

**The Park System of Norfolk, Virginia**  
*An Analysis of its Strengths and Weaknesses*

**By**

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## *Introduction and Executive Summary*

A venerable city with colonial-era roots, Norfolk, Virginia, has an increasingly bright future as the center of its large metropolitan area at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay.

In 2004, with their city in the midst of an impressive civic renaissance, a group of Norfolk citizen leaders became interested in knowing the state of Norfolk's park and recreation system and how it compares with those of other similar cities. They turned to the Trust for Public Land's Center for City Park Excellence, which is known for its studies of urban park systems, and contracted for an overview and analysis of Norfolk.

With the assistance of the Bay Oaks Park Committee, and with cooperation from city officials, TPL undertook this study of Norfolk's park system. Data on the system's acreage, budget, manpower, and planning process was supplemented by interviews with city leaders, park and planning staff and Norfolk's citizens. Utilizing an extensive database of city park information Norfolk was evaluated both on its own merits and against other American cities.

By dint of time and budget, TPL's analysis is not comprehensive; it only provides an initial set of snapshot views and comparisons. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are clear enough. By almost every measure, TPL finds that while the city of Norfolk has some wonderful parks, scenic riverfronts, tree-lined boulevards and sandy beaches, it simply doesn't have enough of them. Norfolk is short of parkland. Only two percent of the city's 42,000 acres are reserved for public parkland, and Norfolk's 234,000 residents have access to only 858 acres of public green space. The city would have to nearly triple the size of its park system to reach the standard of 11 acres of open space per 1,000 residents maintained by comparable cities. Moreover, certain individual neighborhoods are particularly short of parkland and the city's park distribution is not equitable.

Land is not the only issue. When compared to other U.S. cities, Norfolk's park agency is understaffed and underfunded. On average, urban park agencies spend \$59 per capita to operate and maintain their public parks. Norfolk spends \$54 per resident. The typical urban park department averages 3.0 employees for each park in the city. Norfolk has just 2.2 employees per park. The agency is burdened by multiple responsibilities, only a few of which are directly related to the provision of active and passive recreational opportunities for the citizens of Norfolk. The result is an uneven system where some parks are well maintained and crowded while others languish and are underutilized.

Moreover, it appears that the city has not adequately factored current and future parks into its long-range urban planning efforts, while existing parks are subjected to ever-increasing pressures regarding management, maintenance and operations.

Norfolk has opportunities to reorganize and redirect its park agency, to acquire new land and bring on the people necessary to maintain it, and to provide its citizens with a first-class network of public parks and open spaces. To do so the city must make some hard choices about its budget, staffing and community development priorities. The practices of other city park systems are offered for comparison, but the revitalization and expansion of an urban park system is not a one-size-fits-all process. The information presented here is designed to spark a conversation between Norfolk's city officials, professional staff, business leaders and citizen activists about the future of urban open space. This report does not provide prescriptions for the road ahead, but rather challenges all parties to come together and craft solutions for Norfolk's special challenges and unique opportunities.

Norfolk has the makings of a great system of parks and boulevards, just as envisioned in the 1994 UDA Architects plan for the city. This report is intended to help city officials; agency staff, business leaders and interested citizens take the first steps toward achieving that potential.

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## ***Norfolk: Brief History and Context***

Founded in 1682 on the Elizabeth River, near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, the city of Norfolk was perfectly located to become a great Eastern seaport and naval center. By the time of the American Revolution it had become the most prosperous town in Virginia. But the city's upward trajectory was difficult and uneven. Years of war and economic embargo hampered Norfolk until after the War of 1812. Yellow fever, imported on a vessel from the West Indies, ravaged the city in 1855, killing more than two thousand people. The Civil War was even more destructive as the nearby Portsmouth naval base became a valuable military target first for the Confederate Army and later by Union troops. In 1862 the historic naval battle between the U.S.S. *Monitor* and the C.S.S. *Virginia* occurred in the waters off of Norfolk. Following that, Union ships blockaded Norfolk's harbor, bringing commerce to a standstill and dealing a severe setback to the city's economy. After the Civil War the establishment of a street railway system, quickening suburban development and revitalization of the city's central business district aided Norfolk's rehabilitation, leading to a pattern of urban expansion and annexation that was to continue for the next hundred years, transforming the city from a compact commercial port to a metropolis of eclectic neighborhoods encompassing more than sixty-six square miles.

By 1950, fueled by a booming post-World War II economy and a large contingent of returning veterans, Norfolk was one of the ten fastest growing cities in the United States. But sprawl and the formation of new cities abruptly curtailed Norfolk's expansion. Neighboring Virginia Beach, with virtually no downtown, vastly surpassed Norfolk in population, and today Norfolk represents only 14 percent of the population of its metropolitan area. As a result Norfolk has experienced economic and social upheaval common to many of America's port cities and eastern commercial-industrial hubs -- cycles of decay and attempted urban renewal, gentrification of some neighborhoods and near-abandonment of others. But in the last twenty years Norfolk has been reborn as the cultural and economic hub of Hampton Roads and southeastern Virginia. The Naval Base and port facilities expanded, priming the city's economic engine. Norfolk rediscovered its potential to attract tourists and visitors with museums, convention facilities and a beautiful downtown ballpark for the minor league Norfolk Tides.

