

# 01

CITY PARKS FORUM  
BRIEFING PAPERS



## How cities use parks for...

# Community Revitalization

### Executive Summary

Parks are complex elements of a city. They can serve scores of different uses, may be specialized in their function, or can simply provide visual appeal for residents. However they work, they act to define the shape and feel of a city and its neighborhoods. They also function as a conscious tool for revitalization.

Parks can stem the downturn of a commercial area, support the stabilization of faltering neighborhoods, and provide a landmark element and a point of pride for constituents. For all these things to happen, the city needs to be open and aware of parks' potential to spur revival, and support the elements that are needed to make that happen.

### Key Point #1

Parks that serve as central walking, resting, and meeting places can revive failing or threatened commercial areas.

### Key Point #2

Renewal takes leadership, vision, and time; with these three ingredients, revitalization tends to attract ever more investment.

### Key Point #3

Community residents and the city, working together on a neighborhood park project, can turn around a distressed residential area.

### Key Point #4

Parks don't automatically lead to neighborhood revival; before investing, the city should make sure the relation of a park to its surrounding neighborhood will allow revitalization.

**KEY POINT #1:**

*Parks that serve as central walking, resting, and meeting places can revive failing or threatened commercial areas.*

In the 1960s Portland, Oregon's downtown business district began showing early signs of disinvestments, with stores starting to move to the suburbs. One suggestion to counteract the trend was to build an 11-story parking garage on the site of the old Portland Hotel. The ensuing public outcry killed the idea; instead, a square block plaza was built on the site.

Pioneer Courthouse Square, which opened in 1984, looks like a European plaza, with 66,000 bricks (each individually purchased as a fundraising device), few trees, and no grass. It functions as a public park, with streams of users walking, eating, talking, reading, watching, and listening, while professional and improvisational players perform, and events from the commercial to the political take place.

After the parking garage was defeated, Meier & Frank, the linchpin downtown retailer, considered closing its store. The city committed to building dispersed parking a few blocks away, creating a bus transit mall, and developing the MAX light-rail system to keep the retailer. Several years later, Nordstrom built a flagship store facing the square.

The momentum carried. Ever since the square officially opened in 1984 and the MAX started in 1986, the combination of central civic open space and dense transit connections has revolutionized the way Portlanders use their downtown—and how the commercial district has responded. Other retailers like Banana Republic, Gap, and Abercrombie & Fitch located there, and two shopping centers, Pioneer Place and the Galleria, were built. There is now discussion of erecting high-end, high-rise housing nearby.

Pioneer Courthouse Square, Inc., the management agency for the square, is considering putting in an ice skating rink to add another dimension to the facility's community draw. Says Square Director Karen Whitman, "My goal is to become the Rockefeller Center of the West Coast."

**KEY POINT #2:**

*Renewal takes leadership, vision, and time; with these three ingredients, revitalization tends to attract ever more investment.*

For more than 25 years, under the leadership of Mayors Bill McNichols, Federico Peña, and current Mayor Wellington Webb, Denver has been steadily restoring the South Platte River and its shoreline communities to ecological and economic health. The former misused, polluted area now features watersports, 15 new adjacent parks connected by a continuous trail, and numerous new commercial, cultural, and entertainment facilities. Its most recent park addition, opened in 2001, is the Commons, near the confluence of the South Platte and Cherry Creek.

The 23-acre Commons was placed in the Bottoms, a blighted area of the city that was the spot of Denver's 19th century founding. The naturalistic, Olmstedian park was constructed on land recycled from a former tangle of railroad tracks and warehouses. It opened 15 years after the charette that led to its vision and five years after the city bought the land. One of its edges curves along the river and is filled with native grasses in constructed wetland seeps; the other, facing the downtown streetscape, has formal walking paths flanked by carefully spaced trees.

The Commons has spurred significant residential and commercial redevelopment in the Bottoms. As of early 2002 developers have built or project building more than 1 million square feet of office space, 350,000 square feet of retail establishments, 575 hotel rooms, 928 units of condominium housing, and 782 units of rental housing. The national sporting goods company REI, which overwhelmingly locates in suburbs, is thriving in a converted power plant near Commons Park.

Downtown is walking or bicycling distance away, and an extension of the light-rail system is planned. Mayor Webb's commitment to build a park along the river seems to have been the signal the development community was waiting for. As Denver Developer Ray Suppa told *ColoradoBiz* magazine, "That was the catalyst. It's one thing to master-plan something; it's another to put in the roads and parks."

Commons Park and its surrounding neighborhood is proof of the resilience of cities, the ultimate strength of great locations, and of the ability of parks to send a profound message. It also teaches lessons about the power of following a vision and using public-private partnerships to incrementally restore the civic infrastructure in tandem with unleashing the economic vitality of a community.

**KEY POINT #3:***Community residents and the city, working together on a neighborhood park project, can turn around a distressed residential area.*

Baltimore's Patterson Park, a gift in 1827 from one of the founders of the B&O Railroad, provides a dramatically different snapshot of "green revitalization." A landlocked area, its rectangular form fits squarely into the grid of the surrounding row house neighborhoods of Butcher's Hill, Washington Hill, and Greektown. With its iconic hilltop Chinese Pagoda, Patterson Park has historically played a role in the relative stability of its ethnic communities.

