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Parks and Recreation in the United States

Local Park Systems

Margaret Walls

1616 P St. NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-328-5000 www.rff.org



Parks and Recreation in the United States: Local Park Systems

Margaret Walls*

Introduction

The United States has 53 national parks and over 6,600 state park sites, but many outdoor pursuits often begin at the playground around the corner, the nature center down the road, or the sports fields at a nearby recreation area. These close-to-home parks and open spaces are a critical component of the U.S. recreation estate. Characterizing and describing these resources is difficult, however, given the wide variety of parks provided in individual communities and the lack of a central organization or government agency responsible for collecting and managing data on local parks. In this background, we show some of the available information. We analyze park acreage and facilities for a set of cities, show trends in local government spending on parks and recreation services, and describe results from a survey we conducted of local park directors identifying current challenges they face and popularity trends in their parks.

A Brief History

Parks have played an important and ever-changing role in American urban life. The Boston Common, designated as a public open space in 1634, is considered the nation's first city park. A total of 16 parks were created before 1800, including the National Mall in Washington, DC, in 1790 (Trust for Public Land 2008).

From the mid to late 1800s, the urban park vision centered on providing natural settings in an urban environment, or so-called "pleasure gardens." The parks designed by noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted epitomized this vision. Olmsted's view was that parks should provide a natural, somewhat pastoral environment where city residents could escape the hustle and bustle of city life. Olmsted parks such as Central Park in New York City,

* Senior Fellow, Resources for the Future. I appreciate the excellent research assistance of Jeff Ferris and the helpful comments of Peter Harnik, Ben Welle, and Colleen Gentles of the Trust for Public Land, Catherine Nagel of the City Parks Alliance, and Joe Wynns, former Director of the Indianapolis Department of Parks and Recreation. The National Recreation and Park Association and the City Parks Alliance assisted with the RFF survey of urban park directors. This background is one in a series for the Outdoor Resources Review Group (see www.rff.org/orrg).

Washington and Jackson Parks in Chicago (originally a single park known as South Park), and Prospect Park in Brooklyn were all created in the late 1800s.¹

Beginning in the early 1900s, the vision for urban parks began to change. According to Cranz (2000), the Progressive movement of the time included a demand for “reform parks” that provided recreation opportunities, particularly for children, in close-to-home neighborhood parks. Thus was born the notion of the playground. The recreation concept expanded to include swimming pools, ball fields, and indoor facilities in the early and middle part of the 20th century. But after World War II, interest in city parks waned. The move to the suburbs, where everyone would have a yard of their own, was thought to make the notion of public parkland rather obsolete (Harnik 2006). Many urban parks declined. According to Harnik (2006), city parks did not begin to experience a revival until about the 1990s, when the center city populations of many urban areas began to grow.

City Parks Today

A comprehensive national dataset on local park acreage, facilities, and characteristics does not exist. However, the Trust for Public Land’s Center for City Park Excellence (CCPE) collects information each year on parks in 75 cities.² We present some summary information and distributional findings from those data. National data on park usership are sorely lacking. Many cities conduct periodic surveys or measure use at particular facilities, but comprehensive data, systematically collected across a range of cities, are unavailable. We report here on findings from a Resources for the Future Survey of Urban Park Directors conducted in the fall of 2008, in which we asked park directors about perceived popularity trends of various activities in their parks. We also present some information from individual cities that have conducted surveys, and we show some statistics collected by the CCPE on use of the largest city parks.

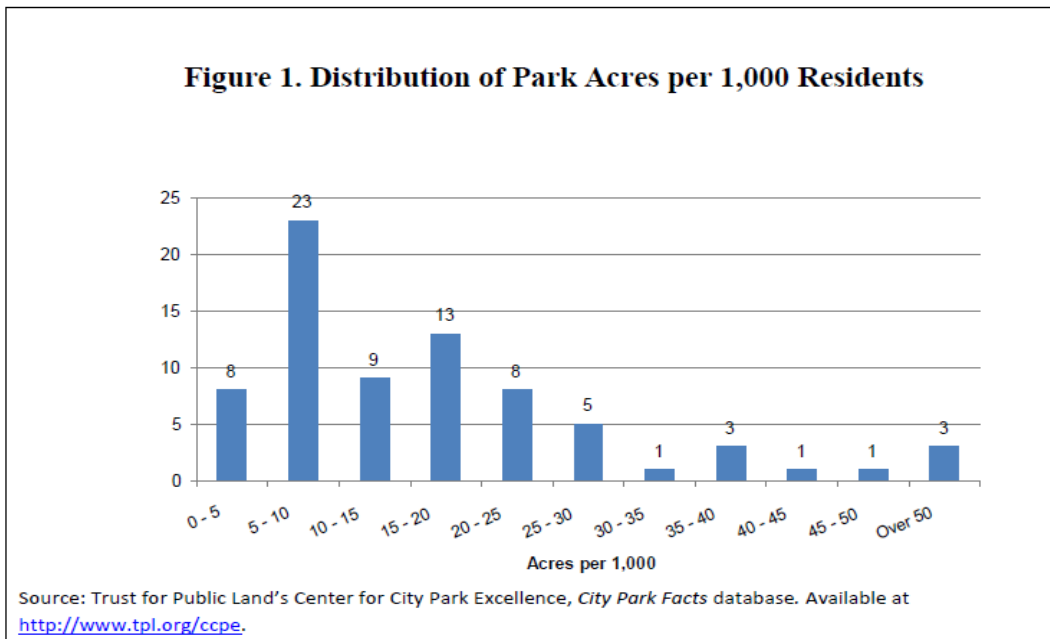
City Parks Today: Acreage and Facilities

