

WHAT WE LEARNED: LESSONS FOR URBAN PARKS (2021)

A Comprehensive Analysis of the Institute for Urban Parks'
Partnerships Lab



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Introduction

2021 was a critical year for America’s urban parks. As the country emerged from the first waves of the COVID-19 crisis—a period that focused attention on the need for greenspace more than any other moment in modern history—players across the parks space, from municipalities to nonprofits, began to recover. Similarly, park groups adjusted to changing public health guidelines, including the return of in-person events and gatherings.

This was the background for the 2021 Partnerships Lab led by the Conservancy’s Institute for Urban Parks. Over the course of the year, the Institute worked alongside eight urban park groups of various sizes to develop plans and strategies for growth in the post-pandemic period, one in which parks are likely to continue to receive increased public interest. Through the Lab, the Institute noted several emerging trends and common challenges. This report acknowledges that individual park groups may face these issues to differing degrees; however, still, these experiences provide useful insights.

The following report is based on the Partnerships Lab work with:

Centennial Park Conservancy (Nashville, Tennessee)

Downtown Detroit Partnership (Detroit, Michigan)

Denver Park Trust (Denver, Colorado)

Friends of Governors Island (New York, New York)

Friends of Hudson River Park (New York, New York)

Friends of Mosholu Parkway (Bronx, New York)

Marine Park Alliance (Brooklyn, New York)

NeighborSpace (Chicago, Illinois)

Key Takeaways

Based on research from the Partnerships Lab, seven actions have been shared that organizations can take this upcoming year:

1. Identify and foster connections with other park organizations
2. Develop an audience engagement strategy
3. Advocate for streamlined signage in the park
4. Build DEAI into organizational infrastructure at all levels
5. Take advantage of existing connections to grow an organization's reach
6. Advocate for citywide or governmental support for park jobs
7. Build a workforce lifecycle into pitches to funders or partners

Emerging Trends

1.1 There is a growing emphasis on the multiple values parks, greenspaces, and open space add to local communities. Park support organizations have widely developed a consensus around the benefits their park's programming, organizing, and advocacy provide—namely economic, environmental, health, social cohesion, and equity. This makes for much stronger pitches to policymakers for funding and resources. Yet like parks departments nationwide, these organizations face obstacles in data collection and, as a result, often lean on weaker anecdotal or literature-based evidence.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

CHICAGO'S NEIGHBORSPACE (CHICAGO, IL)



Figure 1. Graphic provided by NeighborSpace and Borderless Studio.

Chicago's NeighborSpace, an urban land trust that protects a growing network of 130 spaces that fall outside the traditional park and preserve models, developed a framework for story-building focused on community-governed spaces. Their work in the Lab sought to deepen the narrative around this stewardship and facilitate communication with multiple audiences.

"Community gardens and farms are increasingly understood as an important part of cities' social infrastructure—the physical spaces, organizations, and actions that support civic life," said Ben Helphand, its executive director. "Through the Partnerships Lab, NeighborSpace was able to develop a more dynamic vision of what really happens in and around community-managed spaces and develop a model that looks well beyond instrumental impacts."

1.2 Organizations are starting to think more holistically about their goals and impact. One of the most notable trends in the parks nonprofit space is a more wholesale approach to incorporating operational goals—like fundraising, equity, and workforce development—into all aspects of an organization's work and impact. Although smaller park groups have fewer resources, they seem to be on equal footing with larger park groups when it comes to thinking about these larger concurrent themes. Meanwhile, park groups across the board acknowledge that implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, from the board-level down, requires a cultural shift in how the organization sees itself.

CASE IN POINT: To better define their organizational vision, The Bronx's Friends of Mosholu Parkway (FOMP), a volunteer community-based organization, took part in a stakeholder and situation analysis, which identified opportunities for relationship-building and future collaboration.

1.3 Park groups are increasingly aware of their connections to their surrounding communities. Perceptions matter. Several park groups mentioned not sufficiently knowing their audiences or how programming is received by different demographics. Many voiced concerns over a perceived disconnect between local residents and their park: that neighbors didn't feel like they had a stake in the space's success, or that the programming offered didn't reflect the diversity of community needs – which, in several cases, may be the case. These shared sentiments are key starting points for deeper conversations around park equity and usage.

CASE IN POINT: To understand more fully the public's attitudes, South Brooklyn's Marine Park Alliance asked its board members and staff who they saw in the park, which produced important conversations about park usage and equity.

Common Challenges

2.1 Each city's ecosystem of urban park groups is unique, but park groups reported struggles to align their open space goals with partner organizations. Several park groups reported they are looking to better coordinate and collaborate with other park groups across their city or region. This disconnect prevented them from sharing best practices or larger organizing efforts.

