



# How cities use parks for...

# Smart Growth

## Executive Summary

Parks are commonly thought of as the venue for “fun and games,” but that is only one role they play in a metropolitan environment. Urban parks, which broadly include parkland, plazas, landscaped boulevards, waterfront promenades, and public gardens, significantly define the layout, real estate value, traffic flow, public events, and the civic culture of our communities. With open spaces, our cities and neighborhoods take on structure, beauty, breathing room, and value.

Public understanding of the pivotal role that parks play in enhancing the quality of life in our cities is growing, along with an understanding of the links between the quality of city parks and sprawling growth on the fringe of cities. City parks are an important element of smart growth that addresses both the public’s need for greenspace and the role of greenspace in mitigating higher development density. The smart growth concerns of the public create opportunities for both public agencies and private foundations to leverage support for smart growth, “by making and “re-making” city parks that both strengthen urban cores and protect the fringe.

## Key Point #1

Parks have voter support to direct public funds toward growth management strategies.

## Key Point #2

Parks enhance mixed development and redevelopment strategies, offsetting higher density concerns with accessibility to greenspace.

## Key Point #3

Parks can both strengthen the urban core and protect the fringe from overdevelopment.

**KEY POINT #1:***Parks have voter support to direct public funds toward growth management strategies.*

Over the last decade, voters have overwhelmingly supported additional spending for parks and open space conservation. Since 1998, more than 750 measures have gone before voters across the country, with a successful passage rate of 80 percent. Nearly \$30 billion in new park and conservation funding has been created—more than \$4 billion in cities alone since 1996.

In the **November 2003 election**, voters created \$1.8 billion of new conservation funding, passing 100 out of 134 measures on the ballot. The use of new tax dollars to pay for parks and greenspace is a trend that recognizes the leveraging value of the enormous public interest in parks and greenspace. It is fueling new strategies and investments, blending regulatory and market-based tools to address the challenging issues of density, mixed use, and community livability.

This issue is important to voters from a number of smart growth angles. Voters prioritize water as a critical reason to buy land, no matter how it is expressed—from drinking water protection to protection of rivers and streams. Voters care about “natural areas,” not “open space,” which more often conveys a message of abandoned lots. And most importantly, voters care about creating parks for a reason—natural areas, recreation, and safe places for kids to play—rather than just creating parks that abstractly prevent sprawl.

In **Ann Arbor, Michigan**, 68 percent of voters approved a \$72 million bond measure for parks and open space in November 2003. The focus of the measure is to create a greenbelt around the city. “In neighboring communities there has been a very real and negative impact from sprawl, and the voters in Ann Arbor can see it themselves,” according to Doug Cowerd, co-chair of the campaign. “There has been an impact on quality of life and voters have shown they are willing to pay to try and affect some positive change.” (Trust for Public Land and Land Trust Alliance, 2004.)

**Miami, Los Angeles, and Raleigh, North Carolina**, have also benefited from partnerships with their counties, passing park measures worth hundreds of millions of dollars which are split between counties and cities for their separate priorities. Last November, voters in Raleigh passed a \$47 million bond measure with a 69 percent margin (Trust for Public Land and Land Trust Alliance, 2004). The funds will be spent over a seven-year period, which allows the city to pay them back without an increase in taxes. These funds can be further leveraged by use of a grant fund set up by Wake County. Grants are made for both planning and land acquisition. A 50 percent local match is required. Some municipalities have been allowed to pay their portion over time through a loan from the county.

In states where state programs will match local funding, including **Florida, Massachusetts, Colorado, and New Jersey**, local ballot measures have won partly on the availability of state funding matches that leverage local buying power. In 2003, in New Jersey, 27 municipalities passed measures ranging in size from \$180,000 to more than \$9 million (Trust for Public Land and Land Trust Alliance, 2004). Now 189 municipalities in New Jersey have dedicated open space taxes, generating more than \$200 million a year in funding.

**KEY POINT #2:**

*Parks enhance mixed development and redevelopment strategies, offsetting higher density concerns with accessibility to greenspace.*

City neighborhoods need to maintain or increase their population while staying attractive and livable; however, density often remains a contentious issue for city neighborhoods of all types and sizes. Many residents oppose high density because they believe it will consume open space, exacerbate parking and traffic issues, or threaten the existing quality of life. A strong policy promoting parks and greenspace can play a crucial role in addressing these concerns.

As many now understand, density is less the issue than design and amenities. A recent study in Texas showed that people are twice as likely to accept smaller residential properties if there is a park nearby (44.3 percent versus 18.6 percent) (Waugh, 2004).

