STRATEGIC ADAPTATIONS IN URBAN PARK MANAGEMENT—RESPONDING TO COVID-19

Volume 1:1 Urban Park Roundtable Reports
Executive Summary

With the country facing its third economic downturn in 20 years, urban parks (along with other public spaces) are weathering significant cuts across all funding sources. At the same time, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, parks are experiencing increased visitation and usage, limitations to programming, and the need to implement a wide variety of new safety requirements. In light of this, the Institute for Urban Parks virtually gathered participants from more than 60 urban park organizations for our fall 2020 Urban Park Roundtable to examine how urban parks and park partnerships have responded to these concurrent challenges. To meet this moment, urban park managers are leveraging three distinct strategies:

- Making technology the core of community connection
- Designing for (social) distance for visitors and volunteers
- Promoting innovative programming and essential safety guidelines via new partnerships

Additionally:

- As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, urban parks will need to channel creativity and innovation to meet the needs of visitors. A number of attendees described this pivot as transitioning from reactive responses to proactive responses in the work that they do.
- Urban parks are working to balance conflicting goals. Parks are juggling issues related to public health regulations, open space access, and First Amendment activities, while ensuring that people can use parks and open spaces as an outlet for exercise, exposure to nature, and social engagement.
- To support budget planning and resilience, organizations successfully engaged new and active donors and found opportunities to convert restricted gifts to unrestricted.
- Offering a hybrid experience—a combination of virtual and in-person programming based on local health regulations and space available—is critical. Both public agencies and nonprofit organizations successfully demonstrated the use of technology to continue or expand programming virtually.
- Park agencies may continue to be called on to support non-park issues, including food distribution, COVID-19 testing, and, likely, support for the largest vaccination program ever attempted.\footnote{The College of Physicians of Philadelphia. (n.d.). The History of Vaccines. https://www.historyofvaccines.org/}

Introduction

On November 12 and 13, 2020, over 70 representatives of more than 60 public agencies and nonprofit urban park organizations gathered virtually to examine how urban parks and park partnerships have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussion sessions focused on recovery efforts, current strategies, and future implications for urban parks.

To provide context as well as specific examples of lessons learned in urban park management, select staff from the Grand Park (Los Angeles, CA) leadership team—Julia Diamond, Executive Director; Marty Preciado, Director of Programs; and Robert Gonzales, Director of Operations—spoke about the overall challenges to their park in downtown Los Angeles, California, and specifically their experiences since March 2020. These included the pivot to digital programming, with a revamped art installation effort, balancing social justice protests, and continuing public access for visitors to the park.

After analysis of this featured presentation and of subsequent small group discussions, the following key takeaways emerged:
MAKING TECHNOLOGY THE CORE OF COMMUNITY CONNECTION

An infusion of new technology and technological skills was required to replicate in-person the programming, operational, and fundraising activities that are essential components of a park’s vitality. The variety of phone calls, virtual meetings and presentations, email updates, and social media posts, already embedded in daily operations, became even more important as the pandemic unfolded.

Participants spoke at length about changes to programming, in particular. In-person events were initially canceled, but practitioners began experimenting with virtual options relatively quickly. Park tours and volunteer training were two of the most frequently mentioned examples of early pivots, as they lent themselves to video presentations most readily. For larger events and programs, collaborations with traditional media or tourism partners were an effective means to promote and highlight alternatives to in-person programming and in some cases created opportunities for new partnerships. For example, for the first time Grand Park and the Music Center partnered with ABC7/KABC-TV Los Angeles to broadcast the first hour of the Fourth of July Block Party: Home Edition, which is a popular annual celebration.

For in-person programming, a combination of reservations, tickets, or timed-entry permissions had to be issued through park websites, subject to guidance and restrictions imposed by the local health department. As summer progressed, additional hybrid programming and event options were successfully implemented. For example, exercises classes concurrently hosted virtually and in-person (with social distancing and masks), environmental educational events, public art openings, and a series of lectures focused on art, history, and horticulture.

Given the heightened state of the pandemic, a combination of virtual and hybrid programming is expected to continue well into 2021. In terms of moving from a reactive to proactive approach, several participants advocated using the winter months to shift from the reactive focus of the past eight months to a much more proactive, planned focus that clearly establishes realistic programming goals for 2021 and capitalizes on the opportunity to reach constituents through virtual programming. Many urban park agencies and organizations feel sustained programming is an essential way to connect people to parks, especially parks in downtown areas that have fewer residents. Opportunities for in-person programming will remain restricted as long as the pandemic continues. Given restrictions on crowd sizes mandated by mayors and governors in many regions of the country, a strategic and sustained virtual platform remains critical.

Technology also supported fundraising in several important ways. Pre-pandemic, organizations used traditional methods (mail, email, phone calls) to reengage lapsed donors. As both park agencies and nonprofits announced pandemic-related budget cuts, organizations increased calls for support through social media and earned media—targeted to lapsed, current, and prospective donors. Several organizations reported that they received both significant numbers of small donations from new donors and unrestricted operating and programming gifts from active donors. Additionally, some philanthropic foundations and individual donors agreed to reclassify formally restricted gifts to unrestricted with the express purpose of supporting budget planning.

At the start of the pandemic, in-person fundraisers were canceled. By the late summer, hybrid, socially distanced, or remote alternatives began to emerge, utilizing video conferencing for parties and galas paired with at-home kits filled with park swag or food and drink. While funds raised were generally less than those brought in by in-person events, many organizations were encouraged by the level of support received and felt these events were critically important for keeping donors engaged.