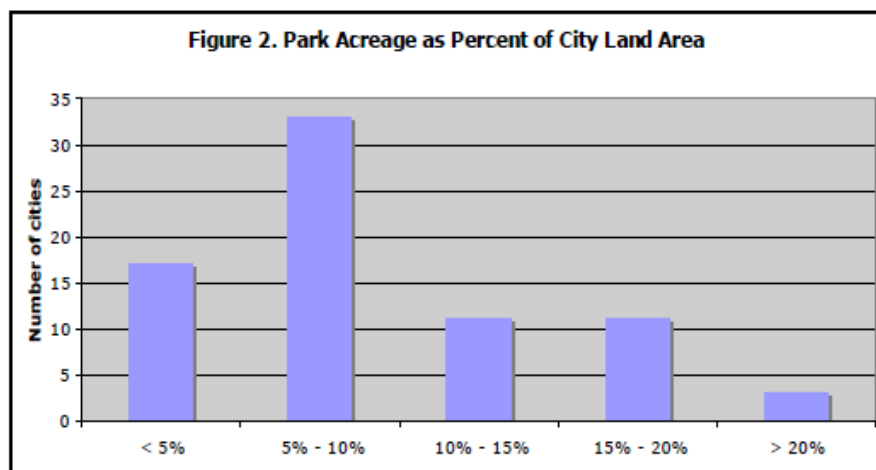
The 75 cities in the CCPE sample average approximately 18,000 acres of parkland within their borders. Acreage varies widely, however, from only 330 acres in Santa Ana, California to nearly 104,000 in Jacksonville, Florida, and well over 500,000 in Anchorage, Alaska. Figure 1

¹ For more information on the Olmsted legacy, visit the National Association of Olmsted Parks website at <http://www.olmsted.org/>.

² For more information on the Center for City Park Excellence, see <http://www.tpl.org/ccpe>.

shows the distribution of park acres per 1,000 city residents and Figure 2 shows the distribution as a percentage of city land area. Most cities in the sample have between 5 and 10 acres per 1,000 people, but some provide much more than that, as Figure 1 makes clear. The three cities with more than 50 acres per 1,000 people are Anchorage, Jacksonville, and Albuquerque. The average across all 75 cities in the sample is 41 acres per 1,000 people. Parks make up just less than 10 percent of the total land area of an average city. Again, there is some variation across cities, as shown in Figure 2, though less than for acres per person. Most cities—32 out of the 75 in the sample—lie in the 5 percent to 10 percent range and only 3 cities have more than 20 percent—Anchorage, Albuquerque, and San Diego, with 40 percent, 30 percent, and 22 percent, respectively. The lowest percentage is Honolulu, with 1.6 percent.





Source: Trust for Public Land’s Center for City Park Excellence, *City Park Facts* database. Available at <http://www.tpl.org/ccpe>.

For illustrative purposes, we show in Table 1 two cities that have approximately equal populations. Philadelphia has only about half the park acreage of San Antonio, on both a total and per resident basis. But, as a percentage of the land area of the city, Philadelphia has much more than San Antonio. Philadelphia also has more park units—301 versus 213 in San Antonio. What does this mean for city residents? Philadelphia residents are likely to live closer to a park than residents of San Antonio, but they have to share that park with more people. In addition, that park is likely to be smaller, as average park size is much smaller in Philadelphia than San Antonio.

Table 1. Park Acres, Number of Units, and Population for Selected Cities in 2007

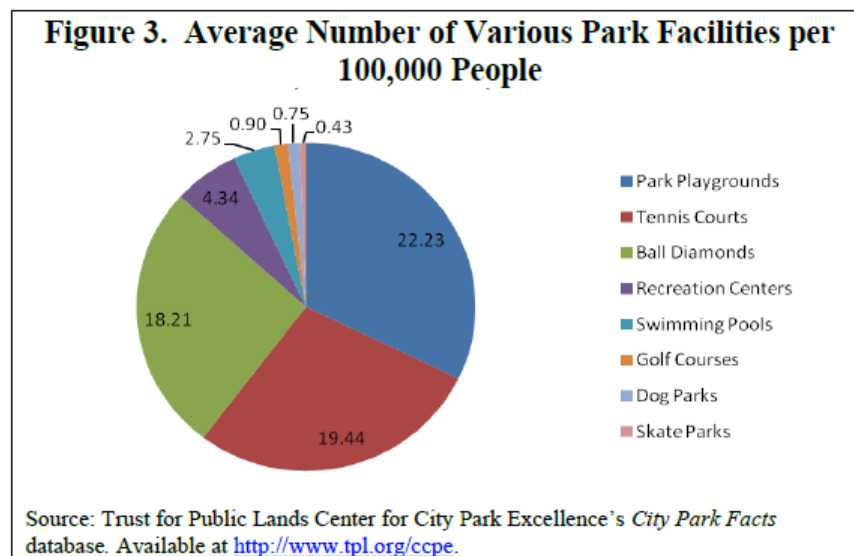
	<i>Philadelphia</i>	<i>San Antonio</i>
Population	1.45 million	1.30 million
Park Acres	10,937	20,753
Number of Park Units	301	213
Acres/1,000 Resident	7.6	16.0
Acres/Park Unit	36.3	97.4
Acres as % of Land Area	12.7%	8.0%

Source: Trust for Public Land’s Center for City Park Excellence, *City Park Facts* database. Available at <http://www.tpl.org/ccpe>.

Of course, this is a simplistic characterization; spatially detailed and disaggregated data on parks and population would allow for a more careful analysis. With advances in geographic information system (GIS) technology, many local governments now collect such information but neither the CCPE nor any other organization or government agency keeps a consistent dataset of

this type across cities.³ In order to fully address the adequacy of park resources across communities, analysis of GIS data is essential. Such data would allow for an assessment of park locations relative to population in cities, with analysis of various socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of that population, as well as analysis of the types of parks and recreation facilities provided.

