



Pocket Park Toolkit

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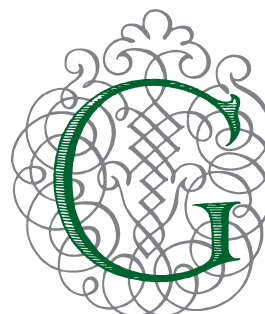
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THE
TRUST
FOR
PUBLIC
LAND

FOREWORD

This [Pocket Park Toolkit](#) was created to help any individual, group, or organization interested in supporting their community by building parks. Through research, discussion, and interviews with experts in the fields of community engagement and organizing, park funding, design, and ongoing park operations and maintenance, this [Toolkit](#) provides practical guidance for both the novice community leader and the seasoned government employee. It is geared toward a reader with knowledge about parks and their benefits, but still looking for some clear guidance on how to get started. This [Toolkit](#) provides a snapshot of successful strategies and case studies partnered with checklists and templates to empower folks to work with their neighbors to build more parks and stronger, healthier, and more connected communities.



This [Pocket Park Toolkit](#) works in part as a complimentary document to previously published toolkits funded by the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation in partnership with the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs including:

- [Reclaiming the Right of Way: A Toolkit for Creating and Implementing Parklets](#)
- [Creating a Complete Los Angeles River Greenway For All](#)
- [Placemaking for an Aging Population: Guidelines for Senior Friendly Parks](#)
- [Smart Parks: A Toolkit](#)

Each toolkit has been created to support a wide variety of user groups wanting to create open space in their communities.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

What are Pocket Parks?

The defining characteristic of a pocket park is its size. Although there is no strict definition, Pocket Parks are generally recognized as public park spaces that occupy less than one acre of land. In contrast to larger neighborhood or regional parks that attract park goers from all around a city, Pocket Parks are

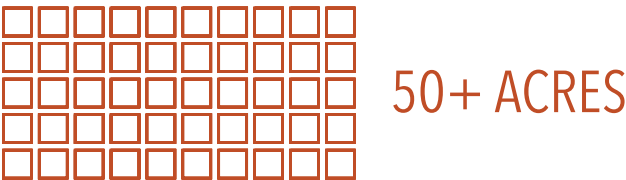
The defining characteristic of a pocket park is its size.

built with the intention of providing the community within the park’s immediate vicinity with the benefits of a public park. Pocket Parks use scaled down features and recreational amenities to relay the same benefits afforded by larger parks while occupying a fraction of the space.

What Does a Pocket Park Look Like?

There is no uniform template for a pocket park. Because pocket parks are opportunistic, often sited on whatever available land is identified, their location might not be as obvious or central as other larger, more typical park sites. But that is the point. Pocket parks are intended to fill in the gaps in neighborhoods where there is no available park space. A pocket park might be constructed under utility power lines or beside a decommissioned railroad track. As such, the shape and dimensions of a pocket park will vary depending on the site.

REGIONAL PARKS



POCKET PARKS



Like the shape and dimensions, the look and features of the pocket park too will vary due to the site and, more importantly, those living next to it. Pocket parks are meant to serve residents within close proximity –

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE POCKET PARK

The concept of a pocket park, also known as a vest park or mini park, is hardly a new idea. Pocket parks were a product of post-WWII reconstruction in Europe. Pocket parks offered previously war stricken municipalities a way to rebuild public spaces despite shortages in labor and raw materials.

Pocket parks could be built inexpensively and relatively quickly in populated areas. Street corners were cleared of rubble and debris to make way for trees and park benches. These smaller, lower maintenance parks helped restore familiar, pre-war landscapes and reestablish the neighborhood’s identity.

In the United States, as cities began acknowledging the need for recreational facilities in densely populated areas, the success of pocket parks in Europe did not go unnoticed. Karl Linn, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, began promoting the idea of using tax delinquent land to create public commons in urban areas along the east coast. The novelty of developing parks from underused lots was well received by both citizens and city officials.

By the mid-20th century, the value of a park was no longer based solely on its size but instead on its accessibility. Today, pocket parks continue to be used by municipalities as a practical method to increase park access for all communities.

users that will walk or bike to their new park. The character of the pocket park and the amenities selected should be based on the input of those individuals. This is especially so because the type and number of park features that can be built is restricted by the relatively smaller park size. Taking up valuable space with an item or facility the community is not interested in using would be a waste of often limited resources.



Why Build Pocket Parks?

Building one, or even a few, multi-acre parks will not necessarily provide park access to all city residents. While those parks may feature numerous facilities of interest, lack of time, funds, or means to visit a park that is miles from an individual's home can be enough of a barrier to prevent the use of larger, more distant parks. Creating pocket parks that are within walking or biking distance to homes that do not currently have close access to a larger park is a viable solution for cities to increase park access throughout all neighborhoods. Information on park access for the majority of American cities is available on [ParkServe](#).

Additionally, pocket parks are a particularly useful tool for increasing park access for residents in communities where the development of larger parks is not feasible due to a lack of available land. Many dense urban areas do not have large tracts of available, vacant land on which to develop a new park. In many cities, building a park on a half-acre or less may be the only viable option to create new parks.

Finally, pocket parks can be used to revitalize unused or underused land. Brownfields, vacant lots, abandoned parking lots, and utility or public right-of-ways can all be transformed from neglected spaces that attract unwanted or illicit activities into community assets.

*Community members look at the construction of their new park
Kellogg Park, CA
Photo: PlusM Productions*

What are the Potential Benefits of Pocket Parks?

Parks, when utilized by the local community and well maintained, are invaluable features of the urban landscape. As a public resource, they provide recreational facilities that encourage active lifestyles, spaces where the community can gather and build comradery, and essential environmental services that strengthen the overall health of a community. The [social](#), [health](#) and [environmental benefits](#) of parks should inform design decisions and be implemented into every pocket park project.

Pocket parks provide [social benefits](#) because they support neighborhood identity and make communities more livable. Numerous studies have shown that converting empty neighborhood lots into

parks is associated with decreases in neighborhood crime. This in turn decreases the anxiety felt by residents living in high crime areas. Pocket parks should be designed to maximize activity and use. A well-activated pocket park will discourage illicit activities from taking place.

The presence of a pocket park attracts a wide variety of users of all ages and backgrounds who are looking for a comfortable, safe place to play and socialize. Pocket parks should be designed with places for people to gather and provide a setting for relationship building. Relationships between community members, elected officials, local parks departments, as well as established community organizations such as neighborhood councils and parent groups can be strengthened by the presence of a pocket park.



*Socializing
Story Mill Community Park, MT
Photo: Bruce Muhlbradt*

Human health has a direct link to the built environment. Available open space can influence the overall health of the community so a new pocket park provides a community with [health benefits](#). In 2019, The Trust for Public Land's [ParkScore Index](#), reported that 100 Million Americans or just over 30% of the population does not live within a 10-minute to a park. Parks within walking distance become a destination for families with children, increasing a family's overall levels of physical activity.

Parks promote physical activity that helps to combat and prevent heart disease, obesity, diabetes, cancer, and other chronic illnesses. From 1999-2016 obesity rates rose from 30.5% to 39% for adults and 13.9% to 18.5% for youth. Designing a pocket park with age appropriate recreational and fitness opportunities promotes healthy living across all age groups. Playgrounds, fitness equipment, and walking paths are all features that promote physical activity in parks.