In addition, organizations shifted the timing of “the ask” in many virtual events, such as annual meetings, donor programs, and auctions. Organizations made donation requests in advance versus the day of the events. Some organizations planned televised virtual holiday tree lighting events with “text to give” campaigns to broaden public support through use of established technologies. Timely “thank you” messages by email, video, text, and mailed letters continue to be an important practice.

Earned revenue dropped substantially, especially for parks located in downtown urban centers. Office and retail staff in urban cores worked from home, were furloughed or laid off, and some companies folded entirely. Limits on the
number of people who could gather, how food and drink establishments could operate, and restrictions on events also contributed to the drop. Concessions, events, and public programming began to return slowly in the summer months, subject to health department restrictions, and will likely remain slow until employees return. Corporate support, especially through annual donations and group volunteering, decreased substantially as well. Participants suggested alternative partnerships with local schools, gyms, and concert promoters—providing access to outdoor space for programming in exchange for earned income, though at smaller levels.

DESIGNING FOR (SOCIAL) DISTANCE FOR VISITORS AND VOLUNTEERS

There was tremendous uncertainty in the early days of the pandemic. Very little was known about how the virus spread and what safety procedures were necessary to keep both park staff and visitors safe. Parks closed indoor facilities, added signage, equipped staff with protective equipment, and created new protocols. These protocols covered areas like vehicle usage, sanitizing, and social distancing. Urban park managers faced a key challenge in keeping up with the shifting guidance from the federal, state, and local authorities. Park staff, often those in recreation and programming positions, were required to change roles. They supported food distribution, provided wellness checks for seniors, and served as public health officers and COVID-19 ambassadors in their parks. Park staff also encouraged social distancing, distributed masks, and reported congestion points in parks and on trails as usage increased. For most parks, increased usage combined with drops in earned revenue and loss of staff proved challenging. Some parks, especially those with natural or human-created barriers to entry, implemented reservation or timed-entry systems to manage visitation, a process that will need to continue well into 2021.

To reinforce the need for social distancing, park organizations used a variety of communication methods, including social media updates and in-park signage featuring unique COVID-19 related messaging, in addition to existing signage. Keeping visitors updated on openings and closings has required consistent management. Winter months should also be used to prepare integrated communication strategies for the warmer months. Some of the strategies discussed included adding social distancing ambassadors, designing activity books with safety and educational messaging for young visitors, and creating a social distance fitness space with directional signage.

Volunteering in parks also changed dramatically. Most activities ceased, including corporate volunteering and the gifts that usually accompany their volunteer support. Most volunteer programs remain on pause, though some have re-emerged with restrictions, such as experienced volunteers working independently or in small, socially distanced groups. Many park organizations, facing increased visitation and trash, pivoted to offering opportunities to experienced volunteers, armed with “green and go” kits, with a focus on litter removal.

In some parks, individual volunteers, especially those performing “zone” work in tandem with park staff, returned throughout the summer and fall. These volunteers performed park ambassador roles with modifications. Still, given staffing reductions and continued restrictions on group size, individual volunteers will play an important role in supporting a growing backlog of maintenance needs. Additionally, with the ongoing pandemic and a large vaccination program beginning to unfold, park agencies may be asked to tackle an even larger role in supporting communities. Planning volunteer activities and prioritizing volunteer roles over the winter and spring months of 2021 is critical.

PROMOTING INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING AND ESSENTIAL SAFETY GUIDELINES VIA NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Urban park agencies and organizations experimented with a range of arts and cultural programming using virtual and hybrid methods. Examples include webinars, performances, concerts, lectures, and even a virtual blessing of Dix Park in Raleigh, North Carolina, by local Native American tribes.

New collaborations between park partners and a range of atypical organizations resulted in successful experiments and lessons learned on a variety of topics, ranging from social justice to coordinated food distribution to public health
education. After the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May 2020, social justice movements filled public spaces and parks across the country in the form of protests, marches, calls to action, vigils, and demonstrations. For both public park agencies and their nonprofit partners, responding creatively to accommodate both social movements, and in some cases, longer-term encampments in parks, was particularly challenging. Park organizations navigated a variety of other public agencies (local and county police, public health, and parks) while balancing First Amendment activities; providing safe, maintained public spaces; and keeping parks open and their staff healthy and protected.

Moving into 2021, park organizations plan to continue to collaborate with a wide variety of partners for education, programming, and inclusion. Park organizations cited media partnerships as a successful tool used throughout 2020 to help share park programming and safety guidelines with park users via television, print, radio, and tourism partnerships. Other organizations noted collaborating with partners that had better access to facilities and resources for COVID-19 safe events, which supported revenue generation and community connection. In 2020, parks were called on to expand their efforts to include food distribution, COVID-19 testing, and wellness checks. As noted, the ongoing vaccine distribution may require the use of recreation and senior centers as public locations for vaccination programs on an unprecedented scale. Further, we expect that park organizations will begin to seek out opportunities to collaborate in more significant ways. Many participants raised concerns about their ongoing viability—indicating interest in sharing strategies or services, developing broader partnerships for programming and fundraising, or even mergers and consolidations.

Conclusion
2020 presented a series of daunting challenges for urban parks and park systems across North America. While parks are often described as an “essential service,” perhaps now more than ever, park agencies are confronted with huge challenges to providing those services—including dealing with reduced revenue and staff, balancing ongoing maintenance, ensuring equitable access, and supporting public health initiatives. Participants of the fall 2020 Urban Park Roundtable provided a wealth of lessons learned and shared strategies for moving forward, as the pandemic continues.

The Institute for Urban Parks hopes that urban park professionals will find this report useful for their 2021 planning. It is also our hope that the urban park community continues this shared dialogue as we move through the new year, finding inspiration and mutual support. In April, the Institute will host the Spring 2021 Urban Park Roundtable to continue this important conversation.