

A PLATFORM FOR DENVER'S URBAN PARKS

INTRODUCTION

The following document, **Platform for Denver's Urban Parks**, was created and supported by the Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation (INC) Parks and Recreation Committee and approved by the Delegation of Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation, January 8, 2011.

The purpose of the platform is to provide a proactive and positive framework in which citizens of the City of Denver may discuss public policy pertaining to the size, function, location and purposes of urban parks with the City's Department of Parks and Recreation, elected officials and other residents.

Over the past several years, INC has taken positions in reference to the following Denver Department of Parks and Recreation proposals: Admission Based Events, U.S. Open Air Cinema, Park Zoning, Dog Park Master Plans and Advertising in the Parks. Opposition to aspects of these proposals and presentation of constructive alternatives reflect INC's concerns over the commercialization of urban parks, the limitation on the use of urban parks by the public, and a perceived erosion of support for the principle that urban parks should provide opportunities for equal access by all citizens to the experience of nature.

This platform is an extension of prior positions taken by INC. It is an effort to move the public policy discussions toward broad solutions to conflicts that have emerged over the use of urban parks.

The platform is based on four broad assumptions:

1. There is a need to preserve open green space and citizen's opportunities to experience nature through free and open access to parks;
2. There is a need to implement a community-based process for the development of park policy;
3. There is a need to significantly increase the amount of parkland within the City; and
4. There is a need to have sustained and dedicated revenue sources for parks.

In this way, park policy will be anchored in Denver's historic commitment to providing access to open green space for its citizens and oriented toward the future development of urban parks in the 21st century.

The Historical Perspective

Denver has a proud tradition of being one of the few cities in the United States to exemplify the best features of the City Beautiful Movement that began in the early part of the past century.¹ The community leaders of this movement in Denver, including prominent elected city officials, were central to the creation of the city's public parks and parkways and advanced their purpose as to provide beauty, to promote mingling of people from all socio-economic backgrounds, and to endorse the principle of equality by allowing all citizens access to free open space.²

Evaluation of the city's park system, one hundred years after its creation, shows the wisdom of the original plan. The 2010 report of the Trust for Public Land documents the economic value of Denver's parks in relation to public use, health, community cohesion, clean air, clean water, property values, and tourism. The Trust calculates the total annual economic value of the Denver park system to be over \$48,000,000.³

The Contemporary Parks Controversy

Despite the demonstrated economic value of the park system to the community, Denver's urban parks have become a source of contention over the past several years. Denver's Mayor and his appointee, the Department of Parks and Recreation Manager, have been in conflict with segments of the public over the primary experiences that should be available in parks and how multiple uses of parks should be managed. For example, there has been a public outcry over the proposed (but never implemented) 2007 plan to enclose a large portion of Denver's City Park for a three-day rock music festival;⁴ the number, type, and placement of dog parks;⁵ and the use of parks for admission-based events.⁶

On this latter point, neighborhood groups have adopted formal written statements objecting to this policy. These groups include neighborhood associations, groups representing parks, and organizations representing multiple neighborhood organizations such as the Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation, a group comprised of 85 registered neighborhood associations.⁷

The Department of Parks and Recreation "Game Plan"

Denver's master plan for its parks, The Game Plan, sets forth the following four principles to guide their maintenance and development: Sustainability, equity, engagement, and sound economics, with sustainability of parkland being the most important of these.⁸ Because the plan lacks sufficient detail regarding implementation of these principles, the plan has contributed to public controversies such as those noted above.

This debate will continue until the following occurs: 1. there is clarity of purpose as to the foundational purpose of Denver's parks; 2. there is a significant increase in the amount of urban parkland; and 3. there is a set of criteria for evaluation of whether or not a proposed use of a given park is appropriate. This Platform addresses these issues.

THE WAY FORWARD

Open Green Space Protected

While parks serve a variety of purposes including providing citizens recreational opportunities, for example, to play games, ride bikes, and take walks, urban parks should not be considered as sites for every activity which requires open land. Within the context of a growing population, a limited amount of urban parkland, and an increasing pressure to use parkland to raise revenue for the city, it is critical that the historic purpose of urban parks be protected: Providing all citizens free access to open green space, trees, lakes and gardens.

Protecting this purpose must be the cornerstone of public policy for Denver's urban parks. This assertion does not undermine the importance of recreation. It does serve to anchor Denver's urban park policy in its historic purpose—to provide all citizens access to the experience of nature—an experience that cannot be fulfilled by any other public space in the urban environment.

Urban Parkland Needed

Conflicts over how this experience may be protected within the context of other recreational uses of parks such as providing playgrounds, recreation centers, or fields on which to play team sports requires that additional land in the city be converted to parkland.

There is a lack of adequate urban parkland for the size, density, and expected growth of Denver's population. For example: The city had 555,000 residents in 2000 and is projected to have 700,000 in 2020.⁹ When the amount of urban parkland in Denver, 6,286 acres, is compared with the amount in a city with a comparable population and level of density such as Portland, Oregon, Denver lags far behind. Denver has 10 acres of parkland per 1,000 people compared to Portland's 25 acres per 1,000 people.¹⁰ Denver has fewer acres of urban parkland than half the other 28 intermediate-low-density big cities in the country that were studied recently by the Trust for Public Land.¹¹

In addition, Denver's relatively young and outdoor-oriented population requires more green space than we have currently.

