

Small Parks
Opportunities and Draft Recommendations

Tasks 15.1 and 15.2

November 7, 2008

Small Parks

Draft Recommendations

Small Parks

1.0 Overview

This report provides the draft recommendations for the Small Parks planning process and highlights the system-wide challenges and opportunities based on input provided by the Steering Committee at their last meeting. A previous report to the Steering Committee included:

- Brief history of the small parks;
- Case studies of two small park clusters;
- Identification of physical, programmatic and coordination challenges and opportunities; and
- First draft of recommendations for system-wide improvements, including cluster planning concepts.

The overall goal of our recommendations is to *elevate the importance of small parks and create a distinct role for the city's small parks that contributes to neighborhood livability and national identity.* The recommendations hinge on the idea that the presence of the small parks in all neighborhoods and their unique role in the history of the physical planning of Washington imply that any small system-wide improvements to their physical appearance and usefulness can have dramatic impacts on the livability of the neighborhoods and the national image of Washington, DC.

2.0 Summary of Challenges

Overall challenges for small parks were identified based upon information obtained through a review of current planning reports and studies, site visits, and feedback provided to NCPD from agency and stakeholder interviews. The list of challenges identified in the first report has been revised to clarify the issues, and is summarized below.

Planning and Management

- Lack of accurate and complete data: jurisdiction, use, Geographic Information Systems data
- No coordinated management planning among District and federal agencies
 - No clear role for small parks in the overall park system
 - Multiple jurisdictional responsibilities can lead to confusion and inefficiency in planning for and managing small parks
 - Preservation or repurposing guidelines
- Management of public-private partnerships are resource-intensive, are not coordinated, and not occurring at a large scale

Improvements and Programming

- Varying levels and types of use
- Contradictory or inconsistent policies for programming and permitting among the managing agencies
- Limited programming due to park size, location or presence of utilities
- Unsafe and limited access to parks
- Lack of signage or park identity

Maintenance

- Uncoordinated and inconsistent maintenance
- Maintenance activities aren't clearly linked to intended park uses
- Multiple maintenance programs among the managing agencies (NPS, DDOT, DPR) and multiple private maintenance contracts
- Lack of community stewardship that affect long-term condition of small parks

Funding

- Not a high priority in any agency budget
- Limited outside sources of funding
- Uncoordinated funding for improvements among various grantees for the same target area or neighborhood
- Restrictions on how agencies can receive and allocate funding from outside parties

3.0 Opportunities and Lessons Learned from the Cluster Concept

The first Steering Committee report proposed the cluster concept as a way of providing identity to, and coordinated management and maintenance of, the small parks. The case studies of the small parks at Mt. Pleasant and Columbia Heights, and along Rhode Island Avenue and Florida Avenue, identified opportunities for linking a walkable cluster of small parks using three “seams” -Sustainability, Place-making and Connectivity – which focus on coordinated physical improvements to visually unify the parks and create a distinct identity at the neighborhood or corridor level. The cluster concept was thought to be an appropriate strategy for small parks in geographic areas, corridors, or neighborhoods where revitalization activities are occurring, where small parks can be linked to provide multipurpose amenities in a community with very limited open space, or where a cluster has two or more small parks of substantial size that could be used for recreation, place-making activities, and other complementary uses to adjacent residential and/or commercial uses. A key criterion for the success of the cluster concept is improving the access into these parks, since the concept relies on linkages to support the sustainability, place-making and connectivity “seams.”

The lessons learned from the case studies are:

- While not all small parks fall neatly into a cluster, thinking about them as geographic or functional system(s) can establish identities for the small parks that could help the partner agencies and the public better define park purpose, maintenance and improvements, and partnership opportunities.
- By thinking about small parks as linked clusters, it is possible to come up with designs and programming that could make these spaces better able to meet multiple park goals.

4.0 Small Park System Recommendations

Washington's small parks can contribute significantly towards neighborhood livability, sustainability, place-making and historic and commemorative goals. The following recommendations are meant to enhance the contributions of small parks by improving coordination between agencies and identifying tools for system-wide planning, management, improvements, maintenance, funding and programming.

Planning and Management

1. **Categorize small parks by geographic area, function, and/or size** as a basis for determining the appropriate agency to manage them, their purpose and programming, and their local or national identity. This will help in creating a visually coherent system of small parks, regardless of their various jurisdictions. Categories for place-making should consider how small parks can contribute to federal and local needs and could include:

- Sustainability components: LIDs, tree canopy, impervious surface conversion
- Community gathering places: event stage, tot lots, dog parks, community gardens
- Commemorative and historic components
- Vending or markets in commercial and residential neighborhoods
- Gateways and corridors: Ceremonial/capital city functions, transportation corridors and transit stops, neighborhood gateways

2. **Develop a shared database** of small parks to inform coordination efforts between agencies and with the public. Complete an inventory of all small parks to include data on: ownership, size, location, function, level of use, historic or cultural value, commemorative elements, programs and condition. This database becomes a tool for planning, programming, and prioritization for improvements of small parks.

3. **Create a one-stop point of contact for the public** to access information or to request services for the small parks.