Norfolk's physical form and emotional resonance has been overwhelmingly influenced by water – the James, Elizabeth and Lafayette Rivers, the Willoughby and Chesapeake Bays, and the Atlantic Ocean. Unfortunately, the city's shape has been much less influenced from its landward side, by its parks and preserves. From the very beginning, unlike other colonial-era towns, Norfolk was not designed around a central urban green space. There was an informal market square and parade ground but Norfolk had nothing to rival the New Haven Green, the Boston Common or the 22 centrally planned squares that gave Savannah, Ga. its distinction. It was not until 1892 that the city purchased 114 acres to construct City Park, later renamed Lafayette Park. By 1900 the park was home to a small zoological collection which remains in a much expanded form to this day. As the park aesthetic changed from passive to active recreation in the 1920s Lafayette Park, along with other city parks, was redeveloped to accommodate sports fields and recreation facilities.

In 1923 Norfolk annexed the Ocean View area, along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. Ocean View's pristine beaches greatly expanded the open space and recreation opportunities

available to Norfolk's residents and tourists alike, and proved to be a boon to the local economy. The onset of World War II required yet more development of semi-rural areas within and around the city, as open space was rapidly consumed by hastily assembled housing for service members and their families. Town Point Park, a seven-acre sliver of emerald nestled along the banks of the Elizabeth River in downtown Norfolk, has become one of Hampton Roads' premier sites for concerts and festivals, simultaneously showcasing the city's natural beauty and urbane sophistication.

Norfolk is experiencing a renaissance, but its park system has not always benefited from it. Rather than seeing parks as nodes around which redevelopment could occur, public green spaces in Norfolk have sometimes been seen as impediments to economic activity. In some cases parks have even been seen as utilitarian patches of land waiting to be paved for parking lots, houses, roads or commercial development. New parks, when created, have often been cobbled together from otherwise unusable land, rather than being designed and acquired as part of a comprehensive city-wide network of parks, boulevards and trails.

### **What Makes for a Great Urban Park System**

Excellent city park systems are a product of concerted effort in support of clearly defined goals. While total park size is not a surefire proxy for excellence, acreage can be a shorthand method of getting an idea about greatness. Starting with this measure can give a hint about other factors.

#### ***Acreage***

The city of Norfolk proclaims that it has 1,704 acres of parkland open space. However, much of this acreage consists of the campuses of the city's public schools. Subtracting those parcels, the true measure of parkland is only 858 acres. Much of this is concentrated in less than a dozen community parks and golf courses; smaller neighborhood and pocket parks scattered in the city's older neighborhoods make up the balance. While the community parks are generally well distributed, a casual glance at any map reveals that large areas of Norfolk are without either a neighborhood park or easy access to a larger community park.

Norfolk's public parks account for only 2 percent of the city's total land area. By comparison, cities with similar population densities devote an average of 8 percent of their land to public parks and recreation facilities (*see Appendix A*). Norfolk also fares poorly when the amount of parkland per resident is measured. Comparable cities average more than 11 acres of parkland for every thousand residents while Norfolk has just 3.7 acres per 1000. (Virginia Beach, though a much less densely populated city, has more than 30 acres of public open space for every thousand residents.)

Acreage numbers drawn from the 1999 Open Space Supplement to Norfolk's Recreation Master Plan document a park system with a serious land shortage that has shown little improvement in the intervening five years. The Trust for Public Land's more rigorous analysis – without including schoolyards – reveals an even greater deficit of genuine park space in Norfolk. To address this widely recognized shortage of public open space the city needs to make land

acquisition for parks and recreation facilities a priority, and also to consider the open space implications of any land redevelopment projects.

In 1999 the Norfolk Open Space Committee drafted a supplement to the city’s Recreation Master Plan. This open space supplement divided Norfolk into nine recreation planning areas, plus the naval base. The report inventoried Norfolk’s existing parks and open spaces, using the following classifications.

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Service Radius</b>	<b>Standards</b>
Neighborhood Park	2,500 sq. feet to 20 acres	¼ to ½ mile	3 acres per 1000 population
Community Park	20 to 50 acres	½ to 3 miles	3 acres per 1000 population
Citywide Facility	50 to 150 acres	5 to 15 miles	4 acres per 1000 population

Unlike many American cities Norfolk counts school properties among its park inventory. School playgrounds and recreation fields are not considered adequate substitutes for public parks. City officials argue that Norfolk’s substantial land use impediments, including a large military presence and two major public universities require the dual use of school grounds as recreation facilities. However, even including public school facilities Norfolk has a deficit of 366 acres of community parkland, and 32 acres of citywide facilities. The city needs 15% more public open space than it currently has.

Although the city as a whole has a surplus of neighborhood parks, several neighborhoods have significant local land shortages. The greatest deficiency is in the Ocean View recreation planning area, where, even counting public schoolyards, 29 additional acres of neighborhood parkland would be necessary to achieve the city standard of 3 acres per 1,000 residents. The Northside planning area is 18 acres below the city standard, and the Central planning area lacks 14 acres of needed neighborhood parkland. (*See Appendix B, Table 1*).

Many of these areas are also lacking in community parks. The Central planning area has a 104-acre deficiency, Northside needs 76 additional acres, and the Lafayette River area falls 70 acres short of the community park standard. Overall, eight of Norfolk’s nine recreation planning areas have a deficit of at least 20 acres of community parkland. (*See Appendix B, Table 2*).

It must be noted, too, that many of the parcels of open space that the city does own are roadway medians, traffic triangles and other land that is not particularly well-suited to use by the public. The 55-acre Virginia Zoological Park, and the 147-acre Norfolk Botanical Garden account for two large chunks of the remaining open space acreage. The Botanical Garden, though owned by the city, is managed and maintained by a private non-profit group and is not a public park in the traditional sense. While the zoo and the Botanical Garden are wonderful assets to the community, both facilities charge entrance fees, and allow only a limited range of acceptable recreational activities.

