



NRPA's mission is to advance parks, recreation, and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people.

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# Creating Mini-Parks for Increased Physical Activity



## INTRODUCTION

Providing quality park and recreation space for inner city residents is increasingly challenged by the limited amount of available park space in urban areas. As a result of the diminishing access to parks and open spaces, the physical and recreational needs of urban youth often go unmet. To meet these growing needs, park and recreation agencies are in a position to play an important role in the conversion of unused areas and abandoned spaces into what are being called mini or pocket parks. These unique parks are often created out of vacant lots, rooftops and otherwise forgotten and unused spaces.

## WHAT IS A POCKET PARK?

A pocket park is a small outdoor space, usually no more than ¼ of an acre, usually only a few house lots in size or smaller, most often located in an urban area surrounded by commercial buildings or houses on small lots with few places for people to gather, relax, or to enjoy the outdoors. They are also called vest pocket parks, a term first used in the 1960's. Pocket parks are urban open spaces on a small-scale and provide a safe and inviting environment for surrounding community members. They also meet a variety of needs and functions,

including: small event space, play areas for children, spaces for relaxing or meeting friends, taking lunch breaks, etc.

Successful "pocket parks" have four key qualities: they are accessible; allow people to engage in activities; are comfortable spaces and have a good image; and finally, are sociable places: one where people meet each other and take people to when they come to visit.

## BENEFITS OF POCKET PARKS

It is important to note that pocket parks are not intended to service an entire city in the same way as a neighborhood or city park. Each should be created with the specific interests and needs of the contiguous community—that is, the nearby individuals and families for whose use it was originally intended (Olmos, 2008). *continued >*





## ACQUISITION/IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

Many pocket parks have been created as a result of community groups organizing and rallying for more open space within the urban environment. Leftover spaces and other urban eyesores present opportunities for conversion to pocket parks,

offering important and desirable amenities to communities. These are often purchased and owned by cities, with the agreement that they will be run and maintained by a foundation or other organization if the city is unable to maintain the park itself. The benefits of these unique urban spaces often include one or several of the following:

- Support the overall ecology of the surrounding environment
- Help protect and conserve local wildlife, landscape, and heritage
- Reduce pollution, traffic, and consumption of resources, such as oil
- Empower local residents to make decisions that affect their community
- Make communities safer and more sociable
- Improve fitness and health
- Regenerate run-down areas
- Reinforce relationships between local authorities and communities

Though pocket parks vary according to specific purposes and locations, there are numerous characteristics that the majority has in common. For example:

- Pocket park users should not have to walk more than 5 to 10 minutes to reach their destination.
- Since parking may or may not be provided, the parks should be accessible by both foot and bike, and should not require the use of a car.
- Parks should serve a resident population of approximately 500-1000 persons.
- Parks should strive to accommodate as many different users as possible, prioritizing the needs of surrounding neighborhoods.

Community gardens are a popular choice when creating a pocket park that is being designed for neighborhood interaction by people of all ages. Unlike playscapes, they typically do not include play structures; instead they provide the land, resources, and informational support necessary to grow food for local sale and consumption. Community gardens have a variety of purposes for the people they serve; they unite residents of all ages in fun and productive outdoor activities and facilitate the growth of community solidarity and neighborhood revitalization.

## FUNDING POCKET PARKS

There are many possible funding sources for the development of pocket parks. The Trust for Public Land is one organization that offers assistance with private and public funding for mini-parks (Trust for Public Land, 2009). At the local level, public-private ventures, individual contributions, and philanthropic support are often solicited to underwrite start-up and equipment costs.

While some parks are financed almost entirely with private funds, many are typically financed by a combination of various funding sources. For example, capital support for the acquisition, design, and development of the 6th Avenue NW Pocket Park in Seattle, Washington consisted of joint contributions from the Pro Parks Levy, the Neighborhood Matching Fund, and the local community. These organizations continue to contribute towards enhancement of parks including: large lawn areas, landscaping, paths, neighborhood gathering areas and interactive features for children's play.



## CREATING A POCKET PARK

In organizing pocket parks, designers must often work out a delicate balancing act so that all groups can use the space in peaceful co-existence.

There are no set designs for pocket

parks; each one is different depending on the size and use of the space, but because space is restricted and user needs are both diverse and vary throughout the day, conflicts can sometimes arise between different groups. Thus, park and recreation agencies can fulfill the community's vision for the parks by assisting in the development of an implementation strategy, beginning with small-scale, doable improvements that can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them. More importantly, park and recreation agencies can help design parks to provide the maximum benefit to the community. Since mini-parks cannot provide all the benefits of large parks, park and recreation agencies can help identify what trade-offs may be necessary. As with any new park or recreation innovation, there are challenges in the development of pocket parks.