ACTION: Identify and foster connections with other park organizations. Depending on a group's capacity, there are internal and external measures that can be taken to create these networks. Sharing calendars of other local organizations so events are better coordinated is one approach. Groups should also schedule regular touchpoints to discuss and develop opportunities to share services, collaborate, or advocate together. If an issue or need isn't addressed, tapping into national networks allows groups to look beyond their city to find park organizations with relevant expertise for advice on specific challenges.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

HUDSON RIVER PARK FRIENDS (NEW YORK, NY) &
CENTENNIAL PARK CONSERVANCY (NASHVILLE, TN)



Figure 2. Photo courtesy of Centennial Park Conservancy.

Hudson River Park Friends (HRPK Friends) and the Centennial Park Conservancy were both members of the 2021 Partnerships Lab cohort. Both organizations have built successful fundraising operations but struggled with a variety of development challenges as their organizations have grown. Through shared experiences and peer mentorship opportunities in the Lab, the two groups were able to connect and consult on common issues related to fundraising and development. Staff from each organization decided to continue this collaboration post-Lab by setting up a formal consulting relationship.

"Working with Hudson River Park Friends has been invaluable as we set up a formal Development department for the first time at Centennial Park Conservancy," said development director Justin Tam. "Understanding best practices for committees, CRM data management, and annual campaigns from a seasoned department head has truly helped us as we operationalize our fundraising efforts."

"It's a pleasure to be a mentor, or at least a continued resource, to Centennial Park Conservancy," said chief development officer Toby Pearce. "At Hudson River Park Friends, our work is not done, but we have come a long way in diversifying our funding streams by launching new and successful fundraising and marketing programs, events, campaigns, committees, and initiatives to raise the profile of the organization. Sharing best practices is how we uplift each other's development work, and I'm proud to share our accomplishments, and even challenges, to allow other organizations to grow, mature, and become great."

2.2 Both park patrons and the general public lack an understanding of who park groups are and what they do. Mirroring the disconnect mentioned earlier in the Emerging Trends section, park groups reported that public awareness is an ongoing challenge: Users often mistake these groups for others or remain unaware that a park they enjoy even has an organization attached to it. This hinders the groups' ability to attract volunteers and/or funders.

ACTION: Develop an audience engagement strategy. If a park is going to serve the public, it has to hear from the public. Each event or initiative organized by a park group, internal or external, has a specific audience—whether it's the public, funders, or the board and staff. In the case of a public audience, park groups should aim to collect data from a diversity of users—non-regular versus regular; morning versus afternoons; ages, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic status—pertaining to what they'd like to see in the park, and then tailor programming to meet those needs, as they will greatly vary. Meanwhile, funders and board members have separate interests, which can be better addressed if staff communications are aligned with them.

ACTION: Advocate for streamlined signage in the park. Often, a park group may help steward a park, but because of city bylaws, their logo isn't allowed in the space, or they're limited in what they can promote. Government relations teams could ask municipalities to adapt licensing agreements to allow for stronger public communication. If the park group is being asked to take care of the park, they should be able to promote themselves.

2.3 There is a disconnect between park group boards and issues of equity. The Institute surveyed board members from many of the organizations in the 2021 cohort and found that, on several occasions, members did not list diversity or inclusion as top priorities for their organizations. This disconnect evokes

greater calls for internal diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) training and more thoughtful recruitment of board members.

ACTION: Build DEAI into board infrastructure at all levels. While the Partnerships Lab has helped with many individual DEAI initiatives, groups should strive for a comprehensive strategy that instills DEAI values into every organizational process. That includes integrating DEAI priorities into board recruitment and onboarding; developing specific board policies focused on equity; fostering a shared language around DEAI; and scheduling regular trainings for existing board members. A culture shift is less likely to happen with piecemeal projects.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

THE DENVER PARK TRUST (DENVER, CO)



Figure 3. Photo provided by The Denver Park Trust.

The Denver Park Trust, founded in 2019, is a fundraising organization working in partnership with Denver Parks and Recreation to improve and add new parks in the neighborhoods that need them most. From the start, the organization has made a conscious decision to prioritize diversity and inclusion on their board and in their day-to-day practices.

During their time in the 2021 Partnerships Lab, the organization provided board and staff with DEAI training, developed guidelines for board membership, and established a community grants program. At

each phase of their development, the organization continues to intentionally keep the communities they serve at the center of all decision-making.

“As a young organization we came to the Central Park Conservancy Institute for Urban Parks so we could be more intentional with our growth,” said Frank Rowe, the executive director of the Denver Park Trust. “The Partnerships Lab helped us build a more precise foundation, re-emphasize equity and diversity in every aspect of the work we do, and recommit to our mission.”

2.4 There is a challenge in translating achievements or programming to the general public through media or other venues. Along with the perceived lack of understanding from the public, park groups report difficulties in getting their achievements, projects, or events into local media spots or other forms of public notification. This is typically coupled with a lack of organizational capacity for outreach or PR.

ACTION: Park groups should take advantage of existing connections to grow their reach.

