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Amid Protest and Pandemic, Urban Parks Show Their Worth

U.S. cities are now seeing the critical role that public space plays during a crisis. But severe budget cuts are looming. Can investing in parks be part of the urban recovery?

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Protesters gather at Dolores Park in San Francisco, California on June 3. Between hosting protesters and pandemic-weary residents, urban parks are seeing a surge in use. Josh Edelson / AFP via Getty Images

During this extraordinary time in America’s cities — weeks of coronavirus lockdowns followed by mass protests against police violence and racial inequality — one theme runs through the twinned crises: the power and value of public spaces.

The nation’s parks experienced a surge of use during the pandemic that closed stores and businesses and kept so many Americans isolated in private. Since March, when coronavirus restrictions in the U.S. were enforced en masse, still-open city park facilities saw soaring numbers of visitors. Popular trails in Dallas, which tracks visitors, saw usage climb from 30% to 75% in March. In Minneapolis, during the still-cold month of March, trails experienced summertime levels of usage. Erie, Pennsylvania’s Presque Isle State Park saw visitor numbers jump 165% year-over-year during the third week of March.

“Parks are the most valuable resource in the city at this point,” says J. Nicholas Williams, director of the Parks, Recreation and Youth Development Department in Oakland, which has also seen an uptick in visitors in the last few months.

Then came the protests over the killing of George Floyd on May 25, triggering a wave of mass demonstrations that, in venues such as Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., and Cal Anderson Park in Seattle, are using these same public spaces as stages for protest. That, too, is part of the critical role they play in urban life.

“The thing I tell people about parks and public spaces is they can be platforms for equity, and the events of the last week in America show the public realm is the essential platform for equity,” says James Hardy, Akron, Ohio’s deputy mayor for integrated development, who focuses on parks and public space. “It’s especially evident when the press and disregarded members of our community need these spaces to communicate truth to power.”

But amid this rediscovery of the value of parks, steep budget cuts now loom: City tax revenue is drying up, the need to provide additional protective gear for staff is expensive, and funds from special permits and fees, from athletic events to large outdoor concerts, may be small or non-existent during this socially distanced summer. The ongoing protests against police brutality and inequality both highlight the importance of public space for civil action and engagement and likely add to repair and maintenance costs.

A survey from the National Recreation and Park Association in mid-April of more than 300 park commissioners found half had been asked to make budget cuts this year between 10% and 20%, and many have already instituted hiring freezes or laid off part-time and seasonal staff. New York City faces a \$61.3 million cut in its park budget. Coming shortfalls may mean delayed maintenance, shelved plans and deteriorating facilities.

“This is a critical time for public space, perhaps more than we’ve seen in past decades,” says Bridget Marquis, director of the Civic Commons Learning Network, a national nonprofit initiative focused on public spaces. “We’re seeing the gaps and how we’ve let them erode in many places.” According to *Parks and the Pandemic*, a report issued last month by the Trust for Public Land, cities are repurposing this open space in ways that aid the civic response to the coronavirus. Toledo, Ohio’s botanical garden, for example, has been transformed into a Covid-19 test site. The report also highlights how the coronavirus, and the nation’s response to it, has accelerated existing divides and inequality. Despite big investments in signature parks like the reconstructed Brooklyn Waterfront or the \$100 million expansion of Klyde Warren Park in downtown Dallas, a widespread lack of equitable access to green space remains. That gap stands to widen further with Covid-related budget cuts.

But there’s some cautious hope here, too: This convergence of crises could ultimately help convince local leaders and the public to reconsider the importance of public space, and even see parks as part of a broader plan for economic and social recovery.

“We’re optimistic and excited around the top-to-bottom interest in this issue,” says Benita Hussain, director of the Trust for Public Land’s 10-Minute Walk campaign. “There are challenges, but there is a lot of hope, because the will politically to make public space and parks remain a priority is there.”

Hussain leads the Trust for Public Land's signature initiative, which calls for making sure every American is within a 10-minute walk to a public park or green space. That goal is far from being realized, with 100 million Americans, and 27 million children, lacking such access. In some cities — such as Charlotte, Oklahoma City, and Mesa, Arizona — less than half of residents live that close to a public recreation facility.

“We haven't been investing in civic infrastructure, parks, and trails,” says Marquis. “I hate to say there's a silver lining to Covid-19, but it's a time to recognize what we prioritize in this country. I hope part of the legacy will be an equitable and resilient investment strategy in the public realm.”