30% OF THE US POPULATION



DOES NOT LIVE WITHIN A 10-MINUTE WALK TO A PARK

 = 1 million people



*Fitness equipment in use
Olympic Park, FL
Photo: Allana Wesley White*

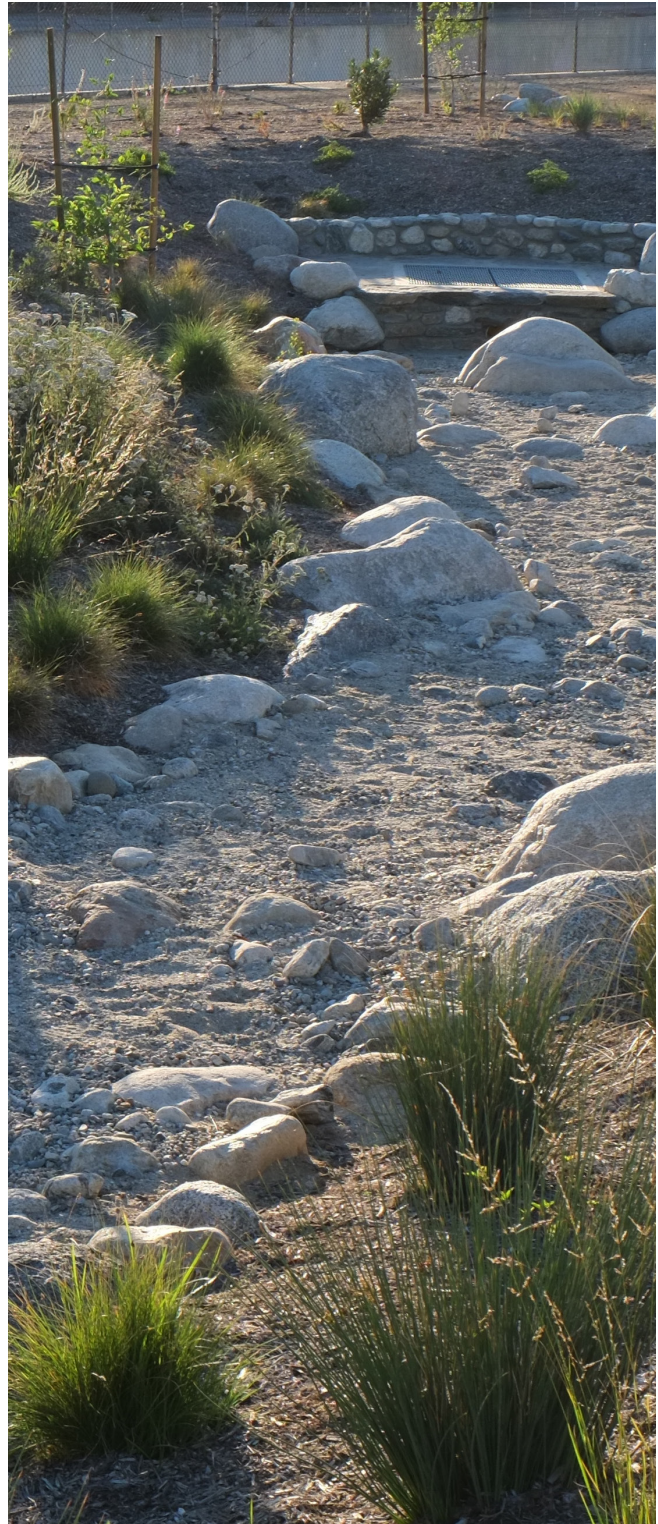
Pocket parks can provide significant [environmental benefits](#). When thoughtfully designed, pocket parks can play a role in reducing the urban heat island effect, managing and treating stormwater, and providing native habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

As the effects of global warming become more pronounced, heat extremes are expected to increase in frequency and intensity in most inhabited areas. Cities and other high-density urban areas with limited trees and open space experience elevated levels of urban heat island effect. Surfaces like asphalt paving absorb heat throughout the day and slowly release it back into the environment resulting in areas that are warmer than surrounding neighborhoods. This can lead to dangerous conditions, especially for vulnerable populations like seniors, people experiencing illness, pregnant women, people experiencing homelessness, and those who work outdoors. Pocket parks can be designed to use permeable surfaces that do not retain heat, as well as add trees and shrubs to shade and cool adjacent paving, thereby decreasing the urban heat island effect within and adjacent to the park. Clearly, simple park interventions have compounding climate benefits for the whole neighborhood.

As cities develop, less and less habitat is available for wildlife. Although small in size, the importance of pocket parks to insects, birds and other native wildlife can be significant. By incorporating native plants, pocket parks become patches of needed food sources for pollinators like bees and butterflies and can offer a site of relief for migrating birds. Thoughtful planning around the vegetation used in pocket parks can boost ecosystem biodiversity within the overall city.

Pocket parks play a pivotal role in the management and treatment of stormwater. Stormwater runoff becomes contaminated as it flows over city streets and into street drains. In some cities, it then flows out into rivers, streams, lakes, and oceans becoming a source of pollution in important waterways. In other cities, aging infrastructure struggles to process the volume of rain from severe storm. When those systems fail the result is flooding and erosion. The need for alternative methods of stormwater management and treatment are ever increasing and pocket parks are ideal locations for green infrastructure that treats and captures polluted stormwater through bio-filtration and infiltration.

Pocket parks are an effective way to provide the multiple benefits described above to neighborhoods that do not currently have access to parks. When carefully planned and designed with the end users in mind, pocket parks are an invaluable community resource.



*Bioswale collects and filters stormwater runoff
Los Angeles River and Aliso Creek Confluence Park, CA
Photo: David Garden*

CHAPTER 2: Engagement, Organizing, & Partner Building

To be truly successful, pocket parks must be designed and implemented with authentic and robust participation from local residents and community leaders. **Community Engagement** means creating an open dialogue with neighbors where designers can listen to and respond to the needs and wants of the community. Community engagement means organizing events to reflect the specificity and uniqueness of the neighborhood. Most importantly, community engagement should be done throughout the course of the design and construction processes to ensure local residents are well informed and have plenty of opportunity to participate.

Community engagement is an extension of **Community Organizing**. The goal of community

organizing is to mobilize a volunteer base rooted in the community, increasing a sense of agency, so residents can advocate on their own behalf without the need for outside support. This process typically involves identifying leaders or champions within the community who can represent the interests of their neighborhood and encourage other residents to join in collective efforts towards neighborhood change.

Approaches to community engagement and organizing will vary depending on the specific neighborhood, the local stakeholders and partner organizations, and the scale of the project. Ultimately, all engagement techniques should empower community members to take part in decisions concerning development in their own neighborhoods.



*Participatory design session with elementary school students
Chittick Elementary School, MA
Photo: Erin Clark*

Step One: Getting Started

The community engagement and organizing process should begin by evaluating the overall feasibility of a new park development. This preliminary phase focuses on identifying possible locations for the park and the benefits each location may provide. It should also identify potential local partnerships and confirm positive community sentiment toward a new park.

STEP ONE ACTIVITIES



Establish a Baseline

1. Does the community want a park?
2. Is there a potential location that is suitable for a new park and is a park the best use of that site?
3. What social, environmental, and health benefits could the park provide?



Identify Partners

1. What nearby organizations or agencies support park development?
2. What nearby community institutions (place of worship, schools, HOAs) might use the park on a regular basis?
3. Are there community centers or business districts that might support the park once built?



Form an Outreach Team

1. What individuals or groups are important to include on the team?
2. What individuals or groups within the community could take on leadership roles within the team?
3. What team members are best able to engage with community members about the creation of a new park?