To craft a truly excellent city park system, the politicians, park staff, business community and citizens of Norfolk should strive to achieve and then exceed the bare minimum standards established by the current recreation master plan. The city has many of the raw materials -- flagship spaces like Lafayette Park and Town Point Park, vast riverfronts and scenic public

beaches, fledgling landscaped boulevards and the beginnings of a greenway that could one day span the length and breadth of the city. But to make Norfolk a truly “green city”, these disparate elements need to be connected into a cohesive whole.

### *Land Acquisition Challenges*

It is not that Norfolk has not built any new parks. Plum Point Park along the Elizabeth River, the recent fruit of an ongoing pollution mitigation project funded by the Virginia Port Authority, demonstrates what is possible when the city is encouraged to consider open space preservation. However, the six acres that Plum Point added to the park system does not make up for the loss of City Beach in Ocean View (where nine acres of waterfront access was sacrificed to residential construction) and the lack of progress on or funding for the planned Southside park on the landfill site near the Ford Motor Company plant. Meanwhile, the pressure on Norfolk’s existing parks continues. Fergus Reid Park in West Ghent is feeling the squeeze from expanding commercial development. Lafayette Park was just barely saved a few years ago from becoming the site of a large new high school football stadium. The stadium was eventually built at Powhatan Field, displacing existing recreation facilities. Ownership of the new football stadium will be transferred to Old Dominion University, further diminishing the city’s supply of public open space. Unlike many other cities engaged in land transactions, Norfolk chose not to negotiate a land swap, and will receive no new land to compensate for the stadium transfer.

To be fair, not all of Norfolk’s open space problems are of the city’s own making. Much of the city’s land lies beyond its control. The large military presence that gives Norfolk part of its character and contributes significantly to the local economy also occupies enormous swaths of land. Likewise, Old Dominion and Norfolk State Universities consume considerable (and expanding) chunks of real estate within the city limits. According to the city manager, as much as 40 percent of Norfolk’s land cannot be counted on the tax rolls.

But that fact alone is not dispositive. San Diego, Calif., has successfully balanced the presence of a large naval base and a branch of the University of California system with the provision of a first-class city park system for its residents. More than 18 percent of the land in San Diego is public open space, and the city provides 30 acres of parkland for every thousand citizens. Likewise, Colorado Springs, Colo., has made excellent use of its natural landscapes to construct striking public parks, constituting almost 10 percent of the city’s total land area, despite the considerable size of the Air Force Academy. Colorado Springs, like San Diego, provides 30 acres of public parkland for every thousand city residents.

Every city in America has some industrial or geographic limitation affecting its land use. The challenge for Norfolk is to make the best use of the available land. The city has budgeted more than \$4.5 million over the next five years for improvements to existing parks and recreation facilities, including \$3 million for a new 9-hole golf course at Lambert’s Point. Nevertheless, Norfolk’s development pattern presents a real challenge to the preservation of urban open space.

Norfolk’s population has been declining since the 1970s. Over the last thirty years the city has lost more than 70,000 residents. Despite this, the number of building permits issued has doubled in the last four years, and 771 housing units were added to the city in 2003 alone. Renewal is positive, but badly planned or undirected construction can overwhelm both city land

and city services. Residential development has already supplanted parkland at City Beach and may do so again at Bay Oaks in East Ocean View. To maintain and improve its existing public spaces Norfolk needs to evaluate future development with an eye toward the impact on the city's tight supply of natural open space.

### ***Mandate, Mission Statement, Structure and Reporting***

A dearth of parkland can indicate underlying problems. To identify them it is necessary to go to the very heart of the park planning and management process and the governmental structure to oversee parks. City park departments, like all government agencies, benefit from the creation and dissemination of a clear and concise mandate, mission statement and list of core services. These documents, if widely read and understood, can guide every aspect of park operations. Flowing from the vision and the plan then come all the necessary ingredients of land, funding, staffing, accessibility, user satisfaction and safety.

Norfolk's Division of Parks and Urban Forestry is housed in the Department of Neighborhood and Leisure Services (NLS), an arrangement that is unusual, though not unique, among city park agencies. Also under the umbrella of the NLS are divisions dealing with recreation, youth development, community development and neighborhood preservation. On the positive side, this structure tends to integrate parks, open space and recreation into the broader fabric of neighborhood and community services. However, it can also mask recognition of the challenges of creating and maintaining attractive, productive urban parks. The lack of focus on greenspace is evident in the NLS's mission statement:

“to enrich the quality of life for our customers through building and maintaining stable, healthy and livable neighborhoods...preserving and enhancing the urban environmental setting; facilitating opportunities for self-renewal, skill-building and fun; ensuring safe and habitable conditions for existing buildings; and fostering citizen involvement and a greater sense of community pride.”

While the mission statement does acknowledge the necessity of “preserving and enhancing the urban environmental setting,” it does so without identifying the intrinsic value of numerous and diverse parks and their positive contribution to the health, stability and livability of urban neighborhoods.

The Trust for Public Land has studied the configuration and operation of urban park agencies in dozens of cities across the United States. Although there is no one optimal model for a park department, successful park agencies do tend to share common characteristics: their staff and organizations are streamlined and focused on the delivery of core, park-related services; they are not burdened with non-park related responsibilities that sap both time and money; and they regularly report the results of their efforts to the public, so that progress can be measured against the mission statement and the agency's core services.