As a result, a sustained effort to double the amount of urban land devoted to parkland in the city over the next ten years is warranted. Despite the fact that Denver is land-locked, multiple opportunities for expansion exist in relation to development of parkland including remediated industrial sites along the Platte River.

Community-based Park Policy Required

How multiple uses of parks should be balanced is a matter of public policy. Nonetheless, any use of parks other than the uses that are easily compatible with preservation of nature (and of historic structures within parks) such as walking, biking, and playing informal games and with sustaining parkland, should be tested against the following principles:

- **The proposed use does not inhibit the primary and or established uses of the park;**
- **The proposed use is respectful of the neighborhoods surrounding the park;**
- **The proposed site has adequate space for the proposed use;**
- **The Department of Parks and Recreation has adequate funding to oversee the proposed use and for repair of any damage to parkland caused by the new use; and**
- **Any new proposed use of a park must be supported by a sophisticated and publicly-available cost analysis.**

Festival Site Should be Established

Some proposed uses are not appropriate for any park. For example, admissions-based events are incompatible with Denver's long-standing commitment to parks that are free and open to the public. However, if Denver's voters agree to establish a revenue-generating and financially-feasible festival site, where both large and small admission and non-admission-based events could take place, the broad philosophical principles on which the rest of the park system has been built could be maintained.

Dedicated and Stable Funding for Parks Must be Sought

Even if multiple uses of parks could be balanced according to the principles outlined above, Denver currently lacks the funds to maintain existing parkland, to preserve and maintain park monuments, and to monitor parks to prevent vandalism and other social problems that occur in parks let alone to develop new parkland. Indeed, in 2003, the city's Game Plan projected a \$6 million yearly shortfall for capital maintenance and repairs and a \$10 million yearly shortfall for current capital upgrades and expansions for city parks.¹²

A broad range of funding sources must be pursued in order to sustain and to expand Denver's park and parkway system. This includes sources such as the ones listed below:

- **Local and state level dedicated revenue sources;**
- **Federal programs that advance sustainable urban communities; and**
- **Endowments that support Denver's parks and parkway system.**

A commitment to securing funds to support a worthy plan for Denver's park system requires that alliances be built among the citizens of the City of Denver, the Mayor of Denver, the City Council, the Manager of the Department of Parks and Recreation, the business community, and private conservation groups. Civic-minded individuals created Denver's parks more than 100 years ago. With unity of purpose and a common vision they can restore and expand Denver's parks once again.

Sources:

1. Wilson, W. (1989). *The City Beautiful Movement*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. Etter, C., & Etter, D. (2006). *City of Parks: The Preservation of Denver's Park and Parkway System*. Denver: Denver Public Library. These authors also note that parks were historically considered a "physical embodiment" of equality of access to space and to nature and to mark "the city as a place of quality".
3. Trust for Public Land. (2010). *The Economic Benefits of Denver's Park and Recreation System*. Author.
4. (<http://denverdirect.blogspot.com/2009/05/commercial-use-of-denver-parks.html>)
5. (see October, 2010 Life on Capitol Hill article, "Dog Park Debate Continues")
6. (see written testimony submitted to the Denver Parks and Recreation Advisory Board (DPRAB) on December 10, 2009 and August 12, 2010)
7. Neighborhood groups that adopted formal written statements objecting to this policy include neighborhood associations such the South City Park Neighborhood Association, Sloan's Lake Neighborhood Association, Whittier Neighborhood Association, Alamo Placita Neighbors Association, University Park Community Council, and the Greater Park Hill Community, Inc.; groups representing parks such as the Cheesman Park Advocacy Group, Neighbors and Friends for Washington Park, and Neighbors and Friends for Cheesman Park; and organizations representing multiple neighborhoods such as Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods and INC. Citizens' complaints regarding this soon-to-be implemented policy on admission-based events (www.denvergov.org/parksandrecreation) include the following: that are undemocratic (all portions of parks should be available to all citizens), unfair (citizens already pay for parks through their taxes), unwanted (due to the noise, litter, and traffic the events cause), and illegal (Denver's City Charter may be interpreted as prohibiting leasing of public land without a vote of the people); that the need for and cost of such events has not been documented; and that admission-based events would ultimately destabilize the neighborhoods surrounding parks, as those who could move away from parks would do so.
8. Denver Parks and Recreation. (2003). *Game plan: Creating a Strategy for Our Future*. Denver: Author. Adopted as a supplement to the Denver Comprehensive Plan 2000/Council Bill 262, series of 2003, April 21, 2003.
9. (<https://dola.colorado.gov/demog>)
10. Harnik, P. (2010). *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities*. London: Island Press.
11. Trust for Public Land. (2010). *2010 City Park Facts*. Author.
12. See note 8 above.