Step Two: A Shared Mission

Once an outreach team forms, the next step is to create a mission statement that clearly defines the intentions of the park. A mission statement goes beyond declaring intent to build a neighborhood park. The mission statement should unite individuals and organizations via common goals for the project. Local community groups, neighbors, and other relevant stakeholders determine this mission statement. It is important this collaborative effort happen at the beginning of the park design process. This early coordination builds trust and demonstrates community ownership from the outset.

STEP TWO ACTIVITIES



Community Asset Mapping

Identify places near the park where the community gathers, such as schools, libraries, and places of worship. These are good places to make first contact with community members about developing a park.



Pop-Up Events

Set up a booth or station organizers around areas in the neighborhood with high foot traffic to peak the community's interest and provide park development and outreach information and gather preliminary feedback.



Community Survey

Surveys can be distributed in person or online to get community feedback about the park project and is a good way to engage a large number of neighbors who may not otherwise be able to participate in meetings or events.

Step Three: The Power of the People

Now that the mission statement is clearly defined, the advocacy and education process can begin. Getting neighbors involved and committed early on is imperative for the project's success. A park project that is community driven will be the most successful over time.

STEP THREE ACTIVITIES



Routine Community Meetings

Host regularly scheduled public meetings at a location in the neighborhood that is easily accessible (identified during step two - asset mapping). Meeting activities can include establishing park committees, brainstorming fundraising events, planning for upcoming design charrettes, among others.



Public Survey Review

Information gathered from surveys collected during step two can be summarized into a handout or infographic and presented back to community. Public review of this data supports compromise and community collaboration over shared goals for the park.



Design Charrettes

A design charrette is a collaborative public meeting where different options for the park design can be explored and prioritized. These meetings can also be used as forums for the community to select specific park amenities and features.

The education portion of this step is a two-way street between the outreach team and the community. The outreach team will explain the process of park design, fundraising activities, and stewardship practices as it relates to the project and the community will provide feedback. This process will identify possible issues and inform design decisions to help address these concerns.

Outreach needs to be proactive and the impetus of making first contact should be on the outreach team members.

Outreach needs to be proactive and the impetus of making first contact should be on the outreach team members. Methods for contacting the greatest number of community members should be shaped by suggestion from the community. Word of mouth, mailers, email, online social networks, in-person events, and pop-ups are all viable options. In addition, energy should be put into boots on the ground activities that give outreach team members a chance to speak to the community directly. Presenting at already established community gatherings such as church groups, city council meetings, PTA meetings, or wherever the community congregates is an effective way to share the project with a large group and connect with residents who may not have otherwise learned of the park project.

Early meetings should promote awareness of the project and focus on growing the number of community members involved. After that, ongoing engagement will reveal the prospective community leaders who are the most active contributors. These individuals can begin to take on more responsibility by leading ongoing outreach, advocacy, and park committees. With this increased responsibility comes the training and tools needed for these community groups to eventually operate without the help of the outreach team.

Be prepared to face some challenges in this outreach phase. Oftentimes, organizers encounter distrust among residents, especially when working in neighborhoods historically disinvested and lacking in park access. It is important to recognize this dynamic and approach engagement with the ultimate goal not to be gathering feedback, but fostering trust.

Step Four: The To-Do Lists

This step involves noting and prioritizing tasks required to move the park project forward, delegating responsibilities, and accomplishing tasks as a team. This might include hosting site clean-up events, contacting city officials to express support for the park development, grant writing, fundraising, handing out informational flyers, contacting local business and relevant stakeholders for support, etc. Every accomplishment and resolved obstacle should be celebrated. Keeping track of the park's progress shows community members that their efforts are moving the project forward and boosts community morale.

Step Five: The Life of the Park

Step Five is ongoing work. The previous steps have established a network of community members who are dedicated to the success of the park. By this point, the park is nearly or already completed. Ideally, and if the engagement has been robust, the park committees and community leaders who contributed to the creation of the park maintain their role as park stewards in addition to park users.

STEP FOUR ACTIVITIES



Community Champions

The most active community members should be recognized for their work on the project. These leaders are an invaluable resource to the park project. They can be put in charge of organizing park events and are ideal candidates for leaders in step five as they have established ties to the community and a vested interest in the park's success.



Park Progress Report

The community should be able to see the progress of a project. This could be shown in a report, checklist, or infographic. Knowing the progress of a project can help the community stay engaged over long periods.



*Community member presented with a certificate of recognition from the City of Los Angeles
El Sereno Arroyo Playground, CA
Photo: The Trust for Public Land*

Engagement Techniques for Long-term Park Stewardship

Park stewardship programs provide community members who are interested in actively contributing to their local parks with a platform to do so. The objective of a park steward program is to maintain the integrity of the park and park stewards are the link between the park, the long-term owner and operator, and the community. The role of a park steward goes beyond reporting graffiti or trash clean up to the parks department. Although these may be important features of the position, they represent just a small portion of a steward's potential.

Park stewards contribute to the overall management of the park. While more technical and labor-intensive

park maintenance activities are reserved for the long-term operators' staff, park stewards can organize and lead smaller upkeep activities. Park stewards help maintain the momentum of community involvement created prior to the project's completion by continuing direct engagement with the community through site activation and programming. Communities evolve and park stewards can ensure park activities adapt to meet the needs of current and futures users.

A local 'friends of' group, local land trust, conservancy, or a city's parks department will often organize the park stewardship programs. In all cases, the stewardship program works in-sync with the local parks department to coordinate the scheduling of programming and larger projects taken on by the park stewards.



*Employees at a local business turn out to help during a park clean up event
El Sereno Arroyo Playground, CA
Photo: The Trust for Public Land*

CASE STUDY: LA Neighborhood Land Trust Stewardship

Since 2002, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (LANLT) has been creating parks in neighborhoods that lack green space in Los Angeles County. The LANLT has participated in the successful creation of twenty-eight pocket parks and community gardens. LANLT has assumed the role of the park's managing body for seven of those completed projects.

The success of LANLT is directly linked to their stated emphasis on including community members in the decision making process throughout planning and construction. In order to maintain a high level of engagement and advance a sense of local ownership after the parks are completed, the LANLT has implemented an innovative Stewardship Program rather than relying on a volunteer base for park support.

Their Stewardship Program brings on park stewards as paid employees of the LANLT. Park stewards are chosen based on criteria including their proximity to the park, availability to perform simple and routine

operations and maintenance duties, and a commitment to support the wellbeing of the community through park related activities. Responsibilities of the park stewards include:

1. Opening and closing the park,
2. Assembling volunteer groups,
3. Identifying potential programming that represents local interests and that the community wants (e.g. dance classes, gardening workshops, yoga, professional development support, etc.),
4. Working with park users to deliver park programming, and
5. Event organizing.

As employees of the LANLT, park stewards are given greater responsibility and have more authority to create and direct park programming based on the recommendations of park users.



*Park programming
Mestizo Curtis Park, CO
Photo: Theo Stroomer*

Attributes of a Robust Park Stewardship Program: Diversity, Accessibility, and Empowerment

A park stewardship program should reflect the diversity of the community. Park stewards with different backgrounds will have unique ideas and services to offer. Incorporating a variety of artistic, cultural, and recreational interests allows for park programming that is fresh and most likely to retain the community's continued engagement with the park.

Neither age, experience level, nor physical capabilities should prevent an individual from becoming a park steward or participating in park stewardship activities.