4. Coordinate with the NPS park units, DDOT and DPR to determine if **jurisdictional transfers or other arrangements for certain small parks** would more effectively meet District and/or federal objectives and clarify responsibilities.

5. Where appropriate, **coordinate the physical improvements and management of a cluster of small parks**. Clustering can help define the identity of the small parks and increase their recreational opportunities by capitalizing on the synergistic benefits of using sustainability, place-making and transportation linkages within the parks.

Maintenance

6. Establish a **shared baseline “clean and safe” standard for small park maintenance**. This “clean and safe” standard will be a realistic minimal standard that considers the various maintenance practices and resources of the agencies.

7. To promote efficient maintenance practices, coordinate between agencies to share best management practices and **develop maintenance guidelines tailored to a few key park functions** (for example, guidance on maintaining LID features) and/or clusters. Further, use these maintenance guidelines as the basis for directing partnership groups interested in providing maintenance.

Improvements and Programming

Prioritize agency planning and enhancements for small parks as follows:

8. **Identify, plan for, and improve small park clusters in underserved areas of the city**. In some neighborhoods, small parks are the only available open space; thus their programming, physical condition and funding become crucial in improving neighborhood

livability. Small parks investments should be a priority in several neighborhoods where parks and open spaces are limited and population continues to increase significantly. CapitalSpace analysis of the amount of parkland for every 1000 residents identified Capitol Hill, NoMA, Mid-City, and Shaw as examples of such neighborhoods.

9. Leverage already occurring planning and improvement efforts affecting small parks in clusters or corridors, including the District's Great Streets and Main Street programs, the continuing requests for commemoration at small park sites, or other federal or local planning initiatives.

10. Tailor resources, amenities and maintenance level to park usage. Parks that are used as bus stops, community events or in commercial areas often have high usage and require additional considerations for their design and maintenance. Their use warrants considering durable and attractive paving materials, location of bus shelters, possible location of public art, and a higher level of maintenance such as additional trash collection.

11. Seek out partners to provide improvements for small parks on an area or District-wide basis. For example, environmental non-profit organizations may be interested in sponsoring tree plantings or LID improvements, or neighborhood associations may be interested in providing enhanced maintenance for a group of small parks. Additional recommendations for partnerships are listed under "Funding" below and will be developed further in the "Partnerships" discussion of CapitalSpace.

12. The following recommendations should be considered in developing programming and improvements for small parks throughout the city.

- **Use the system-wide categorization of small parks or clustering to determine appropriate improvements and programming.** Identify appropriate passive and active recreation components based on park size, context (traffic median vs. pocket park in residential area), access, and safety considerations.
- **Increase access** to and from the park with **defined edges and entrances.** A redefinition of the park edge and clarity of orientation can help encourage park use and create a more enjoyable experience in the park.
- Where appropriate, **encourage social interaction among park users with pedestrian elements** such as seating (benches, seat walls, planter boxes), lighting, bus canopies, bicycle racks, tables, trash receptacles, water fountains, plazas, wireless internet service.
- Take into consideration the context of a site when locating amenities so they are pedestrian friendly and encourage use. For example, sitting areas along busy corridors such as 16th Street, North Capitol Street or Florida Avenue should be set back from the roadway edge and buffered from traffic by landscaping.
- Improve **pedestrian and bicycle safety** along all streets adjacent to small parks with unique paving treatments, painted crosswalks, timed cross signals, traffic calming, dedicated bicycle lanes (particularly around Metro), and directional signage.
- Incorporate local commemoration, linear or neighborhood gateways, public art, and way-finding as **landmark elements.**
- **Incorporate low impact development techniques** to reduce impervious surfaces and address stormwater management.

- **Provide informative and interpretive signage** to identify park ownership and any park partner; contact information, and as appropriate, information about park features or history.
- Issues related to vending, activity programming, and homeless use in small parks are similar to those discussed in the Center City parks case studies, and similar recommendations will be pursued. This includes review of existing District and federal requirements, and considering special requirements for “urban parks.”

Funding

Several funding strategies for small parks are applicable to all parks, and will be developed in more detail as part of our overall discussion of funding and partnerships. They include: developer agreements, established organizations such as BIDs or neighborhood associations, corporate sponsorship, grants and funding tools such as bonds and tax increment financing. Staff is also exploring options for a public-private partnership to raise park funds overall, as discussed at a previous Steering Committee meeting.

In addition, there are several funding strategies that could be effectively and uniquely used for small parks.

- Establish identities for the small parks as a whole and around “seams” such as sustainability, place-making or connectivity, and **use this identity “brand” to target partnerships and as a rationale for funding.**
- **Leverage investments in infrastructure improvements** to provide coordinated planning and improvements of the small parks in affected rights-of-way; for example, DDOT’s Great Streets program includes improvement of small parks to enhance pedestrian amenities within rights-of-way.
- The often challenging in-street location of many small parks could be an opportunity to **tap into unconventional transportation funding sources** such as DDOT’s SAFETEA-LU grants administered by the Transportation Planning and Policy Administration (TTPA) or through capital projects funded through the Infrastructure Project Management Administration (IPMA).