SHARED SOLUTIONS FOR EQUITABLE PARK DEVELOPMENT

Spring Urban Park Roundtable 2022
Shared Solutions for Equitable Park Development
Spring 2022 Urban Park Roundtable

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Gateway Arch Park Foundation
Tower Grove Park
Forest Park Forever
Great Rivers Greenway
Introduction

A park belongs to the public. As a kind of stage upon which the nuances of society are performed, a park can be perceived as welcoming one group and uninviting to the next, safe for certain users and dangerous for others, representative of one demographic while remaining ignorant of another. Deeper systemic issues embedded in race, class, and ability play out in our parks and open spaces, and whether these societal divisions were built into parks intentionally or unconsciously, they are always the result of decades, if not centuries, of specific planning decisions.

The events of these last few years, including the Covid-19 crisis, the Black Lives Matter protests, and general societal unrest, have shown why it’s never been more important for urban park stewards to confront what equity looks like in their park—and to consider what it takes to create a space truly open to all.

About the Urban Park Roundtable

The Urban Park Roundtable, held every spring, fall, and winter, convenes park professionals from around the country to collectively develop “next practices” in urban park management.

Equitable park development was the theme of the Spring Urban Park Roundtable, held in St. Louis, Missouri, on May 12 and 13, 2022. The first day featured group exercises, a panel discussion among the partner park groups, and a tour of Forest Park. The second day featured a summative exercise, tours of Tower Grove Park and Gateway Arch National Park, and a seminar discussion at Great Rivers Greenway.
What We Heard

Before the Roundtable commenced, participants were asked to describe the strategies they utilize to engage with local communities, translate history to users, and collaborate with other park organizations in their respective cities.

For local engagement, organizations mentioned events and programming as ways to attract a more diverse set of users and interests, while others noted relationships with local institutions and community advisory boards. For translating history, signage and social media were common responses, but participants also cited the importance of more intentional design and wording on all communications coming from the park. The extent to which attendees collaborated with other park organizations varied widely, stretching from a more basic level (information sharing and volunteer event coordination) to more advanced (meetings and advocacy).

And finally, when invited to submit questions on public-private partnerships in pre-event surveys, organizations wanted to know more about resources for parks without conservancies and federal funding; the different models for public-realm stewardship, like partnerships or alliances; the accountability of outside funders or government partners when it comes to community engagement; and the degree of community involvement in community planning and awareness.

Gathered from more than 35 respondents representing close to 20 park organizations in 10 different cities, this feedback helped guide the discussions and exercises.

Key Themes

By the Roundtable’s conclusion, four key themes arose:

- **Defining Community.** Who is this space for?
- **Engaging the Public.** Whose voices need to be heard?
- **Catalyzing Growth.** What does it take to build meaningful, lasting change?
- **Measuring Impact.** What do success and failure look like?
Key Theme: Defining Community

Before urban park groups begin to center equity in their processes and practices, it is worth exploring what is meant by “community engagement.” First, ask: Who is using the park, and for what purpose? The response to this will dictate what access or ownership looks like. By understanding the demographics and uses of an urban park, stewards can better answer a vital question: Who is not using the park, and why?

The following recommendations offer strategies on how to figure that out.

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1. **Create a sphere of impact.** Parks influence their surroundings. Cities and communities influence parks. Visualizing that interconnectedness can shed light on usership, which can be impacted by both where the park is located and who is able to visit it. Take time to note the diverse patrons and phenomena that occur in your park, your surrounding community, and your city. It will not only reveal unconscious biases regarding who one perceives as users—a crucial step in centering equity—but it will also demonstrate how unique each urban park is.

2. **Think through impact.** Parks cannot solve all of society’s ills, nor should they be expected to. But park groups can make meaningful changes in their programming and design that lend visibility and power to underrepresented voices. As groups sketch out their respective spheres of impact, they should discuss internally what is within their legal or institutional power to address.

