Recommendations for the Public Space Planning Unit

Parks and Recreation Division

General Services Department

City of Detroit

The Partnerships Lab

September 2020

About the Institute for Urban Parks

The Central Park Conservancy Institute for Urban Parks, founded in 2013, draws on the Conservancy’s 40 years of experience and expertise to develop programs that educate and connect park organizations, while supporting a vital community of practice among public and private partners. Through continuing education, capacity building, thought leadership, and peer-to-peer exchange, the Institute empowers, informs, and connects the individuals and organizations that care for urban parks. We do this to ensure that all urban park organizations have the knowledge and the capacity to create and sustain great public parks throughout New York City and across the globe.

About the Partnerships Lab

Supported by The JPB Foundation, the Institute developed and launched the Partnerships Lab in spring 2019. The Partnerships Lab is an application-based, time-limited capacity building initiative that provides targeted organizational and strategic support to urban park organizations and agencies in cities around the country. Selected partners work closely with the Institute to evaluate their long-term organizational vision, define a discrete organizational challenge, and develop recommendations and strategies to meet that challenge. In addition, partners attend an urban park leadership workshop retreat in New York City and receive a $25,000 implementation grant to support their own implementation of the recommendations.

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Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary and Key Recommendations….p. 4
2. Detroit and Comparison Cities….p. 6
3. Key Recommendations for the Public Space Planning Unit….p. 6
4. Conclusion….p. 11
5. Executive Summary and Key Recommendations

The City of Detroit General Services Department, through the Public Space Planning Unit, a team within Parks and Recreation, has made tremendous progress in strategically investing in planning and improvements in neighborhood parks. A total of $11.8 million has been invested in 40 parks the last three years (2017-2019). These improvements addressed a number of long-standing issues in the parks: developing a consistent standard of care; improving relationships with the local communities surrounding the parks; and supporting neighborhood stabilization efforts. This body of work was created out of a broader master plan for Detroit parks completed in 2017. Other influences include continued investment from the public and private sectors in neighborhood parks, as well as downtown Detroit, with additional continuing improvements in downtown and riverfront properties by partner organizations including the Downtown Detroit Partnership and the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy.

Detroit’s progress is reflected in the annual ParkScore Index, compiled by The Trust for Public Land, which compares the parks systems of the 100 largest cities in the United States. In the past three years, Detroit doubled its spending per resident from $40 in 2018 to $80 in 2020 and rose in the rankings from 88th place in 2018 to 73rd place in 2020.

Funding to fuel this increase has come through a combination of public and non-profit (or private) spending in Detroit and is mirrored in cities across the U.S. For example, in the most recently completed fiscal year, a total of $63.27 million was spent in Detroit parks. While $52 million came from the City of Detroit via taxes and other revenues, 19 percent or $11.24 million came from parks non-profits large and small.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Detroit’s 19 percent share is similar to the cities of San Francisco (20%), Boston (19%), and Baltimore (18%).[[2]](#footnote-2) Seven cities have higher percentages, up to 43 percent in St. Louis. A good example is Buffalo with 22 percent, which draws largely from the work of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Public Space Planning Unit recognizes the opportunity to engage corporate philanthropy to continue to rehabilitate parks targeted in the city’s master parks plan.[[4]](#footnote-4) To manage incoming support of park-related efforts, they developed a draft corporate gift catalogue and recognition policy and applied for the Central Park Conservancy Institute for Urban Park’s National Partnerships Lab to obtain evaluation and feedback. Funded through the a grant from the Lab, this report provides observations and recommendations gleaned from review of key documents including the draft gift catalogue and naming policy, several days of site-visits, interviews, trainings, examples from other comparable cities, park systems, and park non-profits, engagements with staff and leadership, and tours of recently improved parks as well as projects to come, such as historic Fort Wayne and the first proposed portion of the Joe Lewis Greenway.

While these suggestions are by no means exhaustive, we hope that they provide relevant guidance as the Public Space Planning Unit and the City of Detroit navigates the continuing pandemic, as well as its expected economic impacts.

