the Neighborhood Partnering Program, that are competing with Adopt-A-Park for volunteers and diluting the potential prospect pool.

Equally important is the need for marketing to take a cultural-specific approach to outreach. The Adopt-A-Park website is designed for a broad geographic outreach but should better reflect the city's diversity. Some stakeholders also expressed that APF and PARD organizational leadership and contacts are not reflective of community demographics.

While the city's website is available with multiple language options, only some pages of the APF website include a Spanish option. The Adopt-A-Park Handbook appears to be available in English only.

What's more, the handbook in its current form is dense to read, filled mainly with rules and regulations, and can be daunting for an adopter new to running a volunteer group. Information needs to be broken out into smaller "bites." In addition, the handbook could benefit from eliminating overly technical language and adding photos, graphics, and adopter testimonials to make it more readable and easier to understand. Including examples of group mission statements or templates of simple bylaws can go a long way in building adopter confidence.

Overall communication about the program needs to be made clearer. Volunteers cited confusion about who does maintenance, whom they need to go to for information or engage with to get projects done, or what funding is available. It is important for APF to regularly communicate with active and nonactive adopters to provide whatever support and/or information they need to succeed.

Volunteer Expectations

Becoming a park adopter requires time and technical skills. An adopter is expected to plan events, organize volunteers, plan park improvements, apply for grants, and fundraise. A volunteer may not possess the technical skills needed, or have access to people who do, for such jobs as grant writing. While APF does offer free resources, such as park design and grant writing assistance, the tasks can

still seem intimidating. Moreover, adopters are forced to become advocates for all aspects of maintenance and improvements.

Many adopters find it difficult to get volunteers to work on projects. APF can support adopters' park cleanup projects by rallying volunteers from youth groups, including Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Austin Community College, and local high schools. High schoolers could be a particularly good group to engage, because they need to show volunteer hours when applying to colleges.

The volunteer opportunity can speak to young people's general interested in green conservation. A 2021 study by Deloitte found that climate change and environmental issues were the top concern for Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2013. Urban parks, trees, and green spaces offer many environmental benefits, including removing toxins from the air and helping to reduce the so-called "heat island" effect in cities.

Austin's Park Rangers Program and Adopt-A-Creek program, which is sponsored by the Watershed Protection Department and Keep Austin Beautiful, tap into the younger generation's interest in green conservation by partnering with the Austin Civilian Conservation Corps (ACCC). An initiative of the City of Austin and American YouthWorks, ACCC recruits young adults ages 18 to 35 who are paid to work on various green programs, including land management. The Park Rangers program trains participants to lead volunteer days, thereby gaining important career and resume-enhancing skills and experience. This model could be utilized by PARD and APF as well.

"This year I found they [Adopt-A-Park] had money in the budget for events. But we have been doing this for four or five years and this is the first time I heard about it."

– A DISTRICT PARK ADOPTER

New adopters also are looking for direction in how to organize and complete projects. APF can serve as a convener, connecting new groups with older, more successful adopters through a mentorship program. APF could incentivize mentorship by offering an honorarium to more experienced groups for their efforts. Also, an online database can help groups network with each other and share best practices.

Program Bureaucracy

Nothing deflates volunteer enthusiasm more than delays and confusion (i.e., bureaucracy and lack of clear process). Currently, the process for working through the Adopt-A-Park program is complex. In addition to APF and PARD, adopters may need to get approvals from and/or coordinate with Watershed Protection, Urban Forestry, other city departments, and Austin Independent School District (AISD).

One long-time adopter noted that the process seems to have become increasingly more complex in recent years. Volunteers are not allowed to be on site without completing forms and getting approval from PARD. One stakeholder noted that getting extra trash cans becomes a big budget issue, with unclear expectations for who will supply the bags and pick up the trash. Another stakeholder said it took nearly six months to get a meeting with APF after a proposal was submitted. In another example, one stakeholder shared that it took about five years to get lighting for another park.

The layers of complexity adopters need to sort through, unresponsiveness (for whatever reason), and long delays in getting approvals create frustration and a sense of helplessness. While expectations need to be clear and managed upfront, APF and PARD must streamline the process, improve responsiveness, and shorten the time it takes to go from proposal to completion. A quick win

builds trust. Volunteers who see real change in their parks in a timely manner are more likely to stay involved with the program and engage others.