3. **Consider relationships with institutions.** In addition to usership, urban parks have been shaped by external bodies and systems, like schools and universities, medical centers and hospitals, governments, and cultural institutions. These relationships sometimes mirror histories of land acquisitions in respective cities (e.g., town vs. gown), which can then inform the relationships with surrounding communities and users. Explore how these institutions use the space, what their definition of community is, and how you can best collaborate.

This completed “Sphere of Impact” exercise demonstrates the diversity of users interacting with a park or open space on a regular basis. (Source: Central Park Conservancy’s Institute for Urban Parks)
PARTNER HIGHLIGHT: GATEWAY ARCH FOUNDATION

No other landmark represents St. Louis to the world quite like the Gateway Arch. Since its opening in 1965, the world’s tallest arch has welcomed millions of visitors, who have ascended its 630 feet to catch unparalleled views of the “Gateway to the West.” And the area that it rests upon is unique in its own right: Situated in the heart of downtown, the Gateway Arch National Park is not only one of the first urban national parks, but it’s also the smallest.

But for decades, that land—which also includes the Old Courthouse, where the infamous Dred Scott decision was made, and the Gateway Arch Museum—was bifurcated. Interstate 44 (later I-70) cut across the park, severing the Arch grounds from the rest of the city. To cross it, visitors had to traverse a bridge that faced down lanes of high-speed traffic.

Like many other cities, transportation is a barrier to public-space access in St. Louis, a city with few public transit connections and a bike network only in its infancy. The accessibility of the Arch was a telling example of this inequity, as residents who relied on public transit—who are disproportionately low-income people of color—were effectively shut off from their city’s most prized monument. This, in turn, impacted who came to the park—and who didn’t.

“The Gateway Arch undeniably represents St. Louis to the entire world,” said Ryan McClure, the executive director of Gateway Arch Park Foundation. “St. Louisans have immense pride in the Arch, but as a place many residents would visit infrequently. Much of this had to do with the park being disconnected from the community.”

In the late aughts, city officials drafted a plan to address these issues. The project, named CityArchRiver, proposed decking the interstate with a land bridge, effectively reconnecting the Arch with downtown. Additionally, a nearby parking garage was slated for demolition; this would open the park to neighborhoods surrounding it. At the crux of city, state, and federal bodies, the new CityArchRiver 2015 Foundation—today known as the Gateway Arch Park Foundation—was tasked with working with partners to make that vision a reality.

“Gateway Arch Park Foundation was formed with the sole purpose of invigorating the Arch experience for all,” added McClure. “That cannot be accomplished without working in true partnership with many organizations, of varying cultures and values, toward a common goal: ensuring the Arch is for everyone. Today, we continue to work to keep this special place vital, welcoming, and well supported for generations to come.”

Source: Gateway Arch Park Foundation
Key Theme: Engaging the Public

Once an urban park group outlines the communities with whom they want to connect, the next step is engagement. One participant described public outreach as “a necessity, not an amenity”—just as important to park management as maintenance. Like any other conversation involving equity, the ways in which an organization presents itself—or even enters a space—can be fraught after years of mistrust. As with fundraising, it’s important to figure out the best strategies to initiate a conversation with your target audience.

The following recommendations offer guidance on how urban park groups can navigate community interactions.

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1. **Devise an audience engagement strategy.** No two communities, user groups, or institutions are the same, so a uniform approach to engagement isn’t sufficient for meeting diverse needs. An urban park group should brainstorm a unique set of strategies for each population it’s looking to engage, customized with known meeting spaces, hours that work well for said communities, languages spoken, and other features that will facilitate collaboration.

2. **Find trusted partners, or “credible messengers.”** If a neighborhood or demographic has a history of distrust with local institutions, then sometimes the urban park group isn’t the best body to single-handedly host feedback sessions or other engagement events. The organization should identify community figures or spaces (i.e., local activists, churches, etc.) that do have trust and seek out their help when needed. That comes with the understanding that regaining trust is an incremental process and won’t happen overnight. This is also the space to incorporate “deep listening” sessions, where park groups may hear about past missteps.