**Vancouver, British Columbia**, is widely recognized as a leader in making high density work. That city's efforts stem from the adoption of their Central Area Plan in the late 1980s, which shaped a growth strategy emphasizing housing and neighborhoods first, known locally as "Living First." Vancouver's focus on a core-area open space system acts to mitigate higher density, and to tie areas together by allowing people to travel on foot. As Larry Beasley, co-director of Vancouver Planning, comments, "It's about the open space and the public realm being used to contribute to neighborhood form and identity. It's not about having useless private plazas, but instead shaping buildings to emphasize the respite of open public park spaces and squares that are an integral part of every neighbourhood building cluster." (Beasley, 2002.)

One barrier to infill development is the need for upgraded infrastructure, including parks, to attract developers. Some cities are trying to address this issue. In 1998, the city council of **Portland, Oregon**, approved a systems development charge (SDC) that partly offsets the costs of services needed to support new housing. At the current rate of \$1,630 per single-family unit, the residential development fee generates about \$1.5 million a year for park capital improvements. Based on the SDC, the city developed a 20-year plan to build more capacity into the park system ([www.portlandparks.org/Planning/SystemDevCharge.htm](http://www.portlandparks.org/Planning/SystemDevCharge.htm)).

Across the country, 11 of the nation's largest cities, including Ft. Worth, Chicago, and Albuquerque, use impact fees to try to offset the costs of services delivered with new housing.

**KEY POINT #3:**

*Parks can both strengthen the urban core and protect the fringe from overdevelopment.*

There is an important connection between open space/park programs and urban/metro growth policy. By reducing or eliminating some of the infrastructure and financial incentives for developing low-density "edge cities" far from the centers of metropolitan areas, cities can be created that have both vitality and environmental sustainability. A dense, vital central city helps decrease the pressure for peripheral development, while policies that limit development at the edge encourage the kind of infill development that helps keep central cities alive.

Although public interest and support for new conservation programs is high, elected officials rarely leverage city park projects and other green infrastructure into regional policies that protect against sprawl.

In an attempt to persuade cities and counties to think more about smart growth, **Maryland's** Priority Places Strategy uses the "carrot" of state funding, including infrastructure funds, as incentive for local governments to redirect development to existing growth areas. The program has helped support neighborhood redevelopment as well as protection of rural and open space resources with grants for land conservation ([www.smartgrowth.state.md.us/mission.htm](http://www.smartgrowth.state.md.us/mission.htm)).

**Austin, Texas**, is seeking to control sprawl by focusing on the protection of drinking water. After a comprehensive mapping project showed that new housing construction was negatively affecting the city's all-important drinking water source, the Edwards Aquifer, the city decided to direct its public transportation and park investments to East Austin in an attempt to attract developers to concentrate growth on the less sensitive east side of town. East Austin is not only outside the drinking water protection zone but also is an area historically underserved by parks (Blaha and Harnik, 2000). Austin's 2004 Smart Growth map shows four new destination parks, all the city's proposed new rail corridors, and proposed infill development targeted to its "Desired Development Zone" on the east side of the city, and extensive watershed protection goals for the west part of the city. Since 1998, Austin has raised \$153 million through ballot initiatives for parks, open space, and watershed protection.

**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**, has also been aggressive in linking neighborhood conservation and rural development in its comprehensive plan, *Sioux Falls 2015: A Growth Management Plan* (Schmidt, 2002). While managing growth at the periphery—including mandating high-density projects and investing in new parks—Sioux Falls has aggressively redeveloped brownfields and vacant lands in its central city with the help of investments in its parks and trail system.

Regional park partnerships can work for growth management when multiple jurisdictions coordinate, and sometimes collaborate, on park plans that serve multiple needs across the region. Led by the Metropolitan Council, the seven counties surrounding the Twin Cities in Minnesota work together on a regional park and greenway plan that extends from rural sites that protect water quality to neighborhood parks and playgrounds in **Minneapolis and St. Paul**.

Goals to protect natural areas in rural and suburban areas, as well as equity “gaps” in urban areas, are combined in planning and public outreach strategies. The Metropolitan Council received an award this year from APA’s Minnesota chapter for its regional growth plan, which emphasizes four smart growth policies including conservation of natural resources for parks and economic benefits ([www.metrocouncil.org/parks/parks.htm](http://www.metrocouncil.org/parks/parks.htm)).

Based on the experiences of Maryland, Austin, Sioux Falls, and the Metropolitan Council in Minnesota, a parks/growth management policy effort can be effective if it is strongly supported by elected officials, the business community, and the general public. Their leadership requires continuing efforts on the part of local planners to keep citizens involved in the planning process, and to keep parks positioned as a redevelopment and growth management tool.

## Resources

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Waugh, Dave C. 2004. “Buying New Urbanism: A Study of New Urban Characteristics That Residents Most Value.” Texas State University-San Marcos, Department of Political Science (Pol. Sci. 5397), Spring.

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## 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.

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*Photo of St. Paul, Minnesota.*