Figure 3 shows some information on facilities that the CCPE collects in its survey. It summarizes the average number of each of eight different types of facilities per 100,000 residents. Not surprisingly perhaps, playgrounds are the most popular kind of facility in city parks, followed closely by tennis courts and ball diamonds.⁴ The facilities that are more costly to build and operate—recreation centers, swimming pools, and golf courses—are less common. And the facilities that have become more popular in recent years, such as skate parks and dog parks, are far fewer in number.



In addition to these facilities and developed areas, most cities provide nature-based parks with trails and undeveloped lands. The CCPE asks park directors in its survey how much of their

³ More progress has been made in California than anywhere else. The California Protected Areas Database, a GIS inventory of all protected open space in the state developed by GreenInfo Network, includes urban parks. See <http://www.calands.org/home.php> for more information.

⁴ The large number of ball diamonds reported suggests that the number may include other types of ball fields as well as baseball and softball diamonds. Welle (2009) admits that the CCPE survey has struggled with accurately measuring specific types of fields as most fields in busy urban areas are used for multiple activities.

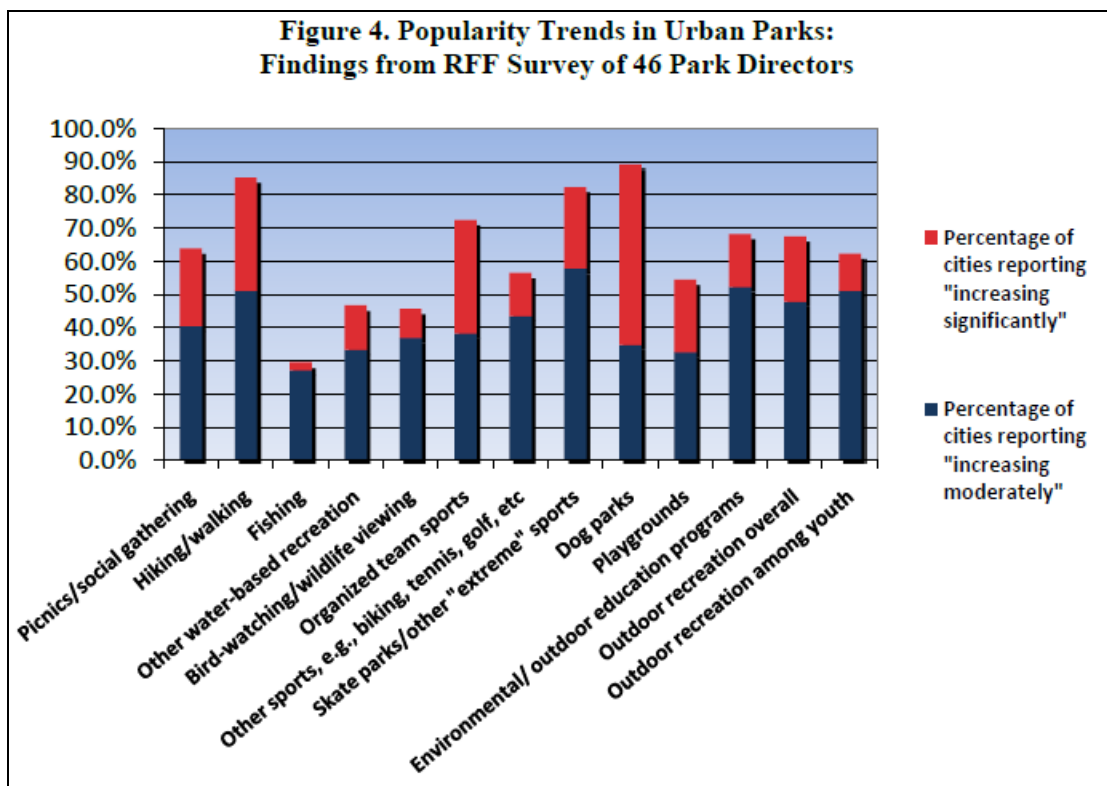
acreage is “natural” and how much “developed.” Natural acreage as a percentage of total park acreage averages 33 percent across all of the cities. However, several cities—mostly in the West—have significantly more acreage in a natural state. Natural acreage accounts for more than 70 percent of total park acreage in Anchorage, San Diego, Phoenix, Bakersfield, and Albuquerque; Albuquerque’s is as high as 92 percent.⁵

City Parks Today: Use and Popularity Trends

The RFF survey, conducted in the fall of 2008, asked urban park directors a range of questions about their budgets, funding sources, challenges they are facing, and also their opinions about whether various activities that take place in their parks were “declining significantly,” “declining moderately,” “about constant,” “increasing moderately,” or “increasing significantly.”⁶ The activities listed ranged from picnics to hiking to organized team sports. They also included “outdoor recreation overall” and “outdoor recreation among youth.” Figure 4 shows the percentage of respondents who reported “increasing moderately” or “increasing significantly” to each of the 13 activities on the survey.

⁵ Natural areas are defined by the CCPE as either pristine or reclaimed lands left undisturbed and managed for conservation. They may have trails and occasional benches, but they are not developed for recreation beyond walking, running, and bicycling. Designed areas have been created, constructed, planted, and managed primarily for human use (Welle 2009).

⁶ For the survey and a summary of findings, see Walls et al. (2009a). A similar survey of state park directors was also conducted (see Walls et al. 2009b).



Some interesting findings show up in the figure. First, most of the listed activities are reported to be increasing in most cities. For example, about 85 percent of the directors reported that the popularity of hiking and walking is increasing either moderately or significantly in their cities. Over 80 percent of the directors reported skate parks are increasing in popularity. And dog parks are increasing in popularity in nearly 90 percent of the cities. Although the CCPE data show (see Figure 5 above) that there are very few of these latter two facilities in most cities, there are indications that interest in them is on the rise. Outdoor recreation overall and outdoor recreation among youth are also reportedly increasing. The latter finding is interesting for two reasons. First, concern over declining youth participation in nature-based activities has been expressed in many recent studies and is a focus of both media attention and new private and public sector programs (Pergams and Zaradic 2008; Kareiva 2008; Louv 2005). Second, in a similar study of state park directors, 46 percent of respondents reported youth outdoor recreation as declining (see Walls 2009 and Walls et al. 2009b).⁷

⁷ The National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, an ongoing national survey of recreation participation conducted by the U.S. Forest Service, has recently added a youth survey and some initial findings are available in Cordell and Betz (2009) and Cordell, Betz, and Green (2009).