Moreover, providing the community with a variety of ways to participate in park stewardship activities opens the door to those who might not be interested in more typical park programming like planting or gardening. Yoga, sporting competitions, arts and craft festivals, and food concessions are all less typical options for park activation. A park steward program should utilize as many different activities as possible to draw in a diversity of park users.

A stewardship program should be accessible to all. Ensure volunteer and engagement opportunities are known to the community by posting a schedule online and on public bulletin boards within and around the park. This keeps drop-ins as well as veteran park stewards up to date on all opportunities.

Offer ample opportunities with varying levels of physical intensity so any community member, regardless of their physical ability, has a chance to attend. Neither age, experience level, nor physical capabilities should prevent an individual from becoming a park steward or participating in park stewardship activities.

The park stewardship program should accommodate and encourage participation by larger groups, such as those organized by a nearby school and other community organizations and facilities. Working with already organized volunteer groups is a great way to showcase the value of the park space to a large number of individuals. Additionally, larger volunteer groups can be leveraged to take on more demanding projects such as replanting shrubs or neighborhood clean-ups.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  Pocket parks begin in the community. The only way to ensure a successful pocket park is to build community support from the outset and continue engaging and organizing throughout design, construction, and after the park is complete.
-  Understand your local resources through asset mapping. What groups, schools, churches, or other resources already exist to support community engagement.
-  Parks are only as good as their long-term maintenance. Build a stewardship group to ensure the park stays clean, safe, and beloved by the community for years to come.

CHAPTER 3: Financial Planning

The development of a new pocket park, just like any type of development, is not possible without financial planning. While there is no singular approach – each park project will have unique stakeholder needs and financial resources – there are a range of tools to help locate available public funding and to organize realistic budgets for both development and long-term operations and maintenance.

Budgeting

During the design process, developing a transparent and realistic budget will allow the community, the design team, and the long-term operator to make educated decisions on what they can afford to build and maintain over time. While the aim of a budget is to manage project costs, the goal of the project is to provide the greatest benefit to the park user. Developing a comprehensive budget can help ensure that funds are sufficient to provide the community-determined park priorities first.

The most well planned park design will be of no use to the community if the operator is not able to keep it clean, safe, and with all park amenities functioning in good use.

Budgeting should also be used to ensure the project remains within the financial and staffing capacity of the long-term operator. The most well planned park design will be of no use to the community if the operator is not able to keep it clean, safe, and with all park amenities functioning in good use.



Too few trash cans or too many plants can create ongoing maintenance issues

Photos: The Trust for Public Land

Types of Park Budgets

Two separate budgets are required for any new park development – the [Capital Investment Budget](#) and the [Operating Budget](#). The two budgets are inherently connected as the long-term operating costs are heavily influenced by the original park design.

The [Capital Investment Budget](#) contains all of the expenses associated with land acquisition and site development including but not limited to permitting fees, consultant fees, as well as the general contractor’s bid to build the project. The developing entity, whether it be a nonprofit, city parks department, or local land trust, is responsible for budgeting and fundraising for these expenses. Generally, the Capital Investment Budget is split into three categories: [hard costs](#), [soft costs](#), and [contingencies](#).

[Hard Costs](#) are all of the expenses directly related to the physical construction of a park, including labor and materials. In other words, these costs are the hours of labor worked, plus the cost of the materials used in construction. This cost category can be thought of as the parks features that are more easily identifiable such as a drinking fountain, a play structure, walkway lighting, picnic tables, a handball court, or perimeter fencing.

[Soft Costs](#) are the expenses and fees indirectly related to the physical construction costs. These are the out-of-sight technical and administrative expenses attributed to a park development project such as site surveying, architectural and landscape design, project management, and permitting fees.

[Contingencies](#) are a crucial budget element that should not be overlooked or omitted. Contingencies are monies that will account for any unforeseen costs the project will incur. There are many scenarios in which this will come into play during the life of a project. Most often it is due to work that was not anticipated (i.e., items discovered once excavation begins) but it ensures money will be available for any items that may have been omitted in the budget due to error or lack oversight (i.e., not accounting for all of the materials required to construct a park feature). It is important to realize that even the best and most carefully crafted budget is still just

an estimate. Contingencies help to ensure a project will be completed in full, without having to cut from planned park elements to pay for unforeseen costs.

A sample [Capital Investment Budget](#) is available at the end of this chapter. The budget includes hard cost line items commonly required for park development projects as well as standard percentages that can be used to estimate soft costs and contingencies. The



CAPITAL INVESTMENT BUDGET CATEGORIES

items included in this sample budget are by no means exhaustive, this is just an example of common costs seen in a pocket park budget.

The [Operating Budget](#) includes the costs required to operate and maintain a park once it is open to the public. It should be comprehensive and account for all costs associated with keeping a park open, clean, and functional. These costs include utility fees, staff wages for landscape and facilities maintenance personnel, costs to replenish and replace items that will wear from regular use (i.e. sand), and other general park upkeep activities. The entity responsible for park operations will be responsible for these expenses for the life of the park. Whatever entity will be assuming operating responsibilities likely has their own costs for maintenance activities which might be wrapped into a larger budget. Work closely with the entity to create the operating budget using their standards and templates.

Tips for Managing Costs

Managing site development and maintenance expenses is critical to the success of a project throughout life of the park. [Evaluating your design](#) and [creating a volunteer network](#) are some of the best ways to manage costs.

A good way to begin is to [evaluate your design](#), consider all the elements planned for the park and their sustainability over time. How will they hold up to regular use with potentially little maintenance? Three key factors should be included in this evaluation: 1. what is the expected use; 2. what are the materials and how well will they tolerate weather conditions (heat and cold) and the expected use, and 3. cost efficiency – is it more efficient to purchase high-end equipment and materials now, rather than replacing materials of lower quality more often?

To ensure the park design meets the maintenance budget, it is important to consider park use. A mental “walk through” of how visitors will use the park can highlight areas that might require more maintenance.

Materials and equipment that can withstand consistent, heavy use and exposure to the elements are a vital piece of a sustainable park maintenance budget.

Insufficient seating or pathways to popular park features might result in users trampling or sitting on landscaping, effectively killing plants and damaging irrigation lines. Even something as simple as installing adequate waste receptacles throughout the park and in greater quantity in areas where they are most needed, like near playgrounds and picnic tables, can reduce the need for unnecessarily frequent visits by park maintenance staff.

Materials and equipment that can withstand consistent, heavy use and exposure to the elements are a vital piece of a sustainable park maintenance budget. When materials and equipment are proposed, it is a good idea to visit multiple sites where that particular product has been installed and in place for

TIPS FOR MANAGING COSTS



Evaluate your design

What is the expected use?

What are the materials and how well will they tolerate weather conditions (heat and cold) and the expected use?

Is it more efficient to purchase high-end equipment and materials now, rather than replacing materials of lower quality more often?



Create a volunteer network

What network of individuals and groups are already involved in the park building process that might want to volunteer?

Are there any opportunities for volunteers to locate or provide in-kind donations of needed supplies?

Is there any part of the park building process that volunteers could assist with?

Are there any park maintenance requirements that volunteers could assist with?

a number of years. Generally, the manufacturer can supply those locations and the contact information for individuals responsible for maintenance and operations of those sites. Discussions with folks regarding their experience with the product can inform if this is a suitable product for your project. Deliberate and thoughtful research into all products to be used in the park can significantly reduce the likelihood of installing features that will not withstand the test of time.