As an example, in the 1980's the Chicago Park District was ineffectual and moribund. An investigation revealed that it encompassed 13 distinct divisions, only one of which dealt directly with parks. After a major overhaul in the 1990s the system quickly rose to national prominence. In similar fashion it may be that NLS as currently



configured simply has too many diverse missions to fulfill: not only parks and recreation, but also youth services, neighborhood preservation and community development. While these are not necessarily conflicting goals they do represent a broad spectrum of needs, and department resources committed to one division may well slight another. (It should be noted that the Division of Parks and Urban Forestry has a clear, concise mission statement -- "enriching the quality of life for all by preserving and enhancing the environmental setting and assets of the City of Norfolk through creating, preserving and protecting landscaped areas for trees, shrubs and flowers on streets, greenways, parks and public grounds" -- and has identified and publicized the core services that advance that mission.)

NLS seems to recognize that it may be stretched too thin. Proposals to reorganize the department are being considered. One would split it into two subgroups, one for parks and recreation, and another for neighborhood preservation and community development. (At the time of this writing, the city was seeking a new assistant director for Parks, Recreation and Open Space.) Realignment has the potential to reinvigorate Norfolk's parks and address the special challenges that confront urban green spaces. But to achieve success the agency must either harness the park planning potential of the existing Department of Planning and Community Development, or bring the responsibility for strategic park planning in-house. Future budget requests and staffing levels should be calibrated to account for the significant amount of new land and facilities needed just to bring Norfolk's park system up to average.

Accountability is also important, and annual reports are a good way for a city park system to announce its goals and measure its progress. For instance, Minneapolis, Minn., produces an annual report that recounts hard numbers of activities held, paid users, individual volunteers, corporate donations, detailed financial analyses and more. The Minneapolis report doesn't sugar-coat the news, listing incidences of crime, pollution and other program difficulties. Honesty about trouble spots provides an opportunity for all segments of the community to contribute to solutions. This is a tool that Norfolk has yet to utilize. Norfolk publishes a quarterly report, *Good Times*, which catalogs the many classes and recreation programs available to residents, but adding an end-of-year summary that addresses the physical and financial state of the park system would make it much stronger. It would allow Norfolk to trumpet its successes and solicit suggestions for improvements from a broad spectrum of interested stakeholders.

### ***Planning & Community Involvement***

Norfolk is well behind schedule to revise its city-wide comprehensive plan, and master planning for parks and open space has suffered accordingly. According to Marcus Martin, formerly of the Department of Planning and Community Development, the current General Plan and Recreation Master Plan are out of date. The city is still operating under a 1992 General Plan, and the most recent open space supplement is five years old. Also, Norfolk's Department of Planning and Community Development lacks a dedicated open space planner. The city's community planners, each responsible for the development of several neighborhoods, take an admirably holistic view of community development, but the absence of a park planner deprives

the department of an expert who can identify deficiencies within the system, opportunities for park development, and strategies to increase connectivity and access to the parks.

Lack of connectivity is one of the major issues facing the Norfolk park system. The city has abundant access to beaches and waterfront parks, but it has not maximized the potential of these sites or turned isolated patches into an interconnected system. In 1994 Urban Design Associates produce a study, called “Great City: A Plan for Norfolk’s Parks and Boulevards,” which recognized the potential for creating a world-class greenspace network. It also candidly acknowledged that much work remained to be done. In the 10 years since the situation has improved only slightly.

The project with the most potential to connect Norfolk’s disparate green spaces is the Elizabeth River Trail. Conceived as a largely off-road, multi-use trail using existing public right-of-ways, unused rail corridors and public streets from the Naval Base to the Virginia Beach line, this ambitious proposal would be the area’s most extensive greenway. It could well spur the development of other connections in Norfolk and neighboring jurisdictions. Currently the trail runs for only a couple of miles in West Ghent, but if it is ever fully assembled it will make Norfolk the pioneer of a greenways movement in southeastern Virginia.

Converting plans into reality requires community involvement. To address recreational programming the city has established advisory boards for each of the 25 recreation centers. But beyond that, public engagement with the park system has been mostly reactive, arising when existing parks or natural areas are threatened. There is a Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission, but it apparently has done little to develop a plan or a constituency. The city has no contracts with independent non-profits to maintain or enhance the parks. While Norfolk has many vibrant civic leagues, few have taken a prolonged interest in the health and well-being of their neighborhood parks.

The two leading park-oriented citizens groups are Preserve Our Public Park Spaces (POPPS) and the Bay Oaks Park Committee (BOPC). Both are relatively new to the scene and both have been largely reactive. POPPS coalesced when Lafayette Park, Norfolk’s oldest park and a signature destination, was proposed as the location of a high school football stadium. A strong public backlash scuttled the plan and saved the park.

Norfolk’s other community-based parks coalition, the Bay Oaks Park Committee, is hoping to achieve similar success. Dedicated to the preservation of a tract of maritime forest in the East Ocean View neighborhood, a parcel that is already home to a small neighborhood park, the BOPC is pressing for the creation of a public park that would preserve the area’s natural features while enhancing both passive and active recreational opportunities for Ocean View residents. The Bay Oaks tract is currently in quasi-public ownership, slated to be redeveloped largely into new housing by the Norfolk Housing and Redevelopment Authority. (Also involved with BOPC is the Norfolk Preservation Alliance, an advocate for preserving and enhancing the city’s history and physical environment.)

Ad hoc organizations and grassroots campaigns can occasionally be effective, but the best city park systems in America are supported by foundations, conservancies and ongoing advocacy groups that have the mandate and resources to become permanent fixtures in the community. In New York the Central Park Conservancy has become so successful that the city

relies on it to help run the park. Yet even smaller groups can have enormous positive impacts. Park foundations can marshal funds to create or refurbish open spaces. Friends groups can turn out park volunteers and also citizen advocates at the time of budget hearings.