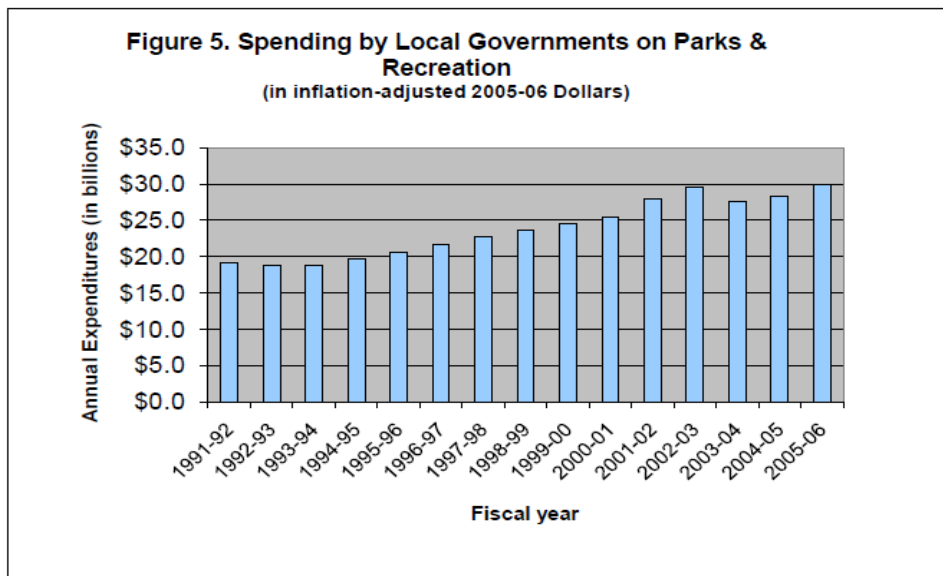
The RFF survey asked park directors whether they collected park visitor and use statistics. Although 26 out of 46 reported that they did, the information collected varies widely across cities. Most park directors reported collecting use information only at facilities and sites that charge fees or for park programs that require payment. Some collect information periodically—say, every five years—for community master plans. Some have counted, or measured, visitors in some way but do not appear to collect demographic or other information that would permit analysis of the data.⁸ The CCPE estimates usership for the 75 most-visited city parks. In 2006, these parks had 289 million visitors. To put this number into perspective, the national park system, with 391 individual sites on 84 million acres of land, had 276 million visitors in 2007. State parks, with 6,600 sites and 14 million acres, had 730 million (Walls 2009a).

Funding of Local Parks: Park Budgets

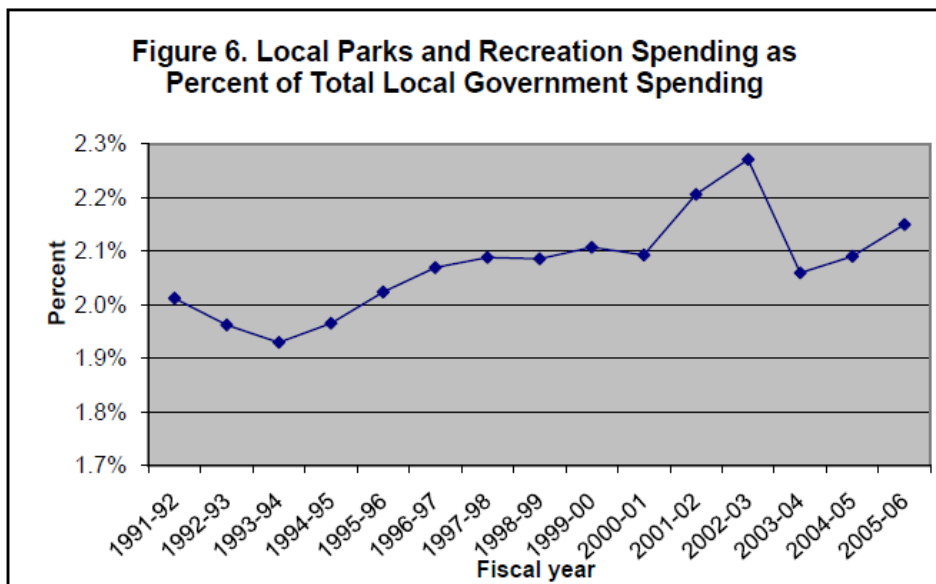
Local governments spent just under \$30 billion on parks and recreation in FY2005–06. As Figure 5 makes clear, spending has risen over time. The figure shows U.S. Census Bureau data on annual spending, in inflation-adjusted dollars, from FY1991–92 through FY2005–06.⁹ Over that 15-year period, total local parks and recreation spending rose 56 percent. Population over that same period rose by only 17 percent, thus communities have been spending more money per person on parks since the early 1990s. They also, however, have been spending more money on everything. Figure 6 shows local spending on parks and recreation as a percentage of all local government spending. Although there have been slight ups and downs from year to year, the changes are quite small—parks spending has stayed roughly constant at about 2 percent of total spending over the 15 years covered by the Census data.

⁸ To highlight the issues, we note that San Diego reported total annual visits to all of the city's parks and recreation areas of 54.8 million, while Chicago reported 3 million and Virginia Beach 3.7 million. It seems unlikely that San Diego has 18 times more park visitors than Chicago. See Harnik and Kimball (2005) for more on the topic of measuring urban park use.