Products should also be evaluated for cost efficiency. Sometimes spending more on a product or feature during development in order to balance the long-term operational budget is the best use of your funding. For example, using surface materials that have a long lifespan like poured-in-place rubber safety surfacing as opposed to engineered wood mulch in playground areas is far more expensive to install but requires little to no maintenance and can remain in place for at least 10 years. The mulch, however, will need to be refilled regularly in order to continue to provide fall protection for children using the playground. Doing adequate and thorough product research is an important way to develop and vet the operating budget and provides a realistic gauge of a product's required maintenance needs over time. This allows all parties to make decisions about the most cost-effective option for the life of the park.

Creating a volunteer network entails tapping into the network of individuals and groups who are already involved in the park building process. Volunteers can be organized to make in-kind donations including needed supplies and labor. For example, community volunteers can be leveraged to assemble a play structure during the construction phase. This is an easy way to reduce labor costs for a day or two and has the added bonus of further engaging the local community by giving them a direct role in the development of the park. Volunteers may also help mitigate the maintenance requirements of a park by organizing routine clean up days so park staff can allocate their resources more efficiently.



*Volunteers assist with park development
New Freedom Park, CO
Photo: FocusTree*

Where to Look for Funding

Every new park project will have a unique funding structure; however, to bring the funding together new public investments almost always require good partnerships and funding support from [nonprofit park-building groups](#), [local governments](#), and [private contributions](#).

[Nonprofit park-building groups](#) have the ability to secure funding through grant writing and philanthropic contributions from established donor lists. A common scenario for a new park development includes a nonprofit partner to fundraise and oversee the development of the park while a public agency partner retains the ownership and management responsibilities of the site. This is a mutually beneficial partnership. The nonprofit organization is often better able to fundraise for capital, they have grant writing and philanthropic staff who are dedicated to and experienced in fundraising for park projects, while the city parks department has the financial stream and staff infrastructure required to operate and maintain a park. This type of cost sharing partnership is a tried and true approach to building parks for community benefit.

[Local governments](#) have a range of mechanisms to fund park projects yet the majority of these funds generally flow to operations and maintenance expenses, rather than new park developments, as dollars for “O&M” are often the most difficult to secure. Local government funds stems from a general appropriations budget as well as revenue generated from public service fees. Public service fees include income generated from parking meters, concession fees, or vendor permit fees in addition to other sources. Although it is not unheard of for a municipal parks department to develop a new park project, their generally steady flow of revenue is often better suited for the long-term upkeep of their parks.

Another source is a general obligation bond. A city or state can pass obligation bonds to raise funds for capital investment projects. If the bond program criteria deals with green infrastructure, sustainable development, or community benefit, a pocket park may qualify for funding.

[Private contributions](#) are another method commonly used to fundraise for park projects. Smaller donations may be secured through a community BBQ or from the sale of inscribed plaques or bricks to be installed in the park. Larger private donations may be sourced from local business owners or institutions. Even naming rights may be sold to establish an endowment for operating expenses.

With pocket park projects often funded through a combination of all of the above, it is important to understand the myriad opportunities to develop a new park in your community.



*Community places flyers in rolls of toilet paper to raise awareness about the “flush fund” for a restroom at their new park Kellogg Park, CA
Photo: The Trust for Public Land*



Moving Forward

Locating funding for a pocket park project should start by scanning programs at the local and state level. For local opportunities, look to a city's development plan or climate action plan, since these often list financing measures and incentive programs related to the development of greenspaces and parks. Government websites like [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) offer internal databases where a user can locate applicable regional grant programs.

Finally, do not underestimate the power of working collaboratively with neighbors. In-person meetings can offer a unique opportunity to network and

share experiences with other novice park building community groups. Schedule meetings with other grassroots community groups who have been successful with any kind of development projects to gain a perspective of the process. Open space advocacy groups and nonprofits hold park building workshops and seminars all over the country. Events like these aim to bring individuals together to learn how to build a park in their own neighborhood and are a fantastic resource for any groups looking to build a new pocket park.

*Wood mulch is cost efficient but requires more maintenance
Dutch Jake's Park, WA
Photos: Mae Wolfe*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 🔑 **Maintain communication with stakeholders during the budgeting process.**
- 🔑 **Design for longevity and sustainability.**
- 🔑 **Funding for park development can come from various sources, know what is available in your area.**

SAMPLE CAPITAL INVESTMENT BUDGET

Not all items listed will be applicable to every pocket park project.

	Item Description	Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Subtotal	Total
1.0	Design, Permits and Testing					
1.1	Construction documents (10% of construction costs)	1	LOT	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
1.2	Geotechnical/MT&I	1	LOT	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
1.3	Agornomic testing	1	LOT	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
1.4	Site survey	1	LOT	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
1.5	Plan check	1	LOT	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
1.6	Permits	1	LOT	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
1.7	Constuction Management	1	LOT	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
2.0	Demolition and Removal					
2.1	Clearing and grubbing		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
2.2	Remove and relocate irrigation heads		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
2.3	Tree Removal		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
2.4	Saw Cut - Exist. Curb		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
2.5	Concrete		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
2.6	Asphalt Concrete		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
2.7	Fencing		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
2.8	Tree Boxing and Relocation		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
3.0	Earthwork and Grading					
3.1	Cut and Fill		CY	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
3.2	Rough Grading		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
3.3	Fine Grading		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
3.4	Soil Import		CY	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
3.5	Soil Export		CY	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
4.0	Sidewalk and Parking Lot Paving					
4.1	Asphalt Concrete Paving		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
4.2	Asphalt Concrete Paving Drive Approach		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
4.3	Concrete Curb		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
4.4	Concrete Curb & Gutter		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
4.5	Parking Striping		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
4.6	ADA signs		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
5.0	Hardscape					
5.1	Integral Colored Concrete Paving		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.2	4" Concrete Paving		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.3	6" Concrete Paving		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.4	Decorative Paving		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.5	ADA Ramp		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.6	Concrete Step		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.7	Concrete Swale		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.8	6" Mow Strip		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.9	Grass Pave		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.10	6" Curb		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.11	Sand Set Pavers		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.12	Unstabilized Decomposed Granite		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
5.13	Stabilized Decomposed Granite		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -

SAMPLE CAPITAL INVESTMENT BUDGET

Not all items listed will be applicable to every pocket park project.

	Item Description	Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Subtotal	Total
6.0	Formed Concrete Work					
6.1	Bench Seating		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.2	Precision Block Wall		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.3	Slump Block Wall		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.4	Split Face Block Wall		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.5	Cast in Place Concrete Wall		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.6	Chain Link Fence		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.7	Chain Link Gate		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.8	Chain Link Double Gate		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.9	Tubular Steel Fence		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.10	Tubular Steel Gate		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
6.11	Engraving		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
7.0	Site Amenities					
7.1	Picnic Table		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.2	Bench		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.3	BBQ		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.4	Drinking Fountain		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.5	Trash Receptacles		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.6	Exercise Equipment		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.7	Playground Equipment		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.8	Playground Surfacing (PIP, Engineered Wood Mulch)		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.9	Tree Grate		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.10	Educational Signage		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
7.11	Park Monument Signage		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
8.0	Buildings and Structures					
8.1	Restroom		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
8.2	Restroom Prefab Building		LS	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
8.3	Shade Structure		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
8.4	Gazebo		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
8.5	Shade Sail		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
9.0	Electrical					
9.1	Up Lights -Solar Powered		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
9.2	Bollards-Solar Powered		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
9.3	Service for restroom and irrigation		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
9.4	Solar Post and Power Assembly Panel		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
9.5	Lighting Control		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
10.0	Utilities					
10.1	Domestic Water Service		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
10.2	Domestic Irrigation Water Service		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
10.3	Reclaimed Water Service		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
10.4	Sewer Line		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
10.5	Gas Line		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
10.6	Electric Service		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
10.7	Phone Service		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
10.8	Cable Service		LF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -

SAMPLE CAPITAL INVESTMENT BUDGET

Not all items listed will be applicable to every pocket park project.