Alignment with Community Needs

Under the current program, adopting a park means making a commitment with a huge demand on personal time. Engaging community members to become adopters and/or to volunteer to work within a group requires an appeal to self-interest and alignment with community needs. Parents with children who play in the park may be concerned about poorly maintained equipment or missing swings, while retirees might want benches added to sit and congregate with friends. Others might see adopting a park as an opportunity for developing leadership skills. GAHCC's Hispanic Austin Leadership Civic Engagement Team worked with CASA of Travis County in 2018 to help increase volunteer recruitment among minorities. They reported, "By changing the message from 'please help this organization' to 'develop your leadership skills as you help the community,' we found that prospective volunteers were more receptive."

Disinvestment and neglect have weighed heavily on East Austin communities and its parks. Adopt-A-Park projects that cover basic care and maintenance are viewed negatively by those in the community who deem them the responsibility of the parks department—not a responsibility that should fall on community residents. In seeking equity, residents want the city to give their parks the same attention and quality as parks in other areas. That may mean prioritizing and allocating greater funding to parks in Districts 1 through 4 which have been identified as deficient.

There is also a desire for an understanding of what is important to Black and Hispanic culture as opposed to a top-down approach to park development and activation. It was noted that the city's centralized programming for children and

> *"Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential."*
>
> – POLICYLINK DEFINITION OF EQUITY

teens, for example, does not always consider the activities they would be most interested in. They also would like to see park recreation centers used for broader multi-purpose programs to bring needed resources to the community.

Park equity also means ensuring public safety in all neighborhoods. Adopters raised safety issues due to homeless encampments and drug use in and near parks and adjacent wooded areas. Safety concerns can keep some residents from engaging with their parks.

Parque Zaragoza Neighborhood Park

Tents housing the homeless can be seen adjacent to Parque Zaragoza

As gentrification of East Austin continues, neighborhood demographics are changing along with perceptions of what is needed to enhance quality of life. Adding new green space or improving parks in underserved neighborhoods can increase property values and bring changes in the social character of the neighborhood, displacing or marginalizing low-income residents in the short- or long-term. The phenomenon is known as the green space paradox, where the new or improved park accelerates gentrification. There is a need for the city to align its parks investments, management, and engagement programs with economic and housing policies that protect residents from such displacement.

Relationship Between APF and PARD

There appears at present to be a lack of defined (or at least mutually understood) roles and responsibilities between APF and PARD. APF desires to be valued as a co-manager rather than treated as a vendor. Employees are dedicated to their missions. However, tensions exist at times between the organizations that appear to be attributable to poor communication internally and externally, inefficiencies in the process, and a lack of alignment (i.e., strategic resource coordination) on community engagement. These organizational challenges cause the community to be confused about who is in charge.

PARD is in the process of formalizing various levels of agreements with nonprofit organizations and conservancies covering the city's parklands. In June 2022, The Trail Conservancy signed a Park Operations and Maintenance Agreement with the city to assume primary responsibility for operations and maintenance of the 10-mile urban Ann and Roy Butler Hike and Bike Trail over time. It gives the organization greater authority over land management and programming over the course of the next 10 years. The City signed a similar agreement in January 2023 with Pease Park Conservancy.

APF does not currently have a formal agreement with PARD but expects to negotiate an agreement in the near future. It is an opportunity to clearly define roles, create internal communication processes that address internal and external needs, and revamp the Adopt-A-Park program and its materials.

Currently, program success is measured by growth in the number of adopter groups. These metrics may not provide a true picture of whether or not Adopt-A-Park is succeeding in its goal to help alleviate disparities in eastern crescent parks. The number of groups that have become adopters is moot if the group consists of one individual and is relatively inactive. It was noted that APF gets proposals from the same 50 groups and few, if any, from others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Define and Formalize the PARD/APF Relationship

To work together efficiently, PARD and APF must be able to understand each's unique role, keep communications flowing, and determine the best way to facilitate the Adopt-A-Park program for the benefit of adopters and community residents.