3. **Identify barriers to access.** City planning and the related public hearings have been built systematically to fit a predominantly older, white, middle-class resident’s schedule; if an urban park group is looking to engage residents holistically, this traditional schedule and format could prove problematic. Before each session, park groups should meet with community leaders to determine unique barriers to access and then design engagement opportunities based on those conversations. After each session, organizations can ask residents what’s bringing them to the meeting—and what may be hindering other community members from joining—and then try to provide resources (i.e., childcare, remote access, etc.) wherever possible. The “Chalk Talk” prompt below offers one approach to speaking about barriers out loud.

**Prompts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Infrastructure: What can parks do to improve equity through their physical infrastructure? What are the barriers to doing so?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic &amp; Urban Development: What role do or should parks play in ensuring equity in economic development, urban development, or capital projects?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Relationships and Communications: How can parks keep equity at the center of their community relationships and communications? What challenges do they face?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising: How can parks keep equity at the center of their fundraising efforts? What challenges do they face?</td>
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The “Chalk Talk” prompt allows for parks and open space organizations to openly discuss the challenges and opportunities they face across a range of equity-based issues.

(Source: Central Park Conservancy’s Institute for Urban Parks)
PARTNER HIGHLIGHT: GREAT RIVERS GREENWAY

In November 2000, the residents of St. Louis and surrounding counties overwhelmingly voted in favor of Proposition C, a measure for a one-tenth-of-one-cent sales tax dedicated to creating a citywide system of greenways, parks, and trails called the River Ring. The effort was part of St. Louis 2004, a nonprofit-led bid for an urban renaissance in the city. That was when the Great Rivers Greenway was born.

Great Rivers Greenway (GRG), now a public agency consisting of members of the city and counties represented, has made steady progress in the last 22 years, with more than 128 miles of greenways already built. But its most ambitious project to date is the Brickline, a 10-mile-long network that will connect 14 historically segregated neighborhoods and major destinations, including Fairground Park and Tower Grove Park. The idea is to “reknit” a city torn apart by misguided urban planning.

“We often ask: How are we engaging folks?” said Todd Antoine, the chief of planning and projects at Great Rivers Greenway. “When we’re creating these public spaces, who are they really for?”

Indeed, years of community engagement prefaced the construction now underway. Great Rivers Greenway staff continue to spend countless hours in the neighborhoods impacted by the project, namely St. Louis’s Northside, surveying residents about what they want to see in their backyard—a crucial step in the organization’s efforts to overcome a historical (and reasonable) distrust of government-led projects. The agency’s outreach now includes hosting Northside Night Out, a community event so popular that it’ll be returning in the coming months.

“When we first came to the community, engagement became less about the project and more about community needs,” said Shaughnessy Daniels, the civic engagement manager at GRG. “Then when we hosted Northside Night Out, a neighbor said they always wanted an event like that. It’s not just about placemaking, but also place keeping.”

Source: Great Rivers Greenway
Key Theme: Catalyzing Growth

Every urban park has a set of user groups unique to its surroundings, history, and culture. But truly meaningful relationships with these user groups must be constructed around substantive trust and inclusion. Internally, park groups need to ask themselves whether they have the infrastructure to take on change, and if not, what would allow for it? Externally, partnerships shouldn’t feel like rubber stamps of approval or checkmarks; instead, they should be a two-way street of feedback that genuinely shapes how an urban park executes programming and projects.

The following recommendations offer insights on how to build lasting, effective change both within and outside an organization.

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1. **Create representative advisory committees.** Just like the cities they are a part of, urban parks are constantly changing—be it in demographics, usage, or even the landscape itself. This means that a one-off engagement with a specific group or community is wholly insufficient for fostering an effective partnership with community groups. Instead, for whatever the initiative or project may be, park groups should look to create committees that meet on an ongoing basis and consist of the respective parties of interest. This is also a key opportunity to be intentional about communication and to establish more permanent collaborations with other park groups to share best practices.