	Item Description	Quantity	Unit	Unit Cost	Subtotal	Total
11.0	Landscape					
11.1	Planting		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.2	Mulch		CY	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.3	Soil Preparation		CY	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.4	Sod		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.5	Turf Sod		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.6	Turf Hydroseed		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.7	Groundcover		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.8	1 gallon Shrub		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.9	5 gallon Shrub		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.10	15 gallon Shrub		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.11	15 gallon Tree		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.12	24" box Tree		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.13	30" box Tree		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.14	36" box Tree		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.15	48" box Tree		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.16	60" box Tree		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.17	72" box Tree		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.18	Irrigation System		SF	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.19	Irrigation Controller		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.20	Irrigation Booster Pump		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
11.21	90 Day Maintenance		EA	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
						\$ -
					Construction Cost	\$ -
					General Conditions (8%)	\$ -
					Contractor Bonds, Insurance, Overhead & Profit (10.2%)	\$ -
					SUBTOTAL CONSTRUCTION COST	\$ -
					Design Contingency Allowance (3%)	\$ -
					Escalation (3% Annually)	\$ -
					Construction Contingency (15%)	\$ -
					TOTAL CONSTRUCTION COST	\$ -

CHAPTER 4: Designing a Park for All

The design of a pocket park is a key factor in how well the space ultimately serves the community. As discussed in Chapter 2, robust community engagement is the only way to ensure the park provides the amenities that best suit the local neighborhood. But how the input gathered from the community ties back into the actual design is vitally important. The design of the site, the location of the selected amenities, their orientation, color choices, texture, and materials, all should encourage use across age groups and physical abilities. Additionally, given a pocket parks' limited size and the unique constraints of each site, serving the largest number of users often requires programming every inch. This chapter will walk you through some important considerations when designing a pocket park for all. This is by no means meant to stand in for the skill of a professional landscape architect on a development project, but will provide some context for the myriad factors that lead to a successful design.

Site Specific Considerations

The existing conditions of a potential park site will present a series of opportunities and constraints. The sites' size, shape, topography, and presence of existing trees or utility poles, all influence development of the site. Understanding the limitations and possibilities of these conditions is the first step in effective planning. How can the opportunities be utilized and the constraints minimized? Are there any existing site features, like small hills, that can be activated as a play area for children to roll and slide down? Are there naturally occurring low points that support stormwater management such as bioswales or infiltration areas? Making use of these site-specific features not only supports the unique nature of a community park, but also reduces costs by avoiding excessive site grading. Any lot can be graded using heavy machinery to produce a flat-surfaced, easily developable, blank template, but the cost associated often makes such efforts prohibitive and ultimately may sacrifice the inherent interest of the site.



*An active LA Metro light rail line adjacent to the park site inspired a train-themed design
Watts Serenity Park, CA
Photo: Spohn Ranch*

Maximizing Benefit for All Users

To support all neighbors with one small pocket park requires careful consideration and organization of the community selected park amenities. Pocket parks by nature are limited in size and thus all features should really appeal to multiple users. These features maximize site use and reduce the amount of space dedicated solely to one group. For example, while play equipment is separated by age range, such as ages 2-5 and 5-12, play elements that are safe for all ages, like mounded rubber surfacing, can increase the overall play value at a site. Boulders and hillsides can be incorporated into the design as both a recreational element and to satisfy a natural aesthetic. Dual purpose splash pads can serve as open plazas to host community gatherings and events when water jets are turned off.

Incorporating both active and passive recreational amenities is another way to ensure a pocket park provides benefits to all users. Active recreational amenities encourage more intense physical exercise

and may include fitness equipment, play structures, basketball hoops, and alternative play features like water play, among other things. Just as it sounds, passive recreational amenities require a lower level of physical intensity and include features like walking paths, garden plots, native habitat for bird watching, and picnic areas. A family with young children might

Incorporating a mixture of active and passive amenities, and thinking about how to maximize every feature, every square inch of a site can help ensure that your park provides something for everyone to enjoy.

want a traditional play structure for their kids, but this may not provide much benefit to older adults simply seeking time to sit outside. Incorporating a mixture of active and passive amenities, and thinking about how to maximize every feature, every square inch of a site can help ensure that your park provides something for everyone to enjoy.



*Game tables work for eating, resting, and multi-generational play
Nat Turner Park, NJ
Photo: J. Avery Wham Photography*

CASE STUDY: Madison Avenue Park and Community Garden

Madison Avenue Park and Community Garden was developed out of a combination of opportunity and need. The project site was an empty lot adjacent to an apartment complex and down the street from the City of Los Angeles Cahuenga Branch Library, multiple schools, and a light rail station. As there was almost no other parkland within a half-mile radius, the site was the perfect location for a new park. When it opened to the public in June of 2019, Madison Avenue Park and Community Garden added an additional half-acre of parkland to the East Hollywood community. Public-private partnerships and a robust community design process ensured the new pocket park would provide a variety of recreational opportunities for a diverse community.

The idea for the new pocket park came to fruition when the Los Angeles Community Garden Council reached out to the Trust for Public Land inquiring about creating a new park that could appeal to a broad range of local residents by including the combined benefits of an urban garden and recreational facility. This partnership, with support from Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks and City Council District 13, utilized the skills and expertise of each

organization to create the unique pocket park.

The half-acre pocket park was developed through a community-driven design process. Local residents were involved in the creation of the park design and selection of park elements through a series of design charrettes. This helped to ensure the final product would be a park that adequately satisfied the neighborhood's wants and needs.

The design packs as many elements as possible into a small space. Divided into two distinct zones, a playground and community garden, the park attracts a variety of community members with different interests and lifestyles. The park successfully defines areas for designated use while making each accessible and useable to anyone interested. Adults can exercise on the fitness equipment, watch their children play on the play structure, or participate in gardening activities. Likewise, younger children have multiple options for play including the play structure, swings, sand pit, and basketball tree with hoops at different heights. Providing such a diversity of park elements provides recreational opportunities to the greatest number of park users and widest range of ages and physical abilities.



*Diverse play options in a compact space
Madison Avenue Park and Community Garden, CA
Photo: EPTDesign*

Major Design Elements of a Pocket Park

There are many ways to break down the major design elements of a pocket park. For the purposes of this Toolkit, we have separated them into the following categories: **Open Space**, **Playgrounds**, **Community Gardens**, and **Urban Plazas**. Each element presents an opportunity to support park activities and recreation for various groups. As discussed above, the limitation of space in a pocket park means that some combination of these design elements should be used to make the site attractive to many different users.

Open Space is one of the more versatile design elements. This concept is just as it sounds – it provides a space in the park, such as a grassy field, that can support active and passive recreation activities. Open space can be programmed as the community sees fit – age groups from older adults down to young children determine how they want to use the space whether it be for physical exercise, leisure, socializing, creative play, or wildlife viewing. Furthermore, walking paths, planters, bioswales, shade structures, and other design elements can be easily incorporated.