### ***Sufficient Resources in Staffing and Maintenance***

Within the Department of Neighborhood and Leisure Services responsibility for maintaining the city's public green spaces lies primarily with the Division of Parks and Urban Forestry. This division planted 1,548 new trees in 2003, trimmed another 7,500, and mowed and landscaped Norfolk's parks, boulevards and public grounds. Of the 232 people employed by the Department of Neighborhood and Leisure Services, roughly 115 are directly involved with parks and recreation on a daily basis. That equates to just 2.2 employees for each of the city's parks, beaches and recreation centers, while the average for urban park systems is 3.0 employees per park (*see Appendix C*). That level of understaffing is bound to have consequences on the ground.

Norfolk has a number of pleasant, regularly maintained and well-loved public spaces such as Lafayette Park, Town Point Park, Ocean View Beach and Northside Community Park. But not all of Norfolk's parks showcase the best of the city. Grandy Village Park, a small neighborhood park in a mixed residential-industrial area south of Interstate 264 seems to belong to a different park system entirely. The playground equipment that is not broken is rusty and unappealing. A backstop rising from grass taller than the six-inch benchmark for Parks and Urban Forestry mowing marks the presence of what was once a baseball diamond. The basketball courts, though usable, are bordered with refuse. On a sunny summer afternoon when many of Norfolk's parks echoed with the thwack of tennis balls and the laughter of children on playgrounds, Grandy Village Park was entirely deserted.

Getting an accurate picture of Norfolk's financial commitment to its park system is challenging. Though the city is to be commended for publishing much of its budget and expenditure data, the information could be made easier to use. Actual numbers for the parks and recreation capital improvement budget were unavailable at the time of this report, making it impossible to assess the city's past spending on land acquisition and new amenities. Norfolk must implement greater fiscal transparency if its park finances are to be evaluated fairly and accurately.

Norfolk spends approximately \$54 per resident on the maintenance and operation of its park system. That amount, while not grossly deficient, is about 10 percent below the \$59 average spending of the nation's fifty-five largest urban park systems. (*See Appendix D*). Make a tour of the city's parks and the results of this funding shortage are apparent. Some may ask why Norfolk should consider expanding its park system when some existing parks are ill-served but maintenance and acquisition are not competing goals. The city can prioritize the preservation of existing parks while still acquiring new land in underserved areas. It is simply a matter of choosing to do so.

### ***Equitable Access***

The best-designed and maintained park adds nothing to a city if it isn't accessible to the average citizen. A neighborhood park separated from the surrounding neighborhood by a major highway, or a community park located far from residents, is not as accessible as it could be and

will not, as a consequence, be used as frequently. Similarly, city parks and programs that levy a charge or are frequently closed for private events are less accessible to the general public.

When it comes to geographic accessibility, the parks of Denver, Colo., are on the cutting edge. Denver's park planners set a goal of having a park within walking distance of every citizen. Using detailed mapping and targeted land acquisition they have recently achieved that goal. Other major metropolises, from Minneapolis to Nashville, Tenn., are also taking steps to ensure that their network of parks and urban green spaces can be useful to every citizen.

The first step toward achieving physical accessibility is having a service radius for each park. Different cities have selected different distances, ranging from a mile down to a few blocks. Ideally, service areas will overlap and no resident will be out of range of his or her own local green space. Norfolk has established a baseline service radius for its neighborhood parks, community parks and citywide facilities. But to evaluate whether the park system is accessible to all residents, Norfolk needs to harness the skills of its GIS department, and map the service radius of all the city parks, recreation centers and green spaces. GIS mapping creates an easily understood visual reference that quickly identifies underserved neighborhoods. To date, Norfolk has not made full use of its in-house park planning tools.

While several of its larger community parks, such as Northside and Lafayette, are located adjacent to major thoroughfares and accessible by bus and foot as well as by car, many other parks are tucked away from travel routes and are easy to miss completely. In some cases this gives Norfolk's neighborhood parks an air of peaceful oases from the bustle of urban living. But just as often these less accessible spaces seem desolate and neglected, cut off from the city they are meant to serve.

Physical geography is only one limitation. Even the most centrally located park can be made inaccessible to average residents by action of the government, the private sector, or quasi-public agencies. Norfolk's residents once had the ability to use a number of parks and recreation facilities constructed for the benefit of the city's military personnel. However, recent security concerns have sharply curtailed access to the naval base, placing these amenities beyond the reach of Norfolk's citizens.

Other factors have converged to limit the public's use of Town Point Park in downtown Norfolk. An oasis of greenspace at the edge of the Elizabeth River, this potential flagship park, convenient to museums, shopping, hotels and offices is often shuttered to the general public by being reserved for performances and special events by FestEvents, a non-profit promotional organization with ties to the city government and major businesses. Parks can be ideal showplaces for the arts, and concerts and exhibitions often serve to highlight the natural advantages of public open space. But parks are for people, and access to public green spaces should not be hindered for private benefit. Open and accessible parks are more likely to become a regular part of the life of the city, to be well-loved, and to engender a sense of pride in ownership in Norfolk's citizens.

### ***User Safety and Satisfaction***

Unsafe parks are not an asset to the community. Safe parks are free from both crime and physical hazards like potholes and broken glass. Park safety is often largely a matter of regular

maintenance since clean, well-maintained parks are more likely to attract recreational users and discourage loitering, delinquency, vandalism and other crimes. Conversely, neglected, unkempt parks are unattractive to potential patrons and are more likely to be perceived as havens for crime.

