

Center for City Park Excellence



Case Study - Norfolk, Virginia

Norfolk, Virginia is a colonial-era city which matured at a time when the values of parks were not yet recognized. The city has miles of shoreline but precious few parks. When the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority bought a particularly beautiful tract of tree-filled land near the Chesapeake Bay and proposed building houses on it, a group of neighborhood advocates approached TPL for assistance. But rather than focusing on only a single small tract, TPL suggested producing a city-wide “park scan” to put the entire system into context. The leaders of the Bay Oaks Park Committee agreed with the idea and set about raising funds to pay for the work.

The result of the eight-month study was *The Park System of Norfolk, Virginia: An Analysis of its Strengths and Weaknesses*. It revealed that Norfolk is significantly short of parkland in general and neighborhood parks in particular. “While the city has some wonderful parks, scenic riverfronts, tree-lined boulevards and sandy beaches,” the report said, “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.”

The study also revealed that park department spending is below average and that the maintenance quality of parks is quite uneven. The report set forth the outline of a new city-wide park planning process and also highlighted some of the most exciting opportunities for new parks and trails - especially the creation of an Elizabeth River Trail which could connect many of the city’s neighborhoods for bicycling and walking.

Partly in response to the report and to increased public interest in the city’s parks, Norfolk in early 2006 began a park department reorganization to better meet the needs of residents and to increase planning and public outreach capability. TPL hopes to work with the city to create more parkland, as well.

“Many of us in Norfolk had a sense that our park system was undersized, underfunded and otherwise not managed like we felt it should be. But it was difficult for us as citizens to be sure, much less speak with authority to our City Council and other leaders. TPL’s Center for City Park Excellence was invaluable in bringing its professional knowledge, experience and energy, quickly, to a study of our park system’s strengths and weaknesses. That study has already changed minds and focused thinking in the few weeks since released, and we expect our park system will be much the better in a few years, in no small part due to the good work of the Center.”

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