Some of the more commonplace examples of issues typically faced in the development of pocket parks include:

- Limited money and staff time
- Insufficient Pocket Parks to meet high demand
- Insufficient support for training and 'networking'
- Too few volunteers

## STEP-BY-STEP PLAN FOR CREATING A POCKET PARK



The following steps can help your neighborhood get started in creating a beautiful oasis of green for all to enjoy!

**1. Secure the community's commitment.** The more inclusive the decision-making, the more successful the park will be. Start talking to as many neighbors as possible and secure them to help you throughout the process. Think about those in your neighborhood. Is there someone who is an expert gardener, someone who knows what's going on at every block or someone that can let you use their spigot for water? Seek these people out and get them involved.

**2. Convene a steering committee.** You will need local leadership for the project. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to create a committee with divided responsibilities in terms of planning and working on the project.

**3. Choose a site.** Think about how the site will be used. What kinds of improvements are needed? Keep in mind how much the neighborhood can realistically take on to address issues such as the creation and maintenance of the plan and make sure the space suits all expectations.

**4. Plan.** Determine a site plan either with the help of a landscape architect. Begin to strategize how the landscaping will be installed, how it will be funded, and how the neighborhood will maintain it in the long run.

**5. Identify and secure potential partners.** Partners should be local businesses, nonprofits and other organizations available in the city. Identify the roles of each partner and secure a written understanding if possible.

**6. Secure long-term and short-term funding.** Begin to look at various resources for funding in the form of grants, in-kind materials and money from businesses. Consider corporate sponsorships and be sure to think long-term about funding and saving money for maintenance and repairs in the future or to cover other necessary items including liability insurance coverage.

**7. Schedule work days in advance.** Assign a project manager and plan out what activities need to occur in what order. Can everything be done in one day, or will it take multiple work days?

**8. Plan a big work day/dedication/celebration event.** This is a very important part of the process to the neighborhood and to the partners. This is a chance to possibly garner media attention, as well as involve as many people as possible.

**9. Implement a maintenance plan.** Before any plants go in the ground, the neighborhood should agree to a maintenance plan and document it in writing.

**10. Pursue consistent engagement.** Just as maintenance is a never-ending job, so is everything else involved. On-going communication with the neighborhood especially should keep them interested and involved in your project. *continued Page 4 >*

## ROTARY CENTENNIAL PARK

**Location:** Long Beach, California

**Description:** Rotary Centennial Park, a new Mini Park is located on the corner of Pacific Coast Highway and Junipero Street. The park was first constructed when the Rotary Club approached the department with the idea of collaborating on the construction of the new park in celebration of the 100th anniversary of Rotary International in 2005.

**Challenges:** Develop a viable plan converting the city-owned undeveloped land along the former Pacific Electric right-of-way that is surrounded by a densely developed area with nearly 80 percent of the residents living in apartments with no backyards.

**Outcomes:** To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Rotary International in 2005, the Long Beach Rotary Club raised \$100,000 to help design and construct a 1.2-acre park at Pacific Coast Highway and Junipero Avenue. Long Beach Rotary involved the public and stakeholders throughout the design process. Community input was translated into plans that incorporated a solar system theme with art installations of planets, a sundial sculpture, benches, turf, trees, playground equipment, and a shade shelter. These creative elements have made Rotary Centennial Park one of the most unique and inviting parks in the city and a welcome addition to a park-poor neighborhood. Custom engraved "Community Bricks" were sold at \$50 and \$100 each. The additional funds went to help pay for educational public art. The park was dedicated on May 21, 2005 on Rotary International's 100th anniversary.

**Lessons Learned:** Continuing support from the park's partner became a critical aspect of the project continuing success. The Rotary's involvement didn't stop with the park's creation and every month since the park opening, Long Beach Rotarians have held work parties to help clean, repair and maintain the park.

## THE FARM-A-LOT PROGRAM

**Location:** Detroit, Michigan



**Description:** Detroit has more than 28,000 vacant parcels owned by the city almost half of them residential plots—that generate no significant tax revenue and cost more to maintain than the city can afford. Finding new uses for this land has become one of the most pressing challenges for a city that lost a quarter of its population in the past decade. There are groups and individuals all around the city who have begun to use vacant land — some privately owned, some city-owned — as personal gardens, community gardens and even full-scale farm operations.