Codify an agreement in writing — To address the inherent issues that volunteers see in the Adopt-A-Park program, there must be a willingness on the part of program partners to revisit organizational policies and structures. An agreement to formalize shared responsibilities should explicitly spell out the role of each organization, the operational processes involved, and measurable program goals. Roles should be determined by which organization is best positioned to execute it efficiently and successfully. For example, should APF undertake all outreach and community engagement? Should PARD staff focus solely on administration and operations?

Establish partnership rules of engagement (interpersonal) — For internal communication between the two organizations to improve there must be mutual respect, a shared understanding of expectations, and an appreciation for each organization's skills and knowledge.

Create a culture where the relationship bond stays strong regardless of staff changes — Staff turnover can affect continuity both internally and externally. Building a collaborative relationship between the two organizations that is purposeful can create a strong cultural bond that holds them together. It would help to designate understudies for coverage at both organizations to step in during times of staff transition. The organizations may also consider co-locating as a tool to encourage the office interactions that might help strengthen working relationships between key APF and PARD in ways that go beyond a formal written agreement.

Create internal communication processes that address internal and external needs — PARD and APF must speak with one voice about the program. There is a need for greater transparency and sharing of program information, internally and externally, along with better coordination with respect to community needs and requests. A framework should be jointly developed to determine what reporting is needed between the organizations in order to monitor progress.

Acknowledge this unique partnership and support it by streamlining processes — The process for getting projects approved appears to be where most delays occur, creating volunteer frustration. With a goal of reducing the time it takes to get projects approved, outline each step in the current process and who is responsible for completing it to determine where the bottlenecks typically occur and why. Eliminate unnecessary steps. Determine if additional staffing capacity is needed or if APF staff can assume responsibility for a task. Re-examine policies that may create barriers. Create a list of circumstances under which projects can be automatically approved without going through additional bureaucratic layers (e.g., types of trees to be planted in areas with known irrigation). Work together using Park Score Card data to identify priority projects that can be automatically approved or coordinated with planned capital improvements that have been funded.

Create a cross-relationship working group to define metrics of success, especially in targeted areas — The organizations need to determine what the Adopt-A-Park goal is with respect to the target area. The number of parks adopted as a measure alone does not take into account how active and engaged the groups are within the program, their impact, and the benefit that is derived. Is the goal to increase the number of volunteers of color? Volunteer satisfaction with the Adopt-A-Park program? An increase in park usage? Improved perception of the park by residents?

There are many metrics that could be more meaningful. It would be helpful to engage the stakeholders themselves in determining the metrics to ensure they are meaningful.

Strategic Community Outreach

Re-examine the approach to community outreach by being more intentional in targeting specific neighborhoods while building relationships with organizations and local businesses that serve the community.

Utilize the Equity Analysis Zone to identify parks to target and revisit communications strategies — Make the approach to outreach and community engagement more intentional by prioritizing areas based on need within the Equity Analysis Zone and the Park Score Card.

Intentionally go out into the community rather than having them coming to you — Communications about the Adopt-A-Park program need to be more interpersonal and targeted. Reduce your expectation of the number of communities reached. Focus instead on those most in need (quality over quantity). Current staffing levels for direct outreach should be reviewed and grown as needed. Find out why residents do not use a local park or volunteer and develop a communication strategy that addresses their self-interest.

Create programming to engage the community — For example, breaking bread is universal. Food that reflects their culture is not only a draw to bring people to an event but a way to make them feel comfortable to talk with each other and collaborate. Recognize the value of houses of worship and small businesses and how you can work with them to bring in volunteers and needed funds. Find ways to connect and engage with community youth and meet generations with different approaches.

Collaborate with intermediary organizations in target areas — Many other organizations within the target communities, without necessarily having an explicit focus on parks, are willing and able to partner with APF and PARD to support the organizations' goals. Align the goals of the Adopt-A-Park program with their broader community development agendas. Break down silos where they might exist. Legitimize and support efforts of other groups doing

the community outreach, engagement, activation, and programming. Strengthen relationships and/or invest in these organizations.