⁹ The annual Census data are not based on a complete census of all units of government; the Census estimates total spending based on sampling numbers, so there is some sampling error involved. The full census is conducted every five years; the most recent data available is from 2002. In that year, there were 38,976 general purpose local governments—3,043 counties, 19,429 municipalities, and 16,504 townships—ranging greatly in size of population served. See U.S. Census Bureau (2005).



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. *State and Local Government Finances*. Various years. Available at <http://www.census.gov/govs/www/estimate.html>.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. *State and Local Government Finances*. Various years. Available at <http://www.census.gov/govs/www/estimate.html>

The Census data is the only consistent data over a long period of time on local government spending. It is comprehensive and thus provides a good estimate of total spending across all communities. However, it includes municipalities as small as 67 people, along with

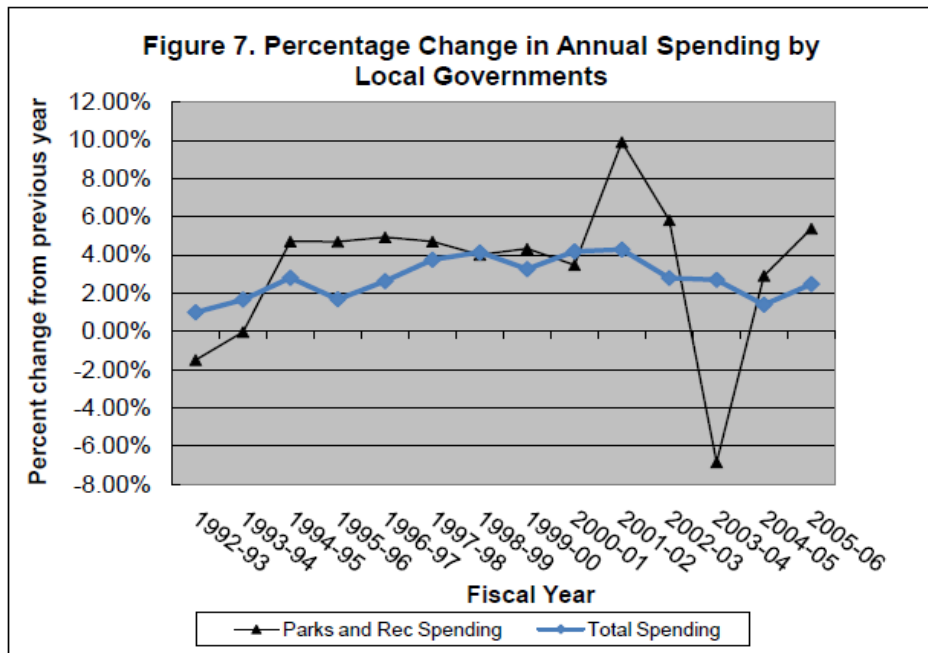
Los Angeles County, which has a population of nearly 7 million. Information on a smaller but more uniform set of larger communities is available from the CCPE. In 2006, spending by 75 cities, home to nearly 55 million people, totaled approximately \$5 billion. On a per capita basis, these cities spent an average of \$91 per city resident. Information collected in the 2008 RFF survey of local park directors provides estimates that lie in a similar range. The cities and counties that responded to the survey—mainly urban and suburban communities—spent a total of \$3 billion in FY2008. These cities serve approximately 32 million people and range in size from New York City, with 8.3 million people, down to Brookline, Massachusetts (a Boston suburb), with 58,700. Average spending for communities in the RFF survey was \$106 per person, quite close to the average from the CCPE data.

Money for local park operations comes from the general fund in most communities. The RFF survey showed that, on average, 76 percent of park operating budgets comes from the general fund. Four respondents to the survey reported that 100 percent of their funding comes from the general fund. Only 15 percent, on average, comes from user fees such as park entrance fees or passes. This contrasts with state parks, which cover 42 percent of their operating budgets, on average, with revenues from user fees (Walls 2009).

This reliance on general funds and the perception that sometimes exists that parks and recreation services are less essential than some other local government services often means that parks get hit hard in times of recession and budgetary shortfalls. Figure 7 shows the annual percentage change in local government spending in total and on parks and recreation—that is, the increase or decrease from the previous year's spending. In the wake of the 2002 to 2003 recession, local park spending dropped more sharply than overall spending.¹⁰ The current recession, in 2008 and 2009, has led many cities to cut parks budgets. In Indianapolis, the Parks Department faced a larger cut in its FY2009 budget than any other department; in fact, the city actually increased spending in some other areas, such as police and fire departments and road work (O'Shaughnessy 2008). Several cities have reported changes in plans for land acquisitions and new parks. In Florida, proposed cuts in state funding halted new park plans in Sarasota; similarly, in the Bronx, plans to convert a vacant lot into a neighborhood park were dropped (see Sword 2009; Potkewitz 2008). Several respondents to the RFF urban park director survey in the

¹⁰ Although the drop in park budgets was steep, because those budgets are a relatively small percentage of total local spending, the decline is not as noticeable in Figure 8.

fall of 2008 reported recent sharp declines in budgets for the current year and expectations of future drops due to the poor economic climate.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. *State and Local Government Finances*. Various years. Available at <http://www.census.gov/govs/www/estimate.html>.

