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SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS

Access to green space ties directly to a person's health and well-being—a connection now widely supported by evidence and accepted by policy makers. Today, ensuring access to green space for all people is a value that should be shared by every resident, community group, and government official. Planners can facilitate increased access to parks and green space through their jobs and community responsibilities. This fact sheet and accompanying web supplements address the unique role of city and regional planners in fostering an environment that establishes Safe Routes to Parks. Aimed at planning and parks directors and commissioners, this handout defines the concept of Safe Routes to Parks, outlines the plans, policies, and strategies that planners can pursue, and identifies examples of communities that are establishing Safe Routes to Parks.

Safe Routes to Parks refers to the infrastructure that facilitates access to parks through walking, biking, or transit.

Safe Routes to Parks represents a systems approach to increasing access to parks and open space that focuses on three inter-related parts:

The Park	Park Access	Infrastructure
The amenities, size, and location of the park are at the core of any systems approach	The entry and exit points to a particular park align with the natural paths and infrastructure that lead to the park.	The infrastructure within a half-mile or 10 minute walk of a park supports safe, attractive access via walking (for neighborhood parks) and/or biking (larger, more regional parks).

Planning's Role

The capacity of planners to write plans and develop strategies that influence policy uniquely positions the profession to facilitate safe access to parks and green space and support the usage of parks by all users, including children, the elderly, and those with physical disabilities. Through these strategies, planners improve health and well-being in the communities they serve.

Key Planning Strategies for Safe Routes to Parks

Assessment/Gap Analysis: Planning departments can gather localized data to identify infrastructure gaps in park access through mapping, GIS analysis, and tools such as policy and walkability audits, focus groups, and surveys.

The Park	Park Access	Infrastructure
Obtain objective, localized data to identify play deserts, demonstrated park inequities, underutilized parks, and which parks are preferred	Identify where people enter and exit a park using mapping, gap analysis, walkability surveys, and phone apps	Conduct focus groups, surveys, and mapping to analyze how a park can be accessed by walking, biking, transit, or automobile.
Best Practice: Objective, localized data informs data-driven decisions related to public investments, targeted programming, and improved intergovernmental coordination (including with the parks and recreation departments).		
Example: In Miami-Dade County, Florida, the parks department used public health data to identify which parks were surrounded by high rates of cardiovascular disease as well as bicycle and pedestrian accidents. This analysis enabled the city to target investment for both the park and the ¼ to ½ mile surrounding it. These infrastructure interventions are expected to increase pedestrian access within the park system by 50%.		

Siting: Plan-making, design guidelines, and development codes can guide the placement of parks and streets to increase park visitability and shorten routes to meet the needs of all residents.

The Park	Park Access	Infrastructure
Directly influence where new parks are located through local policy	Coordinate clear entry/exit points with adjacent infrastructure	Incorporate level of service standards for the infrastructure leading to the park
Best Practice: Incorporate and enforce siting policy through all governing land use documents to ensure coordination and support with all city departments for infrastructure that promotes pedestrian activity, is properly maintained, and follows desirable paths to park access points.		

Capital Improvement Program: The involvement of planners in the development of a local government's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) can influence the allocation of public dollars or priorities to infrastructure that improves residents' access and connectivity to parks and open space.

The Park	Park Access	Infrastructure
Aligning investment decisions with demonstrated need for particular parks acquisition, development, and/or renovation.	Using public health data to make decisions on prioritizing park access projects in the CIP.	Prioritizing investment and projects in the infrastructure that surrounds a specific park.
Best Practice: Use assessments and park master plans to inform the CIP so it coordinates public investment within the entire park shed (the park and infrastructure within a half-mile of the park)		

Partnerships: As collaborators and conveners, planners can facilitate intergovernmental coordination and partnerships between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

The Park	Park Access	Infrastructure
Utilize Memorandums of Understanding, Intergovernmental Agreements, and Shared Use Agreements to increase opportunities for outdoor play at schools, pocket parks, public spaces, and temporary spaces.	Coordinate and facilitate easements for convenient park access for bikes and pedestrians .	Coordinate with private sector, municipal public works and transportation departments, and nonprofit organizations to ensure efficient, barrier-free multi-modal routes to parks.
Example: In San Francisco, the Trust for Public Land, the RAND Corporation, and the city's Department of Public Health (SFDPH) are collaborating to increase usage of three parks in the underserved areas of the city. To date, renovations to these specific parks and their surrounding infrastructure has increased perceived safety in the area and been a driver for facilitating better utilization of neighborhood parks. This partnership has created synergies that leveraged each of these organizations' expertise to complement each other to generate designs for active parks and evaluation methods to inform future work and advance the field. SFDPH tools included the San Francisco Indicator Project, specifically indicators related to community demographics and public realm, the Pedestrian Environmental Quality Index, noise and air quality modelling, and analysis of pedestrian injuries and pedestrian routes to the parks.		

RESOURCES:

National Recreation and Park Association's Safe Routes to Parks Program: <http://www.nrpa.org/walking>
 Trust for Public Land's Parks for People Program: <http://www.tpl.org/our-work/parks-for-people>
 National Complete Streets Coalition's Resources: <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets>
 Safe Routes to Schools National Partnership's Resources: <http://saferoutespartnership.org/resourcecenter>