Go to neighborhood institutions trusted in community — Small local businesses like barbershops or bodegas, houses of worship, and social clubs are the fabric of a community. Allow them and nonprofits in a community to adopt local parks. They have community trust, they want their community to thrive, and in the case of local houses of worship, they come with a built-in constituency. Moreover, they bring other relationships and collaborators to the table. To ensure a sense of shared ownership by the community, advertising or self-promotion by the adopting organization should be prohibited.

Engage City of Austin Council members from Districts 1 to 4 to play an advocacy role in support of their District constituents — The Adopt-A-Park program aligns with broader community development needs and empowerment strategies that Council members seek for their constituents. Public Council support can bring awareness to the program and elevate the importance of the program in the community.

Replace the Adopt-A-Park handbook with a toolkit and outreach materials — Revamp how program information is presented. The toolkit should include topic-specific fact sheets that are non-technical and easy to read, culturally relevant, and available in multiple languages. Topics can include Community Organizing 101, event planning, how to apply for grant funding, Fundraising 101. Information can include examples of mission statements and templates for simple bylaws and organizational structure.

Make the communication more personal by leveraging stories and quotes. Bring it to life with photos and videos— examples of successful projects of all sizes and including images of people of color. Create one-page how-to handouts for each project type (activation, enhancement, maintenance) that map the project process, stages, timeline, and where to go for help.

Review location of the Adopt-A-Park Program information on the PARD website — Make finding the Adopt-A-Park program easier on the website. Consider

separating volunteer programs from other PARD programs, using a direct link to them on the department's home page (e.g., Volunteer Opportunities).

Consider renaming the program and/or rebranding to overcome any negative perception — The Adopt-A-Park program has developed a negative association with some participants because of their experiences with bureaucracy, delays, and unresponsiveness. Creating a better experience and telling their stories in ways that appeal to a more diverse audience may require a fresh look at how the program can be restructured and streamlined to better serve the community.

Understand what transparency is needed for outside groups and report accordingly — Communication is a key element in maintaining relations. Be open and transparent. Provide regular reporting and updates on program operations and goals internally and externally.

Facilitate Volunteering

Address barriers to participation by making it easier to commit time and effort to volunteering.

Adjust volunteer expectations — Time is a precious commodity and lack of discretionary time is the number one reason people do not volunteer. To address this, establish a sliding scale for the number of hours of volunteer time required for projects based on targeted areas. Provide project management internally when needed. Consider utilizing the city's Neighborhood Partnering Program, that provides a platform for neighborhood groups to develop, resource, and execute small- to medium-sized projects on city-owned land, or hire a project management firm to assist where neighborhood capacity does not exist.

Volunteers will quickly lose heart if they do not see responsiveness from the city. Delays in approvals and implementation can create frustration, engender loss of trust, and perpetuate the belief that the city cares less about communities of color. Streamline the process and shorten the timeline to get a project done, working with partner city agencies as needed to find and solve bottlenecks. Encourage newer adopters to start with small projects like mulching or litter cleanup that can be a quick win.

Volunteer burnout is an issue. Long-time adopters are looking to the program for help in handing off their duties when ready to leave the program. Establish a succession program to enable current adopters to step away feeling confident that work will continue after they have moved on.

Rally volunteers from youth groups to support adopter projects — To supplement adopters' needs for volunteers, youth from Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Austin Community College, and local high schools can be tapped to help with projects like clean-up days.

Create collaborative learning opportunities — Create a mentorship program that enables program veterans to share their expertise with new groups and help them overcome hurdles they may face. Group specific parks together in a cohort model based on similarities. Networking can also break down barriers between neighborhoods and forge new relationships. Provide adopters with a database of Adopt-A-Park groups that they can connect with. In addition, reinstate in-person meetings and educational opportunities that were halted due to the coronavirus pandemic. Use the Adopt-A-Park Summit to recognize success and show that you appreciate and value adopters' and volunteers' efforts. Consider an annual volunteer recognition event and awards ceremony to celebrate successes.

Alternative Approach for Historically Underinvested Communities

Consider a different approach to outreach and engagement than what is standard in other areas of the city.