We suggest that the Public Space Planning Unit consider four recommendations:

Finalize and publish the gift catalogue

Offer the gift catalogue for funders on the city’s website, partnering with local non-profits to pursue donations and acknowledge donors. As currently envisioned, the gift catalogue will be considered a “best in class” product and could serve as a model for other cities. No other ParkScore city has published a set of guidelines comparable to the Detroit draft.

establish gift recognition standards

Finalize and publish gift recognition standards for the City park and recreation system, building on lessons learned from existing partnership agreements with current corporate and professional sports teams. Balance the need for corporate recognition with the need to ensure that recognition is fair and consistent in parks and recreation facilities across the city.

implement a public naming process

Implement a public process for the naming of parks and amenities with clearly defined vetting and approval guidelines by city officials. The Public Space Planning Unit has proposed a draft standard, consistent with existing standards of comparison cities.

Pilot case projects to test methods, processes, and assumptions

Use the Joe Lewis Greenway and Historic Fort Wayne projects as pilot cases to test methods, processes and assumptions for corporate philanthropy and community engagement, including strategies to pursue activation, offer programming, and manage operations and maintenance. We believe that establishing and partnering with a citywide parks non-profit is key to success here, allowing the non-profit to manage the gift and donations process, with the City focused on project execution. This will be of key importance as the City manages the economic effects stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Detroit and Comparison Cities

In order to provide feedback on the Public Space Planning Unit’s proposed gift catalogue and recognition program, the Institute and the City team identified five comparison cities across the U.S.—Austin, TX; Atlanta, GA; Denver, CO; Philadelphia, PA; and Portland, OR—to compare practices. These cities share similar sized populations and overall city acreage, but also have demonstrated the ability to attract private funds to improve parks and generate continued economic growth.

In the greater context, 63 of the 100 largest U.S. cities have at least one park non-profit raising and spending funds on parks. The amount of funds can be substantial; in the most recent fiscal year (reported in ParkScore 2020) $559 million was raised and spent by 226 non-profits, which was 7 percent of all park and recreation spending (public and private) in the 100 largest cities.

In Detroit, 19 percent of spending comes from non-profit partners, ranging from the Downtown Detroit Partnership and the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy to smaller “Friends of” parks groups and advocacy organizations. For the most recently completed fiscal year, this means that $11.2 million of privately raised funding was added to the $52 million of public spending on the city parks and recreation system.

Compared to the broader 100 ParkScore cities, Detroit is in the top 20 for non-profit (private) spending.[[5]](#footnote-5) The highest non-profit percentage of park spending is 43 percent in St. Louis to 1 percent in many smaller cities. In our five comparison cities, Philadelphia ranks the highest with 32 percent followed by Atlanta (23%), Austin (13%), and Denver and Portland with 1 percent. Table 1, below shows more detail:

Table 1: ParkScore 2020 Rank and Spending Information

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| City | ParkScore 2020 Overall Rank | Spending per Resident[[6]](#footnote-6) | % from Non-Profits |
| Atlanta | 40 | $151 | 23% |
| Austin | 37 | $147 | 13% |
| Denver | 22 | $130 | 1% |
| Detroit | 73 | $80 | 18% |
| Philadelphia | 15 (tied with Pittsburgh) | $138 | 32% |
| Portland | 6 | $250 | 1% |

1. Key Recommendations for the Public Space Planning Unit

Finalize and publish the gift catalogue as part of the city’s website

* Review and update the descriptions of gifts, as well as benefits to the donor(s) and costs on an annual basis.
* The City and any non-profit partners should highlight priority projects (and timeframes) for gifts, marketing what is of the highest priority to the city and the neighboring communities.
* Ensure that donors can order and pay for items online, as well as via the more traditional methods (check, cash, etc.) Work to establish a city-wide parks non-profit organization that can market priority projects, pursue donations and facilitate gifts on behalf of the city. A formalized agreement, renewed annually, should govern this relationship, clearly spelling out roles and responsibilities.
* As part of the gift catalog website, the city should acknowledge all current donors, with updates and changes published annually.

Based on our research, we find that the Public Space Planning Unit’s proposed approach is both transparent and best in class when compared to comparable city efforts.

Background Research: Comparison of Gifts, Donations, and Volunteering between Cities

We used the draft gift catalogue (dated October 2019) provided by the Public Space Planning Unit as a basis for comparison to peer cities and existing published practices for gifts, donations, sponsorship, and more. Overall, we found that the proposed mix of offerings, proposed recognition and proposed costs, which include 10 years of maintenance by the City of Detroit, are a good mix and is very transparent. In fact, if the policy is enacted and the gift catalogue is published as recommended on the City’s website, the gift catalogue will provide a critical example for comparison cities to emulate.