In the 1970s, as Baltimore's economy deteriorated, the park and the community both began going downhill. The park's lake became clogged with cattails, most of the sports field light poles short-circuited because of water leakage, and the pagoda had to be fenced off. Vandalism and arson destroyed several beloved buildings. Benches in need of repair were removed by the city. In 1985, a racially connected beating further undermined the reputation of the area.

Because of disinvestments and racial tension Patterson Park's historic cohesion had become badly shaken; but individuals and several community organizations remained committed to saving the neighborhood, and the park served as the anchor for their efforts. The Southeast Community Organization and Friends of Patterson Park worked to have a capital improvement master plan adopted, repairs and renovations were made, and private funds (such as \$100,000 from the National Football League) were raised. At the same time, several community development corporations worked to get aid for housing construction and rehabilitation, and arts organizations scheduled events in the park, including a "water ballet" in the swimming pool and a "Stars, Stripes and Snowballs" big-band concert for Independence Day.

By the late 1990s housing demand began to increase and, while still affordable, prices were rising noticeably. Between 2000 and 2001 the average home price on the north side of Patterson Park rose by 8.2 percent, and in the first three months of 2002 it rose by another 12.9 percent (In contrast, during the same period housing prices for Baltimore as a whole declined.) Many of the new purchasers are now rehabilitating their properties.

Along with the gradual stabilizing of its surrounding seven neighborhoods, the park itself is getting significant upgrades. The renovated pagoda was reopened in April 2002; \$100,000 was raised privately to restore the 1893 fountain; and new perimeter lighting was installed. Most important, the city commissioned a detailed study of capital needs for the park's renovation.

"Patterson Park has had a tremendous influence in East Baltimore," says Craig Thompson, a realtor with Long and Foster who lives in the area. "When people were scared of it, it hurt the neighborhood. Now that people's perceptions are changing, it's a great attractant. Today it's just about impossible to find a house for sale right along the park."

**KEY POINT #4:**

*Parks don't automatically lead to neighborhood revival; before investing, the city should make sure the relation of a park to its surrounding neighborhood will allow revitalization.*

There's no guarantee that a city park will be a neighborhood amenity. Shunned or poorly maintained parks can be frightening places that negatively affect their surroundings. Poorly located parks and parks that mark the edges of neighborhoods can serve as barriers or as turf markers to everyone from youth gangs to mothers with toddlers to business people walking to work.

Also, not every successful park exerts a revitalizing influence on its surrounding neighborhood. Parks that are extraordinarily popular in their own right can have almost no impact on their surrounding neighborhood. This can be due to the physical and economic shape of the built environment around the park. If there is no capacity to allow for the growth of small private entrepreneurial enterprises nearby, or nearby residential uses, there can be relatively little street life in the vicinity of the park. Especially in the case of downtown parks, often when the business day ends, the park becomes desolate.

For these reasons, parks need as much thoughtful attention to design, location, and surrounding uses as every other constructed element in the city, from housing to retail to commercial to entertainment. When careful attention is given to selective park creation or improvement, it will likely have a great impact.

Elements to keep in mind when hoping to use city parks for community revitalization:

- 1. PHYSICAL:** A park should be both a worthwhile destination in itself and an attractive walking route to use in the course of doing other business.
- 2. POLITICAL:** Creating a park – or repairing it – should provide the opportunity for people in the neighborhood to get to know each other and work together for the greater good.
- 3. ECONOMIC:** The park should create such a distinctive presence that it gives retailers an opportunity to play off the “signature” and redouble the district's vitality. For a park in a residential area, the distinctiveness should give homeowners the confidence to renovate and upgrade.
- 4. CONTEXT:** The park must be located in a community that has the physical space, economic opportunity, and political commitment to revitalize.

**Resources**

Courthouse Square, Portland:  
[www.parks.ci.portland.or.us/Parks/PioneerCourthouseSq.htm](http://www.parks.ci.portland.or.us/Parks/PioneerCourthouseSq.htm)

Patterson Park, Baltimore:  
[www.pattersonpark.com](http://www.pattersonpark.com)

Commons Park, Denver:  
[198.202.202.66/South\\_Platte\\_River/template21140.asp](http://198.202.202.66/South_Platte_River/template21140.asp)

Cover photo: Commons Park, Denver, courtesy of Civitas, Inc.

**Note:** For an expanded discussion on this topic, please contact the author, Peter Harnik, Director, Green Cities Initiative, Trust for Public Land; 202-543-7552; [www.tpl.org](http://www.tpl.org).

**City Parks Forum Briefing Papers**

This is one in a continuing series of briefing papers on how cities can use parks to address urban challenges. We hope the information here helps you to create great urban parks in your city.

Please visit our website at [www.planning.org/cpf](http://www.planning.org/cpf) to learn more about The City Parks Forum.

**APA** Copyright © 2002 by American Planning Association  
122 S. Michigan Ave, Suite 1600, Chicago, IL 60603;  
[www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org)