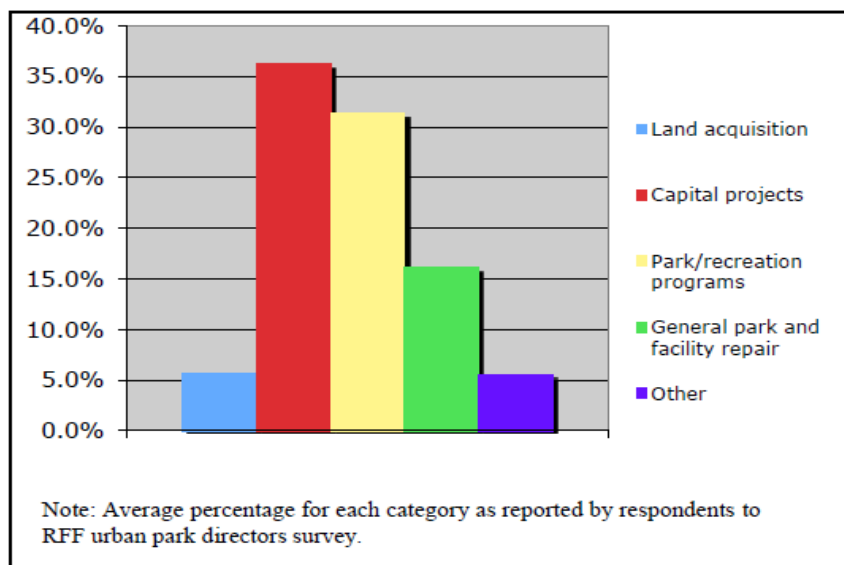
Funding of Local Parks: The Role of Nonprofit Organizations.

In recent years, city parks have come to rely more heavily on the nonprofit community and volunteers as a way to leverage often limited local government finances, introduce new and innovative programs, and invest in park infrastructure. These organizations range from small “friends of the park” groups, which sometimes only work with individual parks, to large park conservancies and foundations that operate across a park system. The City Park Foundation in New York City has an annual operating budget of \$10 million and works across 1,800 parks in the city. Its mission is focused on provision of educational and other programs in the parks. The Olmsted Parks Conservancy in Louisville, Kentucky, which is home to the last park system designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, focuses on park restoration. It has raised \$25 million since 1990. Seattle Parks Foundation also focuses on restoration, along with expanding park acreage and facilities. Since 2001, it has raised \$28 million. While the efforts of these organizations are important and may even be essential to provision of quality park services, it is important to put

their budgets into perspective. As one example, the Seattle Parks Department’s FY2008 budget was \$125 million.¹¹

The RFF survey asked local park directors how much money was generated for their park systems by park foundations, conservancies, friends groups, or other private donors (wills, gifts, special fundraisers) in the most recent fiscal year. For the 44 directors who responded to this question, a total of \$143 million was reported. More than half of that came from New York City alone, but eight cities reported between \$2 million and \$12 million and only five reported zero. The survey asked local park directors what percentage of the funds raised from this sector went for capital projects, park programs, general park and facility repair, land acquisitions, and other activities. The findings are shown in Figure 8. The figure makes clear that most of these groups spend their time and money on capital projects and on park programs. In general, routine operations and maintenance are not covered by these support groups.¹²

Figure 8. Use of Funds Raised through Local Park Conservancies, Foundations, and “Friends” Groups



¹¹ Seattle participated in the RFF Survey and reported this figure. The 2007 operating budget was \$117 million and is available on the department’s website at <http://www.seattle.gov/parks/quickfacts.htm>. The foundation’s spending figure is available at <http://www.seattleparksfoundation.org/aboutUs.html> and the Olmsted Park Conservancy information is available at <http://www.olmstedparks.org/conservancy/>.

¹² According to Nagel (2009), one of the most important activities these groups undertake is lobbying and advocacy to ensure continued public funding. She points out the California State Parks Foundation and the Philadelphia Parks Alliance as two successful organizations in this regard.

It is not clear what the full implications of the conservancy movement are for park financing and operations, or how it will evolve in the future. Local governments may come to rely on these organizations to provide more and more park resources in a community and cut back government funding as a result. This can be problematic. One issue is funding stability: since these nongovernmental organizations have no taxing authority and typically rely on donations, there is a great deal of uncertainty in their funding streams. Moreover, citizens have a tendency to free ride, presenting a classic “public good” problem, whereby people enjoy the benefits without paying the costs. Another problem can arise in communities that have friends groups for individual parks. A community of “haves” and “have-nots” might arise, with parks in wealthier areas better funded than those in poorer neighborhoods. Clearly, good coordination and cooperation between local government agencies and their nonprofit partners is essential. Further study of these relationships and development of models for best practices going forward would be worthwhile.

Funding of Local Parks: State Programs

Local parks have also received a boost in some states in recent years from new state government funding programs. Three of the states that do the most in this regard are Colorado, Florida, and California.

Colorado’s Great Outdoors Colorado, or GOCO, program receives a fixed percentage of lottery revenues each year. An independent GOCO board allocates the money to four broad areas: wildlife habitat, state parks, open space, and local parks and recreation areas. Local governments can apply for open space grants and for funding for park projects through a matching grant program. In FY2008, GOCO’s budget was \$53.1 million. In addition, the Conservation Trust Fund, also financed by lottery proceeds, distributes money on a per capita basis to local governments. The Conservation Trust Fund had a budget of \$48.9 million in FY08. The Florida Forever program, which receives \$300 million annually from bonds backed by a document stamp tax, also provides matching grants to local government. The Florida Communities Trust’s Parks and Open Space grant program receives 60 percent of the Florida Forever funds each year. In California, five propositions have been approved by voters since 2000, providing a total of \$10.2 billion for a range of conservation, open space, and parks investments, including local parks. In 2008, the California state legislature passed the Park Development and Community Revitalization Act, which will provide \$400 million in grants for local park development in communities that are underserved—that is, have less than three acres of usable parkland per 1,000 residents—and that have a significant percentage of the population

living below the poverty line.¹³ While several other states have programs similar to California, Colorado, and Florida, most are not as well-funded as these three.