Table 2 shows a comparison of Detroit’s proposed standards for gifts, donations and volunteering, compared to other cities. Details and links appear in greater detail, but the following table summarizes the polices at a glance:

Table 2: Gifts, Donations, and Volunteering Compared

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| City | Public Gift Catalogue | Adopt a Park / public/private | Links to specific funds or needs: | Links to peer non-profit parks organizations: |
| Atlanta | No | Yes, through Park Pride[[7]](#footnote-7) | No | Yes, Park Pride & others |
| Austin | No | Yes, through Austin Parks Foundation[[8]](#footnote-8) | Yes, community gardens, memorial bench program | Yes, Austin Parks Foundation & others |
| Denver | Yes, a number of funds and/or opportunities | Yes[[9]](#footnote-9) | Yes, but most require donor to call or email | No, all links go to the City of Denver |
| Philadelphia | No, but does offer ability for sponsorship or programs & services | Yes[[10]](#footnote-10) | Yes, gifts for all seasons (tree donation, sponsorship) | Yes, both the Philadelphia Parks Alliance & Fairmount Park Conservancy |
| Portland | No, but does have Adopt-a-Bench & Adopt-a-Rose bed programs | Yes[[11]](#footnote-11) | No | Yes, link to Portland Parks Foundation |

We want to emphasize that the gift catalogue should be an evolving product that includes regular updates of current city and community-related priorities; acknowledgement and recognition of donors; and coordination and engagement with nonprofit park partners to solicit new gift opportunities.

Establish gift recognition standards for the city parks and recreation system

* Build on the lessons learned from recent engagements and related gifts with the Detroit Pistons Foundation and the Detroit Red Wings Foundation including:
  + Logo recognition for donors should be at an equal or lesser size than the City of Detroit Parks and Recreation logo.
  + Recognition opportunities in parks should be temporary or seasonal applications with defined guidelines and timeframes (banners, supplemental signage, virtual/social media opportunities, event materials)
* Implement a published announcement process for new gifts agreed to by the City of Detroit, its nonprofit park partners, and the donor(s),as part of the donation process. This should be clearly stated on the City’s gift website.
* Provide an explicit time frame for gift acknowledgement by the city, including publicly, in the media, print, social, and virtual, and in the relevant park(s). When the donation recognition period expires, offer the original donor the first right of refusal for possible renewal.

Background Research: Comparison of Park and Facility Naming and Recognition Policies

Naming and recognition policies are often challenging for public parks and recreation facilities and the difficulties facing the City of Detroit are no exception. Based on our review of comparison cities (in Table 3), we find that the Public Space Planning Unit’s draft policy is, in general, a “best in class” approach. We recommend a review and revision of the naming and recognition policy at least every few years, as Austin, Denver and Philadelphia have done.

Table 3: Naming Policies for Parks and Facilities in Comparison Cities

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| City | Policy Type | Link to Detail |
| Atlanta | Public | [library.municode.com/ga/atlanta/codes/code\_of\_ordinances?nodeId=PTIICOORENOR\_CH2AD\_ARTIINGE\_S2-2NAPUFASTHOPE](http://library.municode.com/ga/atlanta/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIICOORENOR_CH2AD_ARTIINGE_S2-2NAPUFASTHOPE) |
| Austin | Public | [austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=334588](http://austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=334588) |
| Denver | Public | [denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/747/documents/policy/DPR-Naming-Policy.pdf](http://denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/747/documents/policy/DPR-Naming-Policy.pdf) |
| Detroit | Draft | Document provided by Public Space Planning Unit |
| Philadelphia | Public, but not on city website | [jweekly.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Naming-Policy-facilities.pdf](http://jweekly.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Naming-Policy-facilities.pdf) |
| Portland | Public | [portlandoregon.gov/citycode/article/68091](http://portlandoregon.gov/citycode/article/68091) |

After examining recent corporate philanthropic engagements with two Detroit-based professional sports team, we expanded our review of comparable funding efforts in a few additional cities. We learned that there is a small but growing number of basketball teams (and related sports equipment manufacturers) supporting infrastructure and asset improvements to parks as well as summer programming in cities across the U.S. These philanthropic gifts and related programs include:

* **Los Angeles:** The Los Angeles Clippers Foundation donated $10M to the Los Angeles Parks Foundation to renovate all 350 parks basketball courts by 2020.[[12]](#footnote-12)
* **Portland:** Nike donated $750K to revitalize 30 basketball courts in parks and the Trail Blazers Foundation donated $300K over three years as well.[[13]](#footnote-13) Funds were spent on repairs, repainting, new nets, and backstops. Verde, a workforce development nonprofit, was selected to administer the funds and complete the renovations. In addition to the park name, the courts featured the Portland Trail Blazers pinwheel and Nike swoosh logos.
* **San Antonio:** Spurs Give donated $500K over 4 years, with $500K matched by the City of San Antonio.[[14]](#footnote-14) Starting with one basketball court at Woodard Park, it is not clear on which parks and what park improvements, will also be included. Work has not yet begun. Previous efforts by the San Antonio Spurs focused on youth sports leagues and play.

Based on these comparisons, we believe that the City of Detroit has worked hard to strike a healthy balance between the needs of the donor teams and the need to maintain standards for recognition in public space. The draft gift policy offers substantial opportunities for donors, such as the signs and plaques, and especially, the sign rider as a way to acknowledge gifts no matter who the donor is. All gifts should have an expiration date attached to them. While there is no standard in this still emerging area, we recommend an annual review of policies to ensure that the city keeps pace with comparison cities.

Implement a public, transparent process for the naming of parks and amenities

* The process should be transparent and allow for public applications, public input, and public votes of approval with clearly defined vetting and approval guidelines that ultimately require approval via the Mayor and the Detroit City Council.[[15]](#footnote-15) It should be posted on the city’s website and reviewed internally on an annual basis.
* Recognition, including park and facility naming, should have a “bad actor” clause to remove recognition quickly in the event individuals and/or organizations for who the park or facility is named are involved in a disqualifying event or bad act (i.e. violation of laws, code of conduct, ethics, et al.)
* Further, as mentioned in the Executive Summary, we recommend that the proposed park and facility naming policy detailed on page 24 of the draft gift catalogue be changed in two ways:
  + The permanent naming of any park or facility should be governed by a separate process that is public and transparent, following a public application, public hearings, and a public vote by the Mayor and the Detroit City Council. This recommendation is consistent with naming policies in Atlanta, Austin, and Philadelphia.
  + The naming policy, if in perpetuity, should be subject to a “bad actor” clause to allow the city to rescind the naming after a person or institution, if the person or institution is found to have violated federal, state, or local laws or the city’s “code of conduct.” This caveat originally appeared in Houston over the case of a professional baseball stadium and was called the “Enron Clause.”

Pilot projects to test methods, strategies, and assumptions

* Use the Joe Lewis Greenway and the Historic Fort Wayne projects as test cases. Critical to determining the best approach for gifts and donations, as well as ongoing support for new projects, experiment with different approaches. These include public and private partnership gift approaches as well as ways to involve the broader community and groups in funding, supporting, programming, and maintaining new or revamped facilities.
* The Detroit Greenways Coalition, the large number of active bike clubs, as well as the Historic Fort Wayne Coalition, already provide community support. They can serve as strong partners for initial programming as well as “eyes on the street” for the first constructed segment of the Greenway and the next steps for Fort Wayne, following the RFI (Request for Information) for potential stakeholders.
* Establish a citywide parks non-profit foundation to serve as the city’s key partner for gifts. Based on similar practices in comparison cities such as Atlanta, Austin and Philadelphia, we’ve found that a strong nonprofit, citywide partner is best for managing donations of funds, time, and volunteer support to help the park system as a whole.[[16]](#footnote-16) The citywide non-profit organization can tackle solicitation, stewardship, and acknowledgement of gifts on behalf of the City of Detroit and serve as the primary point of contact for donors and the city.

This also frees up time for the Public Space Planning Unit to focus on park project execution, including the use of donation proceeds as intended.[[17]](#footnote-17) While the formation of a citywide nonprofit would be very challenging in our current pandemic times, piloting a donations approach for specific, priority projects with existing groups could be an interim option to gain experience and share lessons learned. For example, the Detroit Greenways Coalition could pilot fundraising for programming and improvements along the planned first segment of the Joe Lewis Greenway. We’ve included a listing of citywide parks non-profits, services offered and their annual spending in Table 4.