*Open space
Rudolph Park, CA
Photo: Annie Bang*

Depending on the demographics of a community, **playgrounds** can be an important feature in a pocket park. They provide opportunities for families to get outside and give kids a place to focus their energy and get some exercise. A playground can take different forms in order to fit into any pocket park size. Traditional playgrounds might include a jungle gym and swing set whereas creative or non-traditional playgrounds use alternative play features such as a water spout or small rock wall. Non-traditional playgrounds are less prescriptive and can inspire creative free play. Studies show that engagement in free play directly correlates to an increased capacity for problem solving and overcoming obstacles later

in life. In addition, non-traditional playgrounds can be accessible to multiple age groups and physical abilities. For example, toddler swings are designed for the youngest of park goers and their guardians but provide little to no benefit for older children. What is more, without play structures accommodating to older children, they might be tempted to “misuse” and then damage the structure by climbing up its supporting bars or chains. Misuse of equipment can result in frustration among other park users and reduced satisfaction in the park. When used together traditional and non-traditional playgrounds help bridge the gap between age groups and maximize recreational opportunities within the pocket park.



*Playground
Paul Habans Charter School, LA
Photo: Bryan Tarnowski*

Including a **community garden** in a pocket park provides a unique benefit to local residents. Particularly in dense neighborhoods lacking yard space to grow food, community gardens provide residents with healthy food sources and a low intensity recreational outlet. From 2008 to 2013, the number of American households who participated in community gardens rose from 36 to 42 million and American's who grow their own food tend to be from various age groups. The appeal of community gardens spans broadly across age groups and can nurture a relationship with the natural world.

Urban Plazas or green courtyards can be incorporated into a pocket park as a space for passive recreation. As a standalone design concept, the urban plaza park has been popular in large, highly developed urban areas and promoted as a place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of city life. Primarily a rest area with tables and seating, an urban plaza may also include some aspects of the natural landscape such as trees, vines, or water features. Urban plaza elements can be integrated as designated seating or picnic areas separate from where children play. As with other passive design concepts, plazas and courtyards promote access to parks for those who are less physically active but still want to spend time outdoors in a safe and communal space.



*Community gardening
Towerside Park, MN
Photo: Andy Richter*

Planting Design

The planting design of a pocket park should create a sustainable and beautiful landscape that attracts the attention of park goers throughout the year and provides environmental benefits, like urban cooling and habitat for birds and insects. Select plant material that can stand up to a bit of trampling, requires little maintenance, and is appropriate for the specific weather conditions at the site. While the topic of planting design may warrant its own Toolkit, four concepts are most useful to consider when thinking about the role of the landscape in a pocket park: [site appropriateness](#), [ecosystem services](#), and [site visibility and safety](#).

Plants should be selected based on [site appropriateness](#). The soil chemistry and properties, sunlight and water exposure, and variable changes from season to season will all factor into the plants ability to thrive once placed on-site. Native plant species that are already adapted to regional climate conditions are generally always a good choice. Native plants require less maintenance and inputs like water and fertilizer than ornamental species and can even provide an educational benefit to park users when coupled with interpretive signage explaining their significance.

While native species should be considered first, there is also opportunity to bring non-native but regionally adaptive plants into a landscape. Fruit trees, for example, give shade cover and offer a source of healthy food to park goers. Whenever using non-native plants, it is critical to consult the local invasive species databases to prevent further expansion of these plants. Invasive species should not be used.

Durability is another factor of a plant's site appropriateness. Shrubs and ground covers that can bounce back after trampling, such as native grasses or monocots, should be used especially in areas adjacent to playgrounds or other high traffic areas. Examine trees and remove any low branching or vulnerable limbs that may be snapped or broken in the first year after planting. Creating a landscape that can withstand high use and minimal maintenance requires careful plant selection by the design team.

Plant selection should also consider [ecosystem services](#). Ecosystem services refers to a site's ability

to contribute to the environmental health of an area. Pocket parks should be designed to passively manage stormwater, filter and mitigate pollution, and offer valuable wildlife habitat.

Stormwater management devices like bioswales or raingardens can mitigate flooding in and around the neighborhood. Bioswales and raingardens guide excess stormwater runoff into low points within the park. Often lined with riparian or native plant species, the bioswales and raingardens allow stormwater runoff to slowly infiltrate and recharge groundwater supplies. Stormwater management devices like these can be particularly useful in areas with prolonged periods of drought followed by extreme rain events.

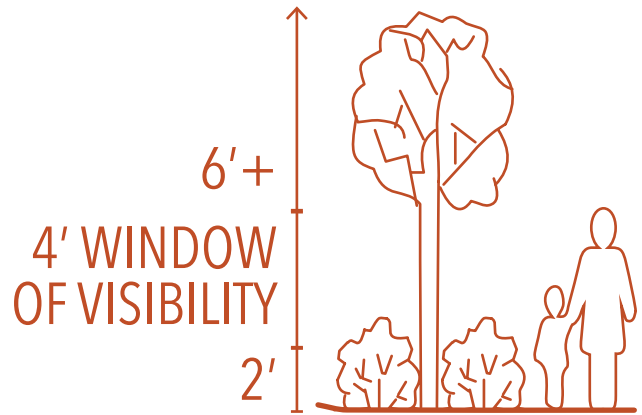


*Simple, educational plant label
La Cima Playground, NY
Photo: Nomi Ellenson*

Planting design in pocket parks can also mitigate pollution. Grass channels and vegetated areas are effective at filtering sediment, nutrients, and other non-point source pollutants from stormwater runoff. Additionally, plants and trees can be used to filter pollution from the air. For example, conifer species, with their needle like leaf structure, are effective at capturing large particulate matter whereas tree species with broader leaf structures are better equipped to capture small particulate matter.

Pocket parks represent an opportunity to establish much needed wildlife habitat in urban areas. Studies have shown a strong correlation between native vegetation cover and total wildlife density in urban areas. Plants can be selected to attract desirable wildlife into the park. For example, milkweed is the singular plant that monarch butterflies require as habitat for their larva. These plants require slightly more maintenance than other ornamental flowers, but the value as critical pollinator habitat might justify implementation in some scenarios.

Planting design should consider and promote [site visibility and safety](#) of users within the pocket park. Plant material, both trees and shrubs, should not obstruct a clear line of sight throughout the park or create clusters of vegetation where people can hide



PLANTING DESIGN FOR SITE VISIBILITY AND SAFETY

and engage in undesirable activities. A good rule of thumb is to ensure the plant material selected provides a 2'-6' window of visibility. Shrubs should not grow taller than approximately two feet tall and trees should not have large limbs that grow lower than six feet from the ground. This creates a four-foot window of visibility throughout the park. Being able to see throughout a park gives users peace of mind while visiting and allows parents to participate in an activity on one side of the park while their child plays on the other.

Amelia Earhart Park Fitness Zone™ Area
Miami, Florida

- 1 Fitness zone area**
This Fitness Zone offers free, easy-to-use strength training and aerobic exercise equipment to help users get fit and stay healthy.
- 2 Rain garden**
This raingarden collects and absorbs runoff from the surrounding pavement and grass. This allows water to absorb into the ground and evaporate into the atmosphere, helping to reduce flooding.
- 3 Urban tree canopy**
Trees intercept rainwater with their leaves and branches and reduce the large amounts of water produced by storms. The trees preserved and planted here are also helping to cool the air and provide shade for park users.
- 4 Native trees and plants**
All of the plants here are either native or drought tolerant, which helps reduce maintenance, promotes biodiversity, creates habitat, filters particulates and harmful toxins out of the air, and eliminates the need for fertilizers, pesticides, and additional watering.
- 5**

The design for new fitness equipment added native habitat planting and a rain garden for stormwater treatment
Amelia Earheart Park, FL
Photo: Alana Wesley White

Site Utilities

Site utilities are necessary for a pocket park to function. Where other aspects of park design guide how a space is used by the public, utilities are required to ensure the park is safe and comfortable to use. While not an exhaustive list, common utilities to consider in pocket park design are [electricity](#), [water](#), and [waste disposal](#), and [sanitary sewer](#).