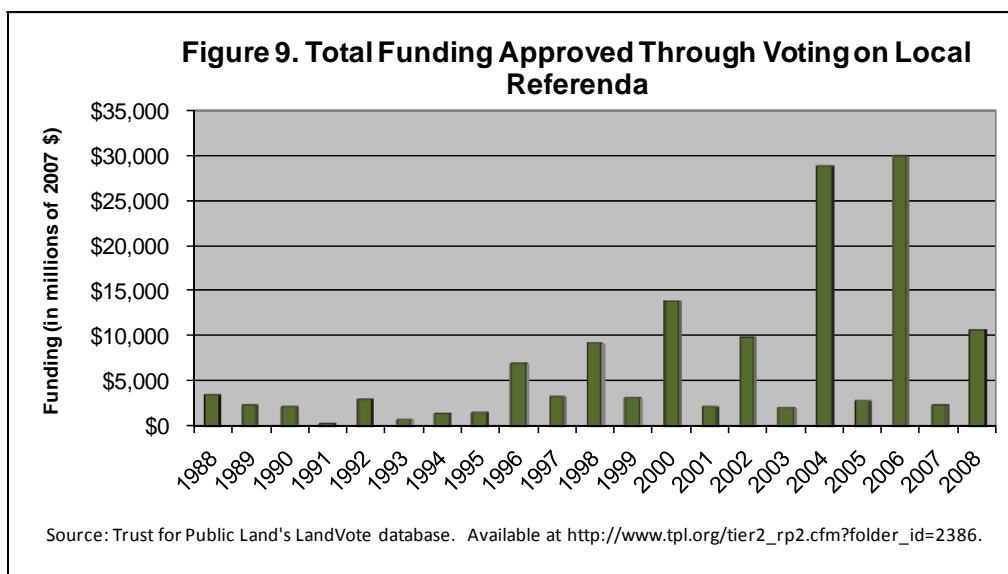
Funding of Local Parks: Local Referenda

Since the late 1980s, local ballot initiatives have become an increasingly popular way to raise money for open space. These referenda ask voters to approve a bond or tax measure to finance various kinds of open space and conservation programs. Between 1988 and 2008, approximately 76 percent of the referenda placed on ballots have passed (Trust for Public Land 2009). Figure 9 shows the dollars approved in ballot initiatives nationwide since 1988, in inflation-adjusted 2007 dollars. At the peak year, 2006, nearly \$30 billion was raised for open space, conservation, and recreation.

A closer look at the data reveals some interesting facts. While referenda are popular in some states, 17 states have passed fewer than three measures in 20 years, and 7 states have never passed a referendum at all. In fact, a handful of states are constitutionally barred from taking such measures to the voters. Massachusetts and New Jersey account for one-third of all measures that have passed. These states have innovative state matching grant programs—the Community Preservation Fund in Massachusetts and the Garden State Preservation Trust in New Jersey, which operates the Green Acres program (a farmland preservation program) and a historic preservation program. These programs provide matching state funds for money that local communities raise themselves through referenda, thus providing a strong incentive for communities to put measures on the ballots. California by itself accounts for one-half of all funds that have been approved over the 1998 to 2008 period. And finally, nearly a quarter of the ballot initiatives passed between 2000 and 2004 targeted farmland preservation. In other words, not all of these dollars raised—in fact not many of the dollars raised—are going to city parks.¹⁴

¹³ See California State Assembly Bill No. 31 at http://www.parks.ca.gov/pages/1008/files/ab_31_bill_9-2008_chaptered.pdf. Interestingly, analysis to identify underserved communities was facilitated by the mapping of urban parks and open space that has been done in the state; see discussion above on page 4 and footnote 4.

¹⁴ See Szabo (2007) for more detailed analysis of types of lands conserved and other issues. Some studies by economists in recent years have used the LandVote data to econometrically analyze the factors that explain both a measure being placed on a ballot and the likelihood that it passes. See, for example, Banzhaf et al. (2007), Sundberg (2006), and Kotchen and Powers (2007).



Funding of Local Parks: The Declining Federal Government Role

These state programs and ballot initiatives passed by voters have stepped in to fill a void left by declining federal funds. The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Act, passed in 1965, provided funding for land acquisition for the federal government, mainly the National Park Service, and for a state matching grant program. The states are required to share funding with localities. Between 1965 and 1981, congressional appropriations for the stateside LWCF program averaged, in inflation-adjusted 2007 dollars, \$626 million per year. Between 1982 and 2007, however, the program averaged less than one-tenth that amount, \$61.9 million per year (Walls 2009). In FY2008, stateside LWCF appropriations were only \$23 million. The Urban Park and Recreation Recovery (UPARR) program, passed in 1978, provided funding to communities to repair and replace deteriorating facilities. During its first six years of operation, UPARR spent \$467 million (in 2007 dollars). However, the program declined sharply thereafter; funding dropped to zero in several years in the 1990s and the program was disbanded in 2002. Today, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program, administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, provides some limited funds for parks and recreation with spending targeted especially to communities in need. In FY08, appropriations were \$93 million, which amounted to approximately two percent of total CDBG spending (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2009). Annual parks and recreation funding in the CDBG program has remained roughly constant since 2001.

Although LWCF and UPARR have declined in importance and the CDBG program is limited, the federal government continues to spend significant amounts of money on a range of land conservation programs—in FY2008, approximately \$6.5 billion was spent on 32 separate programs. Of those, 23 were introduced in the 1990s and 2000s. However, almost none of the programs have a recreation focus and most do not provide funding directly to local communities.¹⁵ The Farm Bill programs such as the Conservation and Wetlands Reserve Programs and the Farmland Protection Program accounted for approximately \$4 billion of the \$6.5 billion in FY08.

Current Challenges in Urban Park Systems

The RFF survey asked local park directors about the current challenges they face. On a scale of 1 to 5, the survey asked directors to state whether each of a set of 12 specific challenges was “not a challenge,” “a minor challenge,” “a significant challenge,” “a major challenge,” or a “huge issue.” The challenges listed included both funding problems and issues associated with park use. The survey also asked directors to identify the single biggest challenge among the options on the list.