Table 4: Citywide Parks Non-Profits

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **City** | **Organization** | **Services Provided** | **Recent Large Projects (Funded / In Progress)** | **Annual Spending (Most Recently Completed Year)** |
| Atlanta | Park Pride | Advocacy, fiduciary services, park grant programs, technical assistance, project management, community engagement, tools, supplies, volunteer programs, annual citywide volunteer day(s) | Kathryn Johnston Memorial Park, Atlanta Community Schoolyards Initiative | $7.96 million |
| Austin | Austin Parks Foundation | Advocacy, fiduciary services, park grant programs, technical assistance, project management, community engagement, tools, supplies, volunteer programs, annual citywide volunteer day(s) | Republic Square, Pam Am Park, North Oaks Park | $6.5 million |
| Los Angeles | Los Angeles Parks Foundation | Capital projects and recreation initiatives for underserved populations | LA Clippers basketball courts renovations | $3.3 million |
| Philadelphia | Fairmount Park Conservancy | Advocacy, fiduciary services, technical assistance, project management, community engagement, tools, supplies, volunteer programs, annual citywide volunteer day(s) | Centennial Commons, Fairmount Park Trolley Trail | $7.9 million |
| Pittsburgh | Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy | Advocacy, capital projects, programming, volunteer programs | Allegheny Commons Park, The Parks Plan, green infrastructure projects in multiple parks | $5.49 million |

1. Conclusion

The City of Detroit has made incredible progress in the past four years, improving public parks in key neighborhoods, encouraging strong non-profit park partnerships, leveraging donations and sponsorships from local Detroit businesses and professional sports teams, and developing a thorough and thoughtful draft gift catalogue and accompanying set of policies. While spending per resident doubled from $40 to $80 in the past three years, the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting economic turbulence it has unleashed in Detroit will make the coming few years even more challenging. We support the proposed gift catalogue and donor recognition approach, working in partnership with a citywide parks non-profit. Once approved by the city, we believe that it will serve as a model example that other cities, including our study’s comparison

1. Data comes from the 2020 Trust for Public Land ParkScore Index, published on May 20, 2020: [tpl.org/parkscore/](http://www.tpl.org/parkscore/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Trust for Public Land believes that the percentage of non-profit spending is on the low-end, as they only count spending from non-profits that file an IRS Form 990 (tax return). Informal “friends of” parks groups, as well as national parks and environmental organizations, are not included. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy: [bfloparks.org](https://www.bfloparks.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While commercial real estate and professional sports teams are existing contributors, city planners see opportunities in health care, education, and other local/regional industries. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Detroit is ninth in terms of parks non-profit spending, tied with Baltimore, behind Boston and ahead of Irvine, Pittsburgh, and Houston. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Spending per resident is a combination of public spending, non-profit spending, and monetized volunteer hours. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [parkpride.org/we-can-help/friends-of-the-park/](http://parkpride.org/we-can-help/friends-of-the-park/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [austinparks.org/adopt-a-park/](http://austinparks.org/adopt-a-park/) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/denver-parks-and-recreation/volunteer.html](http://denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/denver-parks-and-recreation/volunteer.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [phila.gov/departments/philadelphia-parks-recreation/get-involved/park-friends-groups/](http://phila.gov/departments/philadelphia-parks-recreation/get-involved/park-friends-groups/) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [portlandoregon.gov/parks/article/182131](http://portlandoregon.gov/parks/article/182131) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [laparksfoundation.org/projects/la-clippers-basketball-courts/](https://www.laparksfoundation.org/projects/la-clippers-basketball-courts/) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [nba.com/blazers/story/21/6/revitalizepubliccourts](https://www.nba.com/blazers/story/21/6/revitalizepubliccourts) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [therivardreport.com/city-spurs-nonprofit-to-invest-1-million-in-local-parks/](https://therivardreport.com/city-spurs-nonprofit-to-invest-1-million-in-local-parks/) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Approval for naming by Mayor and City Council is typical in our comparison cities, but some of the 100 largest U.S. cities delegate responsibility to the local parks and recreation board or commission. We defer to the Public Space Planning Unit for making the appropriate recommendation. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Examples of strong citywide park non-profits in comparison cities include Austin Parks Foundation (Austin, TX), Park Pride (Atlanta, GA), and Fairmount Park Conservancy (Philadelphia, PA). All manage fundraising for park improvements, volunteering, and adopt-a-park efforts. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Inquiries and requests for park-related gift opportunities led the Public Space Planning Unit to draft the gift catalogue and apply for the Institute for Urban Parks Partnerships Lab grant for assistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)