Pay people for time and resources — Current staffing appears insufficient to effectively communicate, educate, and guide adopters citywide, especially given the challenges in under-resourced neighborhoods. Outreach and engagement are crucial investments in program success. Consider offering an honorarium to adopters who mentor newer groups and to neighborhood ambassadors who can supplement outreach efforts. As local residents, ambassadors can build stronger one-on-one relationships within their own communities. Also, examine the Austin Civilian Conservation Corp as a model to support adopter projects.

Pick a group to pilot in targeted communities — Rather than casting a wide net to promote Adopt-A-Park in Districts 1 through 4, start by targeting specific people or groups whose agenda can be aligned with yours.

Utilize tools such as score cards to help communities understand needs or opportunities for their park and help communicate desires back — The Park Score Cards provide an opportunity to bring the story of a neighborhood's park to its residents. Use the information in outreach efforts to appeal to the community's individual needs. This will also help address issues of trust in the community, as it would objectively and publicly compare park conditions citywide, leveling the information playing field.

Explore resources to retain and expand positions that support organizing and outreach as a sign of value and consistency for the community — To be sustainable, a program must operate consistently. Underfunding and under-resourcing of programs designed to help a community send a negative message to the people it serves and can add to a sense of distrust. More sources of longer-term and dedicated funding would help make program budgets more predictable.

Identify new metrics and apply data-informed approach — Growing the number of adopted parks alone does not measure the success of the Adopt-A-Park program. Disaggregate data to include race/ethnicity and other social indicators to gain a deeper understanding of the subset neighborhoods. This could include the number of new groups, where they are located within each district, and the level of each group's activity. Establish reasonable benchmarks and measure improvements over time to determine where the program has succeeded, where it has fallen short, and where renewed efforts or strategies are needed. Provide needed support to groups that may be struggling to meet their goals.

Other Resources to Consider for the Program

Leverage schools and recreation centers as community hubs — Use schools and recreation centers as a means for multigenerational, multipurpose programs to bring needed resources to the community. These institutions are already valued centers of community services and gathering places, with rich social networks to tap.

AISD Parent Support Specialists are critical to your work in the community — They have a great relationship with families and can be resources for community outreach and organizing. Exploit their knowledge of the communities' needs and social capital.

Tap other funding options — Work with other city departments like Watershed Protection and Urban Forestry to fund some portions of the program. Programs with similar goals need to share resources where possible, and can jointly take credit for success while more strategically deploying precious city budget capacity.

Re-engage with companies that want to come out and help with projects and steer companies to areas with greatest needs — Local employers can be major sources of volunteers. They can be tapped to help with specific adopted parks that have struggled to get volunteers to work in their parks. (Apparently, this happened more pre-pandemic, but should be explored to restart and expand.)

Tap professional service firms that may have capacity or passion for free work — Formalize a pro bono program to leverage local professional talent. Many firms already provide pro bono work to charitable organizations. Also seek out volunteers from professional associations to help with a variety of tasks, such as the American Society of Landscape Architect for park planning and Grant Professionals Association for grant writing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the panel stressed that the kinds of changes needed in the Adopt-A-Park program will take time but can result in a more flexible, efficient program that is more culturally relevant to people of color. The program, however, cannot fix the broader social equity challenges the city faces on its own. In fact, some of the challenges it faces and the feedback the panel heard about are symptoms of those larger scale issues. Achieving the Adopt-A-Park program's goals is a journey that ultimately requires an integrated, cross-departmental approach by the city government and its partners in other sectors to tackle the related issues of housing, poverty, homelessness, health care, and education.

Recommendation	Action	Timeframe

Define and Formalize APF/ PARD Relationship	• Codify agreement in writing:
	  › Roles
	  › Operational processes
	  › Measurable program goals
	• Establish interpersonal rules of engagement
	• Strengthen the relationship bond
	  › Designate understudies to step in during times of staff transition
	  › Co-locate offices
	• Create an internal communication process for sharing information
	• Streamline project approval process
	  › Add staffing if needed
	  › Create criteria for automatic approval
	  › Identify priority projects
	• Create a working group to define metrics of success
		Short-term