Figure 10 summarizes the responses by showing the percentage of park directors who reported each of the 12 issues as “major challenges” or “huge issues.” The specific categories of challenges are listed in the graph legend. Having adequate funding for operations and maintenance was a clear concern expressed in the survey responses. Fully 65 percent of respondents listed this as a “major challenge” or “huge issue” and 50 percent listed it as their single biggest challenge. Funding for capital expenditures and construction of new facilities was also important: 52 percent listed this issue as a “major challenge” or “huge issue.” In written responses on the questionnaire, several directors mentioned the problem of “deferred maintenance” and costs associated with replacement of aging infrastructure. Funding for park programs was also cited as important. Although the graph makes clear that funding concerns loom large, for some cities, it is clear that other issues are front and center. For example, those cities that reported lack of acreage or suitable sites for new parks emphasized the severity of the

¹⁵ The exceptions are the CDBG program, the Department of Transportation’s Recreational Trails program, and some parts of the Transportation Enhancements program (Maher 2009). Funding for federal programs compiled by RFF; details from the author upon request.

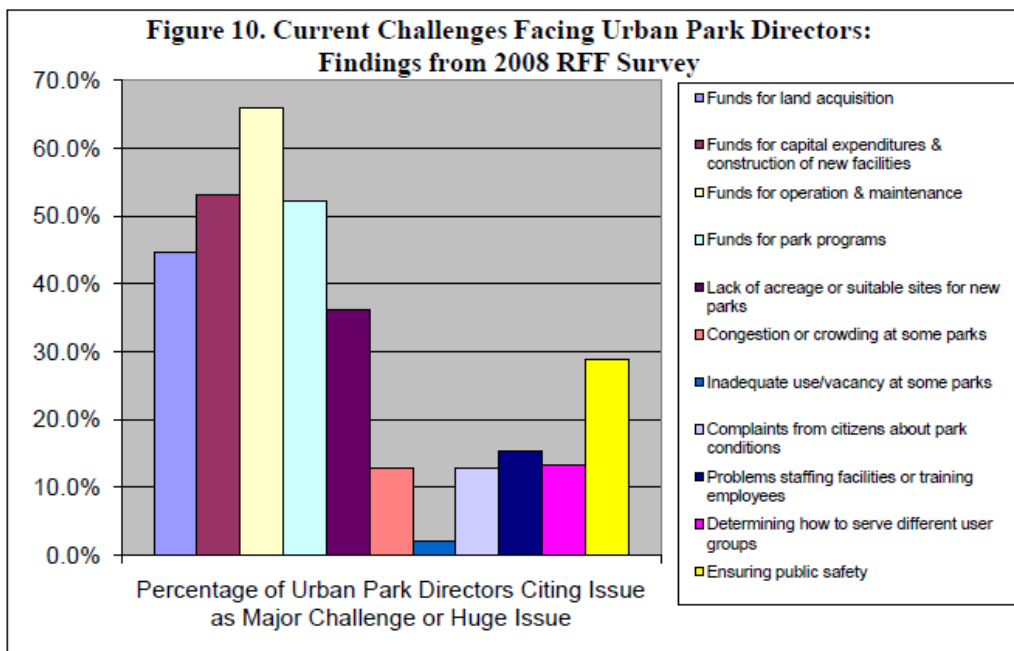
problems they face with a highly developed land base and expensive properties. For public safety, some communities mentioned problems with gangs as a serious concern.

Notable from the graph is the fact that almost no city park directors reported inadequate use of their parks and facilities. This is consistent with their responses to the “popularity trends” questions that we asked and reported on above and confirms discussions we had with many directors about the heavy use of many parks and recreation areas.

Conclusions

In this backgrounder, I have summarized available information on local park and recreation resources, reported on trends in local park funding and sources of funding, and described results of an RFF survey of urban park directors about popularity trends in their parks and challenges that they currently face.

Data from the Trust for Public Land’s Center for City Park Excellence on 75 large to mid-sized cities show that the number of parks, types of facilities, and park acreage vary across cities. However, national data with spatial and other detail on local parks and open space are sorely lacking. In addition, park usership data at the national level are nonexistent. Some local park systems gather data of various kinds to measure use but these data are often limited in scope and are not comparable across cities. Park directors report increasing popularity of many parks and recreation areas in their communities and discussions with park directors suggest that use is high, but without good data it is hard to know whether the supply is meeting demand, what characteristics of park resources are most valued, and what gaps need filling. With advances in GIS technology, spatially detailed data could be available but local datasets need to be developed to take advantage of the technology.



Spending by local governments on parks and recreation has risen in real terms since 1991. Nonetheless, our survey of park directors showed that adequate funding for operations and maintenance, park programs, capital expenditures, and land acquisition are significant challenges. Nonprofit park conservancies and other support groups are filling many gaps and reliance on volunteers is growing. However, further study of these trends is needed to take inventory of what is happening in communities, identify gaps, and document best practices.

Local governments have also raised money by going directly to voters. Since the 1980s, there has been a sharp rise in the number of local referenda directed toward conservation, recreation, and open space. On average, these referenda are adopted about 75 percent of the time. The extent to which these referenda benefit local parks is not clear, however. Many of the programs target farmland preservation.

Finally, a number of innovative state programs have been adopted since the 1980s. Some states do more than others but the most active raise substantial amounts of money, a portion of which is usually shared with local governments.

This rise in state and local spending may be due to the sharp decline in federal government contributions since the late 1970s. The Land and Water Conservation Fund, which provides grants to states and local communities, has diminished in size and importance. Whether the financial resources now provided by state, local, and private nonprofit groups are adequate to support the needs of communities is unclear. Recent evidence suggests that close-to-home

recreation opportunities are growing in importance relative to more distant locations. Americans have more leisure time than in the 1980s, but that leisure time comes in smaller increments rather than large blocks (Godbey 2009). This makes it important for people to be able to get outdoors quickly and engage in activities that take less time. Local parks, open space, trails, and recreation areas help to meet this need. And because 80 percent of the U.S. population resides in urban areas, the local parks that seem to be most critical are those in cities and suburbs. Policymakers would benefit from a better understanding of the resources available and the needs across communities.

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