While crime is an endemic urban problem and no park department can hope to combat it alone, park design can limit the influx of neighborhood crime into public spaces, and the presence of park staff and law enforcement personnel is a strong deterrent to bad behavior. Whether park security is the primary responsibility of civilian recreation workers or trained police officers, a visible presence and regular patrols serve to reassure park guests and discourage potential troublemakers. Also, accurate collection of crime data in parks and surrounding neighborhoods is an essential first step to any crime prevention strategy. This is an area where Norfolk (like most American cities) is not making full use of its resources. Collecting data on male/female user ratios is also a useful proxy for safety information, since low attendance by females is often a strong tip-off about an unsafe park.

The city of Norfolk has not embarked upon a comprehensive survey of its park users. Fee-based activities and recreation center attendance are monitored, but casual users and those who do not pay to play go largely uncounted. Informal observation suggests that this silent majority makes good use of many of the city's parks, playgrounds and athletic fields, albeit in a more sporadic and ad hoc fashion. The absence of a regular and reliable user survey mechanism prevents the city from doing many potentially beneficial things. Not knowing total usership numbers restricts the Neighborhood and Leisure Services Division's ability to budget effectively and request funding increases from the city council. A comprehensive survey of recreation and park users would allow Norfolk to respond to current deficiencies and plan for the growth and acquisition needs of the system. For example many park departments are identifying an increased need for sports fields and youth recreation leagues as young families return to urban areas once largely populated by adults and seniors. Other cities report increased demand for senior citizen-friendly recreation as their population ages.

User surveys don't just facilitate strategic planning. They allow cities to identify and build upon areas of strength. Parks departments that rely on informal complaint or feedback forms have an at best incomplete view of their citizens' satisfaction level. "In my conversations with citizens, parks are simply not a priority," says Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim. This might well be true of the individual citizens who seek out the mayor, but without more systematic information gathering tools, the NLS has no basis for evaluating the general satisfaction level among park users or the desire for increased services or new parks. While it will never be possible to interview or account for every user, the NLS, like every other institution, should realize that knowing its customers is simply good business.

### ***Benefits for the City Beyond the Park Boundaries***

Urban parks have some advantages that are easily measurable -- the number of soccer games played, the average number of children at a playground after school, the number of worshippers on a public beach on a summer day. But the benefits of a park system extend beyond these numbers. Norfolk's Recreation Master Plan acknowledges that urban parks are a form of natural infrastructure that provide personal, social, environmental, educational and economic

benefits to the city at large. Norfolk's urban open spaces clean pollutants from the air, filter water destined for streams and rivers and provide a calming respite from the noise and stress of urban living. Parks are outdoor classrooms as well, living workshops for the natural sciences. They also reduce medical costs from obesity and diabetes through the provision of walking, running and biking trails, athletic fields, golf courses and myriad other opportunities for physical fitness.

A famous urban park story is how New York City's Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmstead, paid for itself within 10 years simply because of the huge increase in property value (and property tax revenue) it stimulated in surrounding properties. This is not just a historical phenomenon. Many cities today can document the economic influence that an excellent park system has on property values, business relocation and employee satisfaction, and increased tourism and commercial development. Indianapolis, for instance, has showed that its popular trails increase local property values and make property easier to resell. The Trust for Public Land is currently developing a model that will calculate the dollar value of all the human and environmental services provided by parks.

In addition to the existing benefits that Norfolk's parks provide, the city could reap rewards by incorporating its natural areas, open spaces, beaches and golf courses into its tourism campaigns. While Norfolk expends significant resources to promote itself as a tourist destination and a location for conventions and business meetings, almost none of this promotion highlights the city's natural resources. In contrast, New York City's Central Park is a marquee tourist destination, and cities from Minneapolis to Denver highlight their public spaces as part of a total tourism package.

### ***The Special Case of Bay Oaks Park***

At present the loudest park debate in Norfolk concerns the proposed Bay Oaks Park in the Ocean View neighborhood. As noted, Ocean View is severely lacking in open space, with a 29-acre deficit in neighborhood parkland alone. The Bay Oaks parcel, a roughly 25-acre piece of land adjoining one-acre Pretty Lake Park, is bordered by East Ocean View Avenue, Pretty Lake Avenue, and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Bay Streets (with additional contiguous land extending to 7th Bay Street). The Norfolk Housing and Redevelopment Authority (NHRA) purchased the land in the early 1990's with a combination of local, state and federal funds. According to the housing authority's plan the Bay Oaks parcel is slated for residential development. However, the land could serve a variety of pressing open space needs if it were developed as a neighborhood park and athletic complex. The Bay Oaks parcel is one of only a few remaining tracts of maritime forest in the city of Norfolk. It has acres of open fields dotted with stands of mature, towering live oaks. In addition to its increasingly rare ecology and natural bay topography the parcel is relatively undisturbed, with few houses and almost no subsurface infrastructure. Maintaining the land as a park would provide immediate environmental benefits to the community, and the addition of recreational equipment would serve the leisure needs of the East Ocean View neighborhood. An expansion of the existing Pretty Lake Park would place no additional pressure on local water and sewer infrastructure, which is already stressed and subject to periodic flooding.

Thanks to the NHRA the Bay Oaks parcel is already in semi-public ownership, even though the Authority would probably have to be repaid its acquisition costs. Norfolk has the opportunity to expand an existing park, remedy a neighborhood park shortage and preserve an environmentally sensitive property. Such large and relatively pristine parcels are rare in any urban area, much less in a city as close to its build-out limit as Norfolk. Given the city's well-documented open space shortage, preserving this environmentally sensitive urban greenspace would demonstrate the city's dedication to responsible urban planning and open space maintenance, while promoting quality redevelopment in the surrounding area.