[Electricity](#) is needed to provide lighting which allows access to the park after dark and can prevent unwanted activities from occurring under the cover of darkness. Some parks even feature electrical outlets for public use.

Access to [water](#) is necessary for maintenance staff and the general public. Irrigation for planted areas and trees and hose bibs for cleaning and maintenance purposes are critical for keeping a park looking beautiful. While drinking fountains, dog bowls, and splash pads or other water play features can all be important and even necessary features of the design.

Planning for [waste disposal](#) facilities is an important part of the design process. Waste receptacles are needed to provide park visitors with an easy way to dispose of their trash and keep the park free of litter. Simply having an adequate number of trash cans at a park can drastically reduce the number of maintenance staff hours required to keep the space clean. Design consideration must also be given to how maintenance staff will access the waste receptacles in order to empty them and if there needs to be a centralized trash enclosure for dumpsters.



*Even dogs need water
Kellogg Park, CA
Photo: Annie Bang*



*Water used for play
Jose Manuel Collazo Park, PA
Photo: Jenna Stamm*

Another utility that may be required is a connection to the [sanitary sewer](#) system. This is commonly needed for restrooms but also at times for excess water produced by drinking fountains and splash pads.

As with all park design considerations, utility requirements will largely depend on the size of the park and financial capacity of the agency responsible for operations and management. The Luskin School of Public Affairs published a [SMART Parks](#) toolkit that can be referenced as a guide to inform utility design decisions. The toolkit features discussion and analysis of park technologies, including irrigation and greywater recycling systems, energy efficient lighting, and dynamic input monitoring tools that can be integrated into a park to maximize cost effective and environmentally responsive use of utilities.

Considerations for Long-term Success

Although the design of a park is fixed once development is complete, seasonal environmental factors and daily use of the facilities will continuously alter conditions on the site. The longevity of a pocket park relies in part on ease of site maintenance. A newly developed, beautifully designed park can fall into disrepair quickly if upkeep of the grounds, features, and amenities is inadequate.

From a design perspective, the long-term success of a park is determined by the selection of long-lasting, durable materials and features that are easily maintained. The selection of site materials requires consideration of the relationship between the upfront development costs and the future costs to maintain the facility. There is typically a tradeoff between present and future expenses where a higher initial investment leads to lower maintenance costs. For example, a weather-based irrigation controller that automatically adjusts the watering schedule based on local weather conditions may have a high installation cost but will result in reduced water waste and lower utility expenses in the long term. There will have to be some negotiating and compromise in order to determine the best option for all involved parties (see Chapter 3: Financial Planning).

Material selection impacts various tiers of stakeholders in the park building process. Considering project investment costs, usability, utility, community

Although the design of a park is fixed once development is complete, seasonal environmental factors and daily use of the facilities will continuously alter conditions on the site.

satisfaction, and operation and maintenance costs together can promote a park's long-term success. A more in-depth discussion of effective operations and management practices can be found in Chapter 5: Operations & Maintenance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 🔑 Design with the intention of serving the entire community. Organize your site to make the most out of every square inch.
- 🔑 Pocket parks not only offer social and cultural benefits to a community, they provide environmental benefits like urban cooling through shade trees and stormwater management via bioswales or permeable surfaces.
- 🔑 Make design choices now that consider how the park will last over time. Parks that age well ultimately provide the most benefit to the community.

CHAPTER 5: Operations & Maintenance

A park is truly only as good as the maintenance it receives. If the community perceives a park as unsafe because the trashcans are overflowing or park amenities need repair, they lose incentive to visit the site. The goal of park operations and maintenance (O&M) is to keep the park **safe**, **functional**, and **open to the public** so that the local community can continue to enjoy the park as originally intended.

Before a park opens, a **management structure** must be determined and an **O&M strategy** put in place. Whether the site owner is a municipal parks department or local land trust, the management responsibilities of a park largely remain the same: day-to-day operations include trash pick-up and opening and closing of the park gates, while more infrastructural maintenance includes keeping the water and electricity running, trimming overgrown vegetation, and repairing damage or vandalized park amenities.

While park O&M activities share commonalities across all parks, each park will have specific management requirements of its own.

While park O&M activities share commonalities across all parks, each park will have specific management requirements of its own. The park's size, location, features, vegetation type, amount of use by the public and overall wear-and-tear will determine the maintenance required to keep the space in working order. Further, the managing entity will have their own operational capacity determining the frequency of site visits. Funding for operations and maintenance is one of the biggest challenges for parks of any size. Because public grants are rarely designated for maintenance expenses and general bonds are typically reserved for capital investment projects (new parks), funding site operations in the long term is limited to a few sources like the local parks department's general fund, special district generated revenue allocated through an inter-agency partnership, and private sector funds like those contributed through

a Business Improvement District. Park operators must work within their own financial and staffing abilities to keep a pocket park in good condition. This means implementing an O&M plan that recognizes each site's specific demands and utilizes available resources efficiently.



SIZE



LOCATION



FEATURES



VEGETATION



USE

FACTORS AFFECTING O&M REQUIREMENTS

There are a variety of resources available to support the development of an O&M plan. The Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers, National Recreation and Park and Professional Grounds Management Society prepared a comprehensive resource entitled [Operational Guidelines for Grounds Management](#). In addition, [Best Management Practices Used at Urban Parks in National and International Locations](#) prepared by the National Park Service is a free resource with clear best management practices for operations and maintenance. Finally, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation's [Parks Inspection Program](#) can be useful in determining a protocol for establishing a system to conduct ongoing park evaluations.

CREATING AN O&M STRATEGY

Parks are not static. Once built, they continue to require maintenance and care to truly serve the community. An effective O&M strategy should reflect the ever-changing social and environmental conditions in the community and may include the following five steps:

1 Evaluate park design

Take a look at the elements in the park such as landscaping, play equipment, trash cans, lawn area, benches, paving, etc. Make a list of all these elements; include details like size and/or quantity.

2 Define O&M standards

Once a list of park elements is created, define the maintenance goal for each. For example, the goal for trashcans may be that they do not overflow or have a noticeable smell while the goal for a lawn may be that it is trimmed and green with no yellow spots or visible dirt patches. Assign tasks required to meet the maintenance goal for each element. For example, trashcans will need to be emptied and sprayed out with water or cleaner. Turf will need to be watered, mowed, fertilized, and reseeded. These are your O&M standards, the maintenance tasks required for each element to ensure the park remains safe, functional, and a beloved resource for the community.

3 Create an O&M schedule

Review the list of O&M standards and make estimates about how often tasks will need to be performed to meet the maintenance goals. Organize these tasks by frequency: daily, weekly, monthly, or annually depending on the task. Park gates need to be opened and closed daily while tree health should be checked annually. The frequency of maintenance tasks for each element may change seasonally. Watering requirements for lawns generally increase during hotter, summer months. Project out a year of tasks based on the estimated frequency and anticipated seasonal needs.

4 Regularly examine site conditions

Because weather and community use will change the condition of the park throughout the year, creating and maintaining a system to regularly examine and track site conditions will help determine how the O&M budget and requirements fluctuate seasonally