2. **Lay out guidelines for incorporating feedback.** What’s the point of a partnership if the feedback isn’t ever acted upon? When they fail to effectively respond to community feedback, public bodies or advisory committees can be seen as mere facades for back-room decision-making. While some suggestions can be untenable in practice, urban park groups should set clear expectations at the start as to what is feasible or not from an institutional perspective.

3. **Devise protocols for ongoing engagement.** Once the proper mechanisms of engagement are installed, urban park groups must consider how to best incorporate community input into organizational processes and practices. If engagement is seen as continuous, then how the park group functions and plans for the years ahead should reflect that feedback loop. According to participants, this can be one of the toughest parts of the process. “How hard are you actually trying to change?” asked Phyllis Boyd, the director of Indy Parks and Recreation. “You have to be ready to accept tough answers there.”
PARTNER HIGHLIGHT: TOWER GROVE PARK

Tower Grove Park is the most expansive Victorian-era park in America and one of the country’s oldest public-private park partnerships. But long before any of that, it was Osage Nation country. The Osage people lived on the land that is now Missouri—and specifically St. Louis—for more than a millennium before European settlers arrived in 1763. The tribe was then forced to cede the land to the U.S. government through the Treaty of 1808. Remnants of its foothold there were all but erased—so much so that Tower Grove Park found that 80 percent of its users could not name one Indigenous tribe.

That was the reality facing Tower Grove Park when the organization began its East Stream restoration. Daylighting the stream—which was buried underground in 1913 due to sanitary concerns—was a top priority in the park’s 2017 Master Plan. Its revival, which is nearing completion this year, is the most transformative project undertaken in the park in decades.

As part of this process, the park staff wanted to ensure that any project of such scale shed light on what came before. Tower Grove Park reached out to representatives of the Osage Nation to collaborate on a landscape design that clearly reflected the heritage of their people. “We know we didn’t have the expertise to have these conversations,” said Bill Reininger, the executive director of Tower Grove Park. “We often find that we’re catching up with the communities around us.”

What resulted was a bevy of strategies created in dialogue with the Osage Nation: signage detailing the Osage’s history there, native plantings to create an ecosystem that mirrors what the Osage relied upon for centuries, and community gathering spaces to teach current and future generations about the history of the land. The project, explained Reininger, was an important lesson for the group on how to seek out advice and then incorporate it holistically.

“It’s a constant learning experience,” said Reininger. “And we sought out help, too. We asked St. Louis University for guidance on updating our DEIA policies, like changing our hiring practices to root out nepotism, removing masculine verbs from job descriptions, and learning about innate practices and unknown biases.”

Source: Central Park Conservancy’s Institute for Urban Parks
Key Theme: Measuring Impact

Is equity measurable? If so, what are the benchmarks? And what do you measure for? These questions remain largely unanswered; as one participant described it, “equity is a spectrum,” so achieving it within an institution isn’t always a straight shot from point A to B. With equity itself constantly being redefined, organizations will need to determine criteria for results not only sensible to their specific situation but also substantial enough to make a difference.

The following recommendations offer strategies for gauging progress on achieving equity.

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1. **Draft an “Equity in Practice” checklist.** After an urban park group has defined its goals, engaged the public, and started to build out partnerships, the next phase is to monitor. Creating an “Equity in Practice” checklist is a helpful tool: Organizations can map out the core questions that arose during planning conversations and use the list as a means of checking in with goals or targets. The questions may change over time, and that’s natural—what’s important is that they are addressed or worked on in some way. As one participant noted, “The work can seem so big, so it’s good to celebrate the small victories.”

2. **Leverage partnerships for feedback.** A healthy partnership is one where one party can ask the other how well it is doing and what it should change. Urban park groups should use their community advisory committees and other means of local outreach as another way to measure success. Surveys, questionnaires, and feedback sessions are all potential tools to use here.