Strategic Community Outreach	• Permit businesses and nonprofits to adopt parks • Replace the handbook with a toolkit • Rename or rebrand the program • Add a separate link to volunteer opportunities on PARD homepage	Short-term
	• Target needy areas using Equity Analysis Zone and Park Score Card • Create a communication strategy based on community self-interest • Create programming for community engagement • Use multigenerational approaches to outreach • Collaborate with intermediary organizations • Engage District 1-4 City Council members as program advocates • Regularly report both internally and externally	Medium-term Ongoing

Recommendation	Action	Timeframe

Facilitate Volunteering	• Adjust volunteer expectations
	  › Establish a sliding scale for volunteer hours
	  › Provide project management when needed
	  › Encourage quick wins like mulching for new adopters
	  › Establish a succession committee
	• Rally youth groups to support adopters as volunteers
	• Create collaborative learning opportunities
	  › Mentorship program, adopter database
	  › Reinstate in-person meetings
	  › Celebrate successes
		Medium-term Ongoing

Alternative Approach for Historically Underinvested Communities	• Offer an honorarium for adopters/neighborhood ambassadors • Target groups vs. casting a wide net for outreach • Use Park Score Card information in outreach efforts • Explore resources to retain and expand positions that support organizing and outreach • Disaggregate data to include race/ethnicity and other social indicators to create a data-informed approach to metrics	Medium-term Ongoing
Other Resources to Consider	• Leverage schools and recreation centers as community hubs • Engage AISD Parent Support Specialists for outreach and organizing • Tap funding sources working with other city departments • Engage local employers as a source of volunteers • Formalize a pro bono program to leverage local professional talent	Medium-term Ongoing

ABOUT THE PANEL

Gideon Berger, AICP
Panel Chair | Program Director, City Parks Alliance

Gideon Berger is an urban planner with more than 18 years of multi-sector experience using an interdisciplinary approach to help cities achieve their community development goals. As program director for the City Parks Alliance (CPA), Gideon oversees and provides comprehensive strategic direction as a convener, connector, and curator of leading-edge information to position parks for 21st century urban needs. He is responsible for curating the biennial Greater & Greener conference, leading CPA's program team to deliver a range of in-person and virtual learning opportunities, and providing strategic direction for research projects.

Gideon has deep roots in local government, including serving as transportation planning manager for Arlington County (VA), leading land-use planning as a senior city planner for the City and County of Denver, as a transportation planning consultant with Fehr & Peers, and as a transit-oriented development planner with Denver's Regional Transportation District. He served for nearly nine years as fellowship program director for the Rose Center for Public Leadership in Land Use, a technical assistance and professional development program for city leaders jointly operated by two professional membership organizations, the Urban Land Institute and National League of Cities.

Just before coming to CPA, Gideon led project management, policy analysis, event programming, and corporate fundraising as senior policy program manager for the Urban Institute's Housing Finance Policy Center. He also previously taught an urban planning graduate studio at the University of Colorado Denver, was board chair of the nonprofit pedestrian advocacy organization WalkDenver, and was an economic development researcher for the Center City District in Philadelphia. Prior to becoming an urban planner, he had a decade-long career in public communication.

Gideon holds a master of city planning degree from the University of Pennsylvania, a B.A. in communications from American University, and is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners of the American Planning Association.

Julio Carrillo, AICP, LEED AP ND
Senior Planner & Manager, Parkhill

With more than 17 years of experience, Julio Carrillo has managed and directed projects ranging from architecture and green building consulting to urban design and community planning. Through his diverse knowledge of project typologies and neighborhood design, he builds communities, not only projects.

Julio balances the abilities of diverse project teams and consultants, creating relevant solutions that support communities in their vision for the future. He also fosters a passion for sustainability – a passion he puts into action. Julio co-founded and directed Peru's Green Building Council, and he is a LEED Accredited Professional.

As a Certified Planner (AICP) and Peruvian Architect (CAP), Julio's experience and expertise go beyond borders. He is a chair in Austin's AIA Urban Design Committee, and currently serves as the chair of Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee at the Urban Land Institute of Austin, an organization that recognized his urban design practice with an Urban Design Award in 2019 (Battle of the Plans). In 2021 Julio was selected as an International Expert of a group leading a research team of young professionals planning the future of cities in Asia.

Julio is leading the implementation of PLANNING 2050, a commitment for cities, communities, planning professionals, firms, and organizations to take action that positively impact aspects of equity, climate change and resiliency.