### ***Conclusion***

Norfolk, Va., is a city rich with history and tradition. The city has played a role in every war, and has served as a gateway to the United States for countless millions. Today this once again thriving metropolis is as socially and economically diverse as ever, and is poised to achieve even greater stature both within Virginia and across the United States. An aspiring world-class city deserves first-rate public institutions and amenities. Norfolk has the potential to construct a park system that knits the city together, tying its attractive waterfront to distant neighborhoods with trails and landscaped boulevards, and ensuring that at least a little piece of nature is within walking distance of every resident.

To achieve this goal Norfolk will have to reevaluate the way it manages its current parks as well as the way it plans for redevelopment. Norfolk's citizen activists will also have a vital role to play with politicians, developers and landowners, forging a new, lasting coalition in support of public open spaces. A project of this scope will require creative thinking about funding, land acquisition, public-private partnerships and the role of citizens and law enforcement in creating safe, useable parks. It is not an easy undertaking, but it is one that can have lasting environmental, social and economic benefits for the citizens of Norfolk.

## Number of Employees per Park Unit, Selected City Park Agencies

Agency	Number of Employees	Number of Park Units	Employees per Park Unit
Mesa Parks and Recreation Division	780	63	12.4
Bayfront Park Management Trust (Miami)	19	2	9.5
Phoenix Department of Parks and Recreation	1,395	172	8.1
San Jose Parks, Recreation & Neighborhood Services	1,466	188	7.8
San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department	1,130	193	5.9
San Francisco Recreation and Park Department	1,140	230	5.0
Nashville/Davidson Metro Bd of Parks & Recreation	488	100	4.9
Los Angeles Dept of Recreation and Parks	1,802	387	4.7
Philadelphia Department of Recreation	555	117	4.7
Chicago Park District	2,525	573	4.4
San Diego Park and Recreation Department	821	209	3.9
Tucson Parks & Recreation Dept	483	123	3.9
Louisville and Jefferson County Parks Department	444	118	3.8
Fresno Parks, Recreation and Community Services Dept	206	54	3.8
Tampa Parks and Recreation Department	618	165	3.7
Houston Parks and Recreation Dept	1,088	308	3.5
Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board	600	170	3.5
Fairmount Park Commission (Philadelphia)	215	64	3.4
Milwaukee County Parks	485	150	3.2
Long Beach Dept of Parks, Recreation & Marine	265	86	3.1
Dallas Park and Recreation Dept	1,070	367	2.9
Arlington, Tex., Parks and Recreation Department	229	88	2.6
Honolulu Department of Parks and Recreation	712	288	2.5
Las Vegas Parks and Open Spaces Division	107	43	2.5
Sacramento Office of Parks and Recreation	362	150	2.4
Tulsa City Park and Recreation Department	309	133	2.3
Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation	895	400	2.2
Denver Parks and Recreation Department	658	301	2.2
Memphis Division of Park Services	413	187	2.2
New Orleans Recreation Department	251	113	2.2
Wichita Parks and Recreation Department	244	109	2.2
<b>Norfolk Department of Neighborhood and Leisure Services</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>2.2</b>
Austin Parks and Recreation	451	217	2.1
Kansas City, Mo., Dept of Parks, Recreation & Blvds	442	212	2.1
Cleveland Dept of Parks, Recreation & Property	299	145	2.1
Mecklenburg County Parks and Recreation	385	189	2.0
St. Louis Dept of Parks, Recreation & Forestry	209	105	2.0
Tampa Parks Department	305	159	1.9
Indianapolis Parks and Recreation Dept	329	183	1.8
Oakland Office of Parks, Recreation & Cultural Affairs	264	147	1.8
Detroit Recreation Department	620	391	1.6
Atlanta Dept of Parks and Recreation	387	242	1.6
District of Columbia Dept. of Parks and Recreation	589	381	1.5
Oklahoma City Dept of Parks and Recreation	219	148	1.5



Fort Worth Dept of Parks and Community Services	287	209	1.4
Miami Parks and Recreation Department	140	109	1.3
Albuquerque Dept of Parks and Recreation	314	255	1.2
Virginia Beach Department of Parks and Recreation	256	213	1.2
El Paso Parks & Recreation Dept.	186	150	1.2
Jacksonville Dept of Parks, Recreation & Entertainment	375	337	1.1
Cincinnati Park Board	123	114	1.1
Cincinnati Recreation Commission	255	250	1.0
Boston Dept of Parks and Recreation	235	224	1.0
New York City Dept of Parks and Recreation	3,304	3,700	0.9
Columbus, Ohio, Recreation and Parks Department	327	352	0.9
Colorado Springs Parks and Recreation Department	174	195	0.9

