

Urban Parks Helped By Conservancies

Urban parks, particularly in America, are often neglected and underfunded due to municipal budget shortfalls. Parks conservancies can be an effective tool to address this, as they can augment municipal budgets and create significant improvements to parks and the quality of life in cities.

PARKS CONSERVANCIES ARE nonprofit entities that raise private sector money for targeted improvements to parks. Fundraising often augments existing public funds, and conservancies typically work closely with municipal parks departments to best allocate funds. Conservancies also generate community support for their efforts.

“Public/private partnerships can create longer-term ways to keep parks a part of the community,” explains Tupper Thomas, president of the Prospect Park Alliance in Brooklyn, one of the numerous parks conservancies across the country. Private money not only can create improvements to parks that public money would not necessarily provide, but also enables parks to better withstand fiscal crises that adversely affect their maintenance. Public/private partnerships provide a set of checks and balances with regard to design and management of parks.

Some parks conservancies focus on an entire city’s system of parks, others focus on just major parks, and still others are formed to serve a single park. The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, and the Prospect Park Alliance in Brooklyn are just three examples of the range of conservancies that exist today. What they all have in common are improvements and upgrades that never would have occurred had the parks been reliant on city funding only, and the impacts of these improvements have helped reinvigorate their respective cities.

▷ **Pittsburgh.** The decline of steel-making had a precipitous effect on Pittsburgh, with the city’s population shrinking by half over the past 50 years. The parks declined along with other municipal services and in 1996 the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy (PPC) was created to bolster support and funding for the municipality’s four large regional parks: Frick, Highland, Riverview, and Schenley.

Meg Cheever, who has been president of the PPC since its inception, even working as a full-time volunteer initially, has overseen changes in the parks. “The formation of the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy mobilized significant private resources for parks and focused public attention on parks and has resulted, in our view, in significant improvements to the parks and the way the city operates them.” The PPC has raised over \$30 million in its ten years of existence.

A good relationship is critical for successful projects to be completed. The PPC works closely with the city to determine objectives and divide work on projects. For a recent renovation project at the entrance of Highland Park, for example, the PPC completed the pathways and flower beds, while the city reconstructed

the pool and fountain. For that project, the municipality and PPC used the same landscape architect, which helped with its coordination.

An important factor in garnering community support is for pilot projects to be in high-traffic areas. An early PPC pilot project, the 2001 Schenley Park visitor center and café in a renovated building, is in a visible location and is a big enough project to make an impact, but small enough to be done quickly.

One of the PPC’s most notable improvements is Schenley Plaza, located just outside of Schenley Park. Schenley Plaza sits on a former surface parking lot located between the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Schenley Park. It was completed last June at a cost of \$10 million and has become a focal point and a key community gathering space.

Community participation is absolutely vital, according to Cheever. “We encourage people to perform hands-on volunteer work in the parks,” she says. Volunteers help with ecological restoration, for example, including removal of invasive plants, slope stabilization, and planting of native species. The community can also get involved through various outreach and events, such as regular walks through various parks.

“As a region, I believe that we are waking up to the spectacular geography we enjoy and the realization that our parks, riverfronts, and green space are a strategic advantage,” says Cheever. “The conservancy has been a wonderful partner in the revitalization of the four great century-old parks of Pittsburgh,” says Tom Murphy, senior resident fellow at ULI and former mayor of Pittsburgh. “The conservancy’s work epitomizes a reach for excellence that shines out in the quality restoration of buildings and gardens and in



PITTSBURGH PARKS CONSERVANCY

In Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy is credited with mobilizing efforts to bring about significant improvements to the city’s four large regional parks, including Schenley Park, which has a plaza on the site of a former surface parking lot (shown above) located between two of the city’s universities and the park.

the community's renewed embrace of the parks.”

▷ **Louisville.** Frederick Law Olmsted designed the Louisville park system in the 1890s, which comprises a total of 18 parks and six parkways. The three largest parks—Cherokee, Iroquois, and Shawnee—anchor the system. The Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy was formed in 1989 to preserve and enhance the entire system.

Susan Rademacher was appointed the first executive director of the conservancy in 1991. She was named president of the conservancy in 2000, a position that also included the title of assistant director of Metro Parks, the Louisville city parks authority. Having both entities fund the position helps cement the public/private partnership and enables the two entities to work closely together. Moving forward, the conservancy will fully fund a CEO/president position, and also hire a historic preservation officer jointly with Metro Parks for continued public/private cooperation.

The Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy raises an average of \$700,000 to \$1 million per year, depending on project goals and plans, to augment municipal parks funding. Those dollars are allocated to projects agreed upon by the conservancy and city. The conservancy has completed significant projects in each of the main legacy parks.