Laura J. Cortez, Ph.D.
CEO & Founder, Cortez Consulting

Dr. Laura J. Cortez is the CEO and founder of Cortez Consulting, a public engagement firm in Austin, Texas. Laura is from the Rio Grande Valley and came to Austin in 1999 as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer. She earned her B.S. in environmental science from Drake University, and later went on to earn her MBA from St. Edward's University and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. Laura spent fourteen years in higher education serving as a scholar-practitioner.

In 2012, Laura served as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Texas at Austin where she served as the Director of Public Engagement. In this role, she led one of the City's most comprehensive public engagement projects known as the Colony Park Sustainable Community Initiative. Laura credits this experience with changing her professional trajectory. After completing the project, she launched her own firm, Cortez Consulting. Today, Laura is designing new ways to effectively engage the community, particularly those individuals who are traditionally left out of the public planning process. Cortez Consulting is involved with an array of projects across the City of Austin working to build positive relationships within the community.

During her free time, Laura is active in the local community. She is a graduate of Leadership Austin Essential Program and serves on the board of The New Philanthropists and Leadership Austin.

Michael Halicki
Executive Director, Park Pride

Michael Halicki serves as the executive director for Park Pride, the Atlanta-based nonprofit that engages communities throughout Atlanta to activate the power of parks. Working with over 100+ Friends of the Park groups, the nonprofit provides leadership, services, and funding to help communities realize their dreams for neighborhood parks that support healthy people, strong neighborhoods, vibrant business districts, a robust economy, and a healthy environment. Under his leadership, Park Pride has received 4-star designation by Charity Navigator's 4-Star Designation and the Platinum Seal of Transparency by Candid (formerly GuideStar) for several years running.

Michael manages staff and programs, supports the board, and leads/oversees advocacy, fundraising, public relations, and program development efforts. He was named as one of "50 Influential Nonprofit Leaders" by the Atlanta Business Chronicle in 2016 and 2017. He has been recognized as one of Georgia Trend Magazine's 2019 Notable Georgians and included in The Atlanta 500, Atlanta Magazine's list of Atlanta's most influential leaders, in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. Additionally, Michael serves on The Livable Communities Council of the Urban Land Institute - Atlanta.

Warinda Harris
Organizer, Central Texas Interfaith

Warinda Harris is an organizer with Central Texas Interfaith (CTI), a nonpartisan, multi-issue coalition of 50 congregations, schools, worker organizations, public health clinics, and nonprofits that work together to address issues affecting the well-being of families and neighborhoods across Central Texas.

Drawing upon 20+ years' experience in interviewing, investigation, and storytelling, Warinda identifies, develops, and promotes community leaders, training them to share and shape their stories and build connection with others in order to implement public action. Warinda's most recent work includes coordination of CTI's partnership with the local school district to explore equitable access to Austin's green spaces.

Kathleen LéVeque, AICP
Assistant Director of Planning, Denver Parks and Recreation

Kathleen LéVeque serves as assistant director of parks planning in Denver's Parks and Recreation Department. Her team manages the parkland acquisition program, systemwide and vision planning, capital budgeting, community engagement, and coordination with the development community.

Kathleen has nearly 20 years of experience in traditional city planning and park planning. She has practiced in California, Colorado, and Illinois. Kathleen earned a master of urban planning and policy from the University of Illinois at Chicago and a bachelor of arts in sociology from DePaul University. She is accredited by the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP).

Monica Lopez Magee
Senior Vice President, Cities and Community Engagement
Children & Nature Network

As senior vice president of Cities and Community Engagement for the Children & Nature Network, Monica Lopez Magee helps city and community leaders develop programs, policies, and partnerships to provide children and families access to nature and its many health and academic benefits. She draws upon her master's degree in public leadership from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, undergraduate studies in environmental science, a decade leading and facilitating youth and family programs in urban settings, and her cultural heritage to create nature-based solutions that prioritize communities of color, transform public spaces, and foster love and stewardship of the natural world.

Monica's dedication to the outdoors carries into her personal life, where she serves on the Austin ISD Community Bond Oversight Committee and enjoys paddling and volunteering with her family.

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