It's not hard to find examples of the public's new appetite for public space in the midst of a pandemic. While so many places to congregate have closed or changed, parks and public spaces still provide places to relax and decompress while maintaining social distance.

“The Covid-19 response, while clearly necessary, created a huge burden of cabin fever, loneliness, anxiety, stress, and personal loss,” Howard Frumkin, professor emeritus of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences at the University of Washington School of Public Health, told the report's authors.

Before the coronavirus crisis hit, park finances were on the upswing, according to Charlie McCabe, a city parks researcher with the Trust for Public Land. Public funding for city parks hit roughly \$8 billion nationwide in 2019, a slight increase from the last few years, as the robust pre-pandemic economy allowed some cities to invest in improving and reconstructing parks, McCabe says, spending money on newly popular amenities such as dog parks and splash pads, as well as recreation and senior centers.

This resurgence was long delayed: After increasing 15% between 2003 and 2007, city spending on parks plummeted 22% as the Great Recession arrived in 2008, according to the NRPA. Spending was slow to recover. By 2013, parks represented just 1.9% of local government spending, down from 2.2% in 2000.

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Coronavirus has forced city park departments to respond to fast-changing public health rules and needs. In addition to opening up trails, adapting space to social distancing, and converting golf courses to parks, a third of park and recreation departments are also offering emergency services, says Kevin Roth, vice president of research, evaluation, and technology at the NRPA. This includes converting recreation centers to shelters, delivering meals, setting up testing sites, and providing day care to children of first responders and health care workers.

“It's really quite challenging now,” says McCabe. “Many amenities, especially the ones that have been invested in heavily in recent years, have closed due to concerns over close contact, while parks have

needed to quickly adapt to provide enough access to walk and bike on trails and open fields, which often get crowded.

Hussain says many park departments are cutting costs by engaging citizens to help; Rochester, New York, has instituted a pack-in pack-out trash policy, similar to what's seen at national parks. There's also a legislative push in Congress to get the Great American Outdoors Act, which would add \$900 million annually to the Land and Water Conservation Fund and help address the maintenance backlog for the nation's parks.*



*Demonstrators observe a moment of silence during a protest over the killing of George Floyd by in Brooklyn's McCarren Park on June 3.
Scott Heins/Getty Images*

Still other park advocates and staff see this moment of crisis as the right time to make the case for parks as key parts of larger economic recovery, and community investment plans, especially commercial corridors hard hit by both the pandemic and damage during ongoing protests. It's not just savvy political thinking, but a smart way to integrate smaller, community-focused green space in neighborhood-level development.

In Detroit, where the city faces a \$348 million budget shortfall over the next 16 months, park officials point to the ongoing Strategic Neighborhood Fund, a public-private initiative focused on building up commercial corridors across the city, as a model that can help make parks part of broader initiatives. The program, which has made parks and streetscape improvements pillars of the process, aims to make green spaces part of inclusive economic development; that may mean including parks in housing programs, and looking beyond traditional standalone "trees and recreation" thinking to figuring out how parks can fit into larger projects.

"The city just emerged from bankruptcy five years ago, so we've been doing economic recovery here ever since," says Alexa Bush, a design director for Detroit.

Akron's newly created Office of Integrated Development also focuses on making parks part of larger investments in neighborhoods and civic infrastructure. Hardy, the city's deputy mayor for integrated development, says that parks programs by themselves can struggle to get funding but fare better when included in larger programs about job access and the quality of public space.

Despite facing an estimated 20% decrease in municipal funding this year, Akron plans to focus on projects and priorities in traditionally redlined and lower-income neighborhoods first, says Hardy. It's all about being strategic and prioritizing the places that need it the most. Parks, community centers, and libraries are always the easiest to eliminate, Hardy says; he cautions that policymakers desperately need to do the opposite, doubling or tripling investments in public space. He fears that city leaders may look at the protests of the last week and see parks as a thing to cut, to limit the liability that comes from mass civic action. That mindset will only deepen the inequality.

"Part of the reason people have been protesting is disinvestment in public spaces to begin with, especially in black neighborhoods," he says. "Parks and park access are part of the large narrative of racism and discrimination against African Americans."

To the extent possible, Akron is trying to say no to cuts, and view recreation as an essential public service. That's a paradigm shift, and one that, post-Covid, park managers hope becomes standard practice.

"Parks are as important as roads and bridges, they're not something to get to later," Hardy says. "They're where people from different backgrounds come together and find themselves on equal footing. They're essential to the American experiment, and this is a great opportunity to make that argument."