Major projects include the Baringer Hill overlook shelter in Cherokee Park, Summit Field and the 2,400-seat amphitheater (2003) in Iroquois Park, and an athletic complex at Shawnee Park. Recent projects include the Big Rock Playground and drinking fountain in Cherokee Park, which was completed late last year, and the Shawnee Park rest shelter, which is due to be completed by the end of this year.

Rademacher notes that there is new residential development on infill sites near both Shawnee and Cherokee parks. She says she believes this is a direct result of improvements to

the parks. In fact, at Park Grande, a small condominium project overlooking Cherokee Park, units are selling for over \$1 million each, according to Rademacher.

Kate Chandler, executive vice president of the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, also emphasizes the role of the private sector. Without private sector funding, “many of the Olmsted Parks would be more run-down and have potential improvements that would be inappropriate in a historical context,” she points out. “The key for the conservancy is it brings the private sector to the table, whose funding enables the conservancy to ensure that all projects are completed with the historical context in mind.”

While the private sector is important, good civic leadership is indispensable as far as park restoration goes, according to Rademacher. “Louisville is blessed to have a mayor like Jerry Abramson,” she says. Abramson helped create the conservancy and has been a major supporter since.

▷ **Prospect Park—Brooklyn.** At 585 acres (236.8 ha), Prospect Park in Brooklyn contains the borough’s only lake and only forested area. The Prospect Park Alliance was formed in 1987 and has greatly enhanced the park, with a marked difference in both its condition and its usage.

Tupper Thomas has been the Prospect Park administrator since 1980 and president of the Prospect Park Alliance since 1987, a group that encourages the municipal parks department and the alliance to work closely on park projects and improvements. Thomas oversees a \$10 million annual budget, which augments the approximately \$3 million that the city allocates to operations and up to \$10 million the city provides in capital funding. Thomas is also cochair of the City Parks Alliance, a national organization composed of city parks leaders from across the country who work together to strengthen America’s urban parks.

Major projects include the Prospect Park Parade Ground, a \$12.5 million project over four years that restored the park’s historic fields. Since 1996, over \$10 million has been spent on extensive woodlands restoration. The Prospect Park Audubon Center, jointly developed by the Prospect Park Alliance and Audubon New York, is a one-of-a-kind trailblazing venture, and the first urban Audubon center in the nation. Opened in 2002, the Audubon Center is housed

In Brooklyn, the Prospect Park Alliance has been responsible for a number of improvements to Prospect Park; along with Audubon New York, the alliance created the first urban Audubon center in the nation, which is housed in the park’s renovated historic boathouse (below). In Louisville, the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy has completed projects in each of the city’s three largest parks, including the Baringer Hill overlook shelter (right) in Cherokee Park.



PROSPECT PARK ALLIANCE

in the historic boathouse. The renovation cost \$5 million, and operation costs for the center are divided among the alliance, Audubon New York, and fees and rentals. Thomas notes that the Audubon Center is a great example not only of a unique partnership, but also for its role as a catalyst for learning. Because of the Audubon Center, she says, “we have really taken the lead on environmental education.”

The role the Audubon Center plays brings up an important issue, according to Charles Bimbaum, president of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, a Washington D.C.-based organization dedicated to increasing the public’s awareness of the importance of cultural landscapes: “The future bridging the cultural/nature divide in an

age of diminishing arts education.” He says Americans suffer from “cultural amnesia,” and parks such as Prospect Park can quite effectively blend culture and nature.

All told, the work of the Prospect Park Alliance increased visitation by over 300 percent, and thousands of volunteers assist with park projects and activities. The alliance maintains a relationship with the greater Brooklyn public through its community committee, which consists of representatives from other organizations across the borough that provides input on the work of the alliance.

▷ **A New Conservancy in St. Paul.** Last September, the Minnesota chapter of the Association of Landscape Architects (MASLA) and the Cultural Landscape Foundation



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hosted a summit in the Twin Cities to assess the potential need for the creation of a parks conservancy there. The summit brought together executive directors of parks conservancies from around the country to address the long-term vision for the parks. The parks in Minneapolis and St. Paul have their roots in the unified vision of landscape architect H.W.S. Cleveland. There is considerable public support to maintain and enhance these historic landscapes. At present, St. Paul intends to create a conservancy. Residents and civic leaders in the city will look to conservancies nationwide for inspiration as they forge ahead in this effort.

Conservancies achieve a number of goals for parks systems. They raise substantial amounts of private dollars to augment municipal funding, which helps parks undertake major renovations and enhancements. They also form stronger community bonds through fundraising, volunteer opportunities, increased usage, and enthusiasm for parks. Most of all, they improve the quality of life in urban areas. **U**

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