There are a number of tools in an organization’s arsenal to raise visibility. First, organizations can promote through their own media, namely their website, newsletter, and social media channels, which can be bolstered by user-generated content. If capacity limitations prevent traditional PR opportunities, organizations should focus on cultivating a network of advocates through their boards, existing partnerships, and/or community ambassador programs. That being said, board and ambassador recruitment processes should account for media relationships and personal reach. Whatever the decision, cultivating a “storytelling” agenda within the organization, where both board and staff members are trained in “pitching” their work to reporters, funders, or the general public, is vital.

CASE IN POINT: The Downtown Detroit Partnership programs and manages nearly 2,000 events annually in Detroit’s downtown parks and public spaces. Since its inception, the organization has leveraged existing relationships and actively built strong connections with media partners, like Detroit Free Press, Detroit News, and WXYZ Detroit, to help promote their work and reach residents, visitors, and businesses.

2.5 Smaller park groups report a lack of capacity for workforce development, including initiatives like thoughtful recruiting, human resources, and DEAI training. Stymied even further from COVID-era labor shortages, groups are hobbled by an inability to scale up, which hinders their ability to invest internally. The inability to afford a human resource (HR) department, for example, is seen as a key obstacle to finding top candidates and handling internal management issues. Additionally, smaller park groups that want to do more fundraising face an operational catch-22: They need administrative staff to do so, which, in turn, requires fundraising. (This was a key theme of the Winter Urban Parks Roundtable held by the Institute.)

ACTION: Advocate for citywide or governmental support for park jobs. Although park groups are defined by their work in stewarding a public space, that doesn’t mean advocacy for institutional support, especially around workforce development, should falter. Park groups could continue to advocate city agencies or representatives for integrated approaches to green jobs promotion.

Demonstrating the capability to successfully train employees in climate-centric work lends a strong argument to cities or municipalities to bolster this hiring with funds or grant programs.

ACTION: Build clear workforce deliverables into pitches for funders or partners. Park jobs are widely diverse in terms of background and scope, which means that their hiring potential after is just as expansive. But park groups must show that potential when actively seeking funding or donations. A green-jobs-focused workforce lifecycle—packaged around work experience, career skills, and pathways—would allow future partners to envision what makes the park groups’ work invaluable, and why it’s important right now.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

FRIENDS OF GOVERNORS ISLAND (NEW YORK, NY)



Figure 4. Photo provided by Friends of Governors Island.

After persevering through the COVID-19 crisis, the Friends of Governors Island (FGI) wanted to build out a major gifts program to diversify their revenue streams and make the organization more resilient to disruption.

At first, the organization believed that in order to solicit a major gift, they had to have a new offering (i.e., a new program, a capital project, etc.). But as time went on, a shift occurred—something bright and shiny wasn’t necessary to solicit major gifts; in fact, if groups frame their programs in such a way, they risk quickly running out of staff capacity to keep generating new offerings. Instead, FGI has begun to focus on packaging maintenance and operations funding as relevant to each donor’s specific interests.

“Coming up with a plan for addressing our challenge required an analytic exploration and redefining how we thought about major gifts and their purpose. After the exploration phase, we realized that we need to dive in and put theory into practice in the real world,” said Merritt Birnbaum, the executive director of FGI. “At the end, we've already had our first successful donor solicitation and feel like we have a road map and new tools/skills to put into practice going forward.”

What Comes Next: A Partnership Lab Action Agenda for 2022

With the 2022 season fully underway, park groups everywhere are still navigating uncertainties as the COVID-19 crisis continues to ebb and flow. But the uptake of social engagement will build even further momentum for parks after an unprecedented two years of visibility and attention. Park groups should be ready to seize that moment and use it to develop lasting success strategies on a number of fronts.

Looking Ahead

The Institute for Urban Parks is excited to welcome a new cohort into the Partnerships Lab. The 2022 class includes:

- Civic Center Conservancy (Denver, Colorado)
- Downtown Providence Parks Network (Providence, Rhode Island)
- Friends of Morningside Park (New York, New York)
- Gathering Place (Tulsa, Oklahoma)
- Prospect Park Alliance (Brooklyn, New York)
- Queens Botanical Garden (Queens, New York)
- The Arboretum Foundation, University of Washington Botanic Gardens, and Seattle Parks & Recreation (Seattle, Washington)

About the Partnerships Lab

The Partnerships Lab leverages the resources and expertise of the Central Park Conservancy to help urban park organizations build their own capacity to plan, develop, and maintain great public spaces. The goal of the program is to strengthen organizations so that they can ensure communities receive the social, economic, environmental, and health benefits that well cared for parks and public spaces provide.

About the Institute for Urban Parks

The Central Park Conservancy Institute for Urban Parks, founded in 2013, draws on the Conservancy's history and expertise as a leader in the field of urban park management and public-private park partnerships to empower, inform, connect, and celebrate the individuals and organizations that care for urban parks so that all urban park organizations have the knowledge, leadership, connections, and capacity to create, maintain, and support great public spaces.