**Challenges:** While gardens are widespread throughout the city, they are generally small in scale and comprise only a tiny fraction of the total number of vacant lots. Inadequate city resources are an obstacle to conscientious land use and effective community management of open space. In addition, gardeners are faced with a lack of long-term security and the issues of liability and insurance are not addressed.

**Outcomes:** The City of Detroit Recreation Department created and manages the Farm-A-Lot program whose goal is to facilitate the reuse of vacant city-owned lots for agriculture. Farm-A-Lot provides soil tilling services and free seeds to residents interested in using vacant lots in their neighborhoods for growing vegetables. When the Farm-a-Lot program which tills 500 to 600 urban gardens, hit the dirt, several of the city's most active "green" organizations came together to fill the void. These organizations, Greening of Detroit, Detroit Agricultural Network (DAN), Michigan State University Extension and Earthworks Urban Farm, banded together as the Detroit Garden Network and each group brings its urban gardening partners one piece of the puzzle needed to get started and keep going.

**Lessons Learned:** Urban agriculture (UA) programs like Farm-A-Lot help the City of Detroit by reducing urban blight, providing educational opportunities, and improving access to fresh produce. Annual costs for maintaining city park space are much higher than the cost of maintaining an urban garden and cities can save 100 percent on maintenance costs of the parcels when community groups and non-profits pay the costs of their own activities and upkeep.

## CASE STUDIES

### BALTIMORE OPEN SPACES

**Location:** Baltimore, Maryland

**Description:** Baltimore City covers approximately 80 square miles, is designated a separate county and has at least 12,000 vacant houses and 14,000 vacant lots which have been difficult for the City to maintain.

**Challenges:** As Baltimore City struggles to manage its 6,000 acres of formally designated parkland, effective management of approximately 14,000 vacant lots and small spaces is hampered by such things as the lack of a central database, property maintenance standards and schedules, the ineffective use of liens to ensure regular property maintenance and the lack of formal coordination among city agencies and non-profit organizations.

**Outcomes:** Despite its dwindling population and shrinking tax base, Baltimore City Recreation and Parks (BCRP) department has often been regarded as an innovator and leader in managing open spaces. The BCRP, Housing and Community Development, and Public Works have had a positive impact on the urban environment by supporting neighborhood open space initiatives. Many community groups in Baltimore along with BCRP are committed to transforming vacant lots in their neighborhoods to attractive green spaces.

**Lessons Learned:** While community management is not an appropriate strategy for every vacant lot, it can be an important component in managing vacant lots and neighborhood open spaces. An example is Baltimore's Vacant Lot Restoration Program started by the Parks and People Foundation. The program has provided training, technical assistance, and site improvement funding for 23 neighborhood-managed open spaces. While the successes and failures of the projects are in many ways unique to the sites themselves, they can also illustrate the challenges commonly experienced by communities everywhere.

Adequate maintenance of community parks and gardens has emerged as the major issue facing many Baltimore sites. Park and recreation agencies can be the best resource for the planning and organization of such efforts whether community based or managed by public agencies.

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#### CONCLUSION

A research team from the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine has found that distressed neighborhoods where vacant lots have been converted into small parks and community green spaces are associated with reduced crime when

compared to neighborhoods with unimproved vacant lots.

In some sections of the city, residents of neighborhoods with improved vacant lots also reported "significantly less stress and more exercise," suggesting that the improvements had an effect on residents' perceptions of safety outdoors. The team also noted that studies have shown that the presence of urban green space is linked to lower rates of mortality and health complaints and to mental health benefits.

It undoubtedly takes more than increased, tended green space to cure crime, improve general health, increase exercise and other issues associated with distressed neighborhoods and vacant lots. Pocket parks have been successful because they are able to respond to the needs of local communities but their success requires careful planning, local empowerment and significant local support. The benefits of these parks go far beyond their communities, and positively impact the well-being of the city and region in which they are located.

The creation and implementation of a written constitution and management plan are important to ensure park sustainability. However, in order for a pocket park to be truly successful, it is imperative to involve community interest, support, and participation in the planning and maintenance process (*Project for Public Spaces, 2009b*). The active investment facilitated by community groups fosters a sense of ownership, which, in turn, creates a strong incentive for them to protect and preserve their park (*Project for Public Spaces, 2009b*).



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