3. **Regularly revisit equity measures.** As mentioned, the definition of equity is fluid in accordance with societal norms and national discourse; in recent years, for example, LGBTQ+ representation has joined gender and racial equity as a matter of immense relevance. With that in mind, urban park groups should plan to reflect upon their equity goals on either a bimonthly or annual basis, with the idea that measures or targets could—and should—change.
PARTNER HIGHLIGHT: FOREST PARK FOREVER

Dubbed the “Heart of St. Louis,” the 1,326-acre Forest Park has played a pivotal role in the city’s development, hosting the 1904 Summer Olympics as well as a number of local institutions, including the St. Louis Zoo and Missouri History Museum. The greenspace is centrally located, abutted by key thoroughfares and Washington University. Today, the extensive care needed for the sixth most popular urban park in the United States, with 13 million visitors each year, is overseen by Forest Park Forever.

After years of raising funds and hundreds of community meetings, the nonprofit is spearheading a $100 million renovation of the park, guided by its Master Plan. That has led to restorations of natural areas, landscaping, and other key amenities, like the Visitor and Education Center. But one thing the Master Plan didn’t include is basketball courts. In the city’s two largest parks—Forest Park and Tower Grove Park—there are no spaces to play the widely popular sport. That oversight, staff officials admit, is due to a lack of engagement.

“Parks in St. Louis struggle with a perception of being inhospitable to Black populations,” said Pam Washington, a board member of We Stories, a nonprofit in St. Louis that initiates important conversions with families around race. “Basketball courts were previously among the sole spaces for Black youth to safely gather and ‘just be,’ but the courts were perceived by white leaders as incubators of crime and removed in the 1990s, as were entrances connecting [parks] to Black neighborhoods.”

Now, there are plans to change that. By 2023, Forest Park is set to reinstall the long-awaited basketball courts, and it’s now in the process of siting them. In addition to consulting the public, they’re using these installations as an opportunity to engage people who may not regularly use the park—or those who do visit the park but are rarely consulted, like children. That takes rethinking how the park goes about public outreach in the first place.

“Even though a park is free, some communities don’t feel welcome,” said Lesley Hoffarth, the president and executive director of Forest Park Forever. “We have our best practices of engagement, but there are unintended consequences to best practices. What’s exciting for one stakeholder will hurt another. Best practices require constant re-evaluation.”
What We Learned

After the Roundtable, a survey was distributed to participants to gather constructive feedback for future action. The respondents overwhelmingly said that sharing stories and best practices about how they maneuvered through complex issues of parks equity—including DEIA training, board representation, and inclusion—was the most valuable takeaway from the two days. Going forward, respondents said that they would like to hear more from underserved parks in order to incorporate a greater diversity of perspectives and experiences into these discussions. And in terms of what organizations hope to implement based on the Roundtable discussions, the key word was communications: how to better reach underrepresented communities, how to collaborate more closely with government partners for these dialogues, and how to reflect upon and incorporate inclusion throughout all organizational processes and materials.

Conclusion

The two-day conference produced a groundswell of actionable ideas, as this report demonstrates. Yet a resounding consensus amongst participants was that equity is not a stopping point but an ongoing commitment. Process is part of the goal. While it’s vital to every urban park group at this moment—especially given the complex history of parks as a part of urban racial and economic segregation—it’s also a process that demands difficult questions and even tougher answers. By confronting these obstacles, and learning how to overcome them, will create urban parks that are more responsive, accessible, and welcoming to all who enjoy them.

Looking Ahead

The fall 2022 Urban Park Roundtable will take place in Los Angeles on October 13 and 14, 2022. It will be hosted in partnership with Grand Park as part of their 10th anniversary celebration. The theme of the two-day gathering is “Convening Community in Urban Parks.” We’ll explore how urban parks can cultivate community ownership and dialogue through intentional communication, programming, and relationship-building. Our hope is that groups can leave with tangible strategies for improving accessibility and fostering a sense of belonging in—and collective ownership of—urban parks. Shortly thereafter, a report like this one will be issued to all Roundtable participants past and present.

About the Institute for Urban Parks

The Institute leverages the resources and expertise of the Central Park Conservancy 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. Founded in 2013, the Institute runs seven programs designed to support urban park and open space organizations by sharing the knowledge and tools necessary to plan, develop, and maintain great public spaces.