**Average** **3.0**

## Capital Spending on Parks, Selected Cities

City	Fiscal Year	Capital Expenditure	Spending per Resident
San Jose	FY 2002	\$192,641,000	\$214
Honolulu	FY 2002	\$69,699,000	\$177
Seattle	FY 2002	\$53,381,850	\$94
San Francisco	FY 2002	\$70,577,211	\$92
Virginia Beach	FY 2003	\$33,400,186	\$77
St. Louis	FY 2002	\$21,916,000	\$65
Denver	FY 2002	\$30,561,317	\$55
Las Vegas	FY 2002	\$26,546,000	\$52
Jacksonville	FY 2002	\$38,135,468	\$50
Kansas City, Mo.	FY 2002	\$19,278,057	\$44
Minneapolis	FY 2002	\$15,826,177	\$42
Austin	FY 2002	\$23,716,000	\$35
Cincinnati	FY 2002	\$11,234,407	\$35
Mesa	FY 2002	\$14,403,161	\$34
Oakland	FY 2002	\$13,500,000	\$33
Washington, D.C.	FY 2002	\$19,000,000	\$33
Boston	FY 2002	\$19,139,000	\$32
Phoenix	FY 2002	\$42,419,637	\$31
Sacramento	FY 2002	\$13,110,000	\$30
San Diego	FY 2002	\$35,319,502	\$28
Cleveland	FY 2002	\$13,000,000	\$28
Chicago	FY 2002	\$75,902,000	\$26
Miami	FY 2002	\$8,883,108	\$24
Arlington	FY 2002	\$7,393,000	\$21
Portland, Ore.	FY 2002	\$11,321,280	\$21
Fresno	FY 2002	\$8,972,800	\$20
Long Beach	FY 2002	\$8,424,875	\$18
Memphis	FY 2002	\$11,292,000	\$17
New Orleans	FY 2002	\$7,993,000	\$17
Tampa	FY 2002	\$5,231,000	\$17
New York	FY 2002	\$128,629,000	\$16
Dallas	FY 2002	\$18,847,746	\$16
Milwaukee/Milwaukee County	FY 2002	\$13,578,000	\$15
Baltimore	FY 2002	\$8,845,000	\$14
Oklahoma City	FY 2002	\$6,672,000	\$13
San Antonio	FY 2002	\$14,816,000	\$12
Toledo	FY 2002	\$3,600,000	\$12
Philadelphia	FY 2002	\$16,295,188	\$11
Louisville	FY 2002	\$7,490,000	\$11
Houston	FY 2002	\$18,729,147	\$9

Nashville/Davidson County	FY 2002	\$5,097,776	\$9
Fort Worth	FY 2002	\$4,968,000	\$9
Atlanta	FY 2002	\$3,578,827	\$8
Charlotte/Mecklenburg County	FY 2002	\$5,241,036	\$7
Colorado Springs	FY 2002	\$2,532,597	\$7
Columbus	FY 2002	\$4,763,696	\$7
Indianapolis	FY 2002	\$4,874,183	\$6
Wichita	FY 2002	\$1,999,186	\$6
Tucson	FY 2002	\$2,495,000	\$5
Los Angeles	FY 2002	\$8,039,000	\$2
		<b>Data Not</b>	
<b>Norfolk</b>	<b>FY 2002</b>	<b>Available</b>	<b>NA</b>

## Operational Spending on Parks, Selected Cities

<b>City</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Annual Operational Spending</b>	<b>Spending per Resident</b>
Washington, D.C.	571,000	\$86,902,000	\$152
Seattle	570,000	\$82,625,666	\$145
Minneapolis	376,000	\$50,399,580	\$134
Chicago	2,886,000	\$315,739,000	\$109
Honolulu	393,000	\$42,444,374	\$108
Cincinnati	324,000	\$33,863,382	\$105
San Diego	1,260,000	\$118,889,083	\$94
Long Beach	472,000	\$43,584,268	\$92
Denver	560,000	\$50,403,960	\$90
Tampa	315,000	\$28,145,000	\$89
San Jose	900,000	\$74,367,000	\$83
San Francisco	764,000	\$61,726,860	\$81
Portland, Ore.	539,000	\$41,009,498	\$76
Sacramento	435,000	\$31,250,000	\$72
Kansas City, Mo.	443,000	\$31,514,439	\$71
Tucson	503,000	\$34,085,000	\$68
Arlington	350,000	\$22,245,980	\$64
Las Vegas	509,000	\$31,594,000	\$62
Phoenix	1,372,000	\$84,129,655	\$61
Mesa	427,000	\$25,754,223	\$60
Cleveland	468,000	\$28,038,397	\$60
Austin	672,000	\$39,554,000	\$59
Atlanta	425,000	\$23,560,822	\$55
Fort Worth	568,000	\$30,865,000	\$54
Norfolk	234,000	\$12,536,000	\$54
Virginia Beach	434,000	\$23,035,013	\$53
Charlotte/Mecklenburg County	735,000	\$38,572,035	\$52
Colorado Springs	371,000	\$18,968,807	\$51
San Antonio	1,194,000	\$56,851,000	\$48
Nashville/Davidson County	569,000	\$26,398,366	\$46
Wichita	355,000	\$16,217,499	\$46
Columbus	725,000	\$33,093,819	\$46
Tulsa	392,000	\$17,151,693	\$44
Fresno	445,000	\$17,748,400	\$40
Milwaukee/Milwaukee County	935,000	\$36,874,000	\$39
Philadelphia	1,492,000	\$57,642,358	\$39
Oakland	403,000	\$15,483,000	\$38
St. Louis	338,000	\$11,782,200	\$35
Boston	589,000	\$20,192,000	\$34
Oklahoma City	519,000	\$17,589,000	\$34
Los Angeles	3,799,000	\$128,078,000	\$34

Indianapolis	784,000	\$25,084,099	\$32
Louisville	696,000	\$21,471,000	\$31
Baltimore	639,000	\$19,685,040	\$31
Houston	2,010,000	\$60,961,909	\$30
Jacksonville	762,000	\$22,693,161	\$30
New Orleans	474,000	\$13,434,398	\$28
Dallas	1,211,000	\$34,304,676	\$28
New York	8,084,000	\$223,204,800	\$28
Miami	375,000	\$10,004,006	\$27
Memphis	649,000	\$15,937,000	\$25
Toledo	309,000	\$7,119,000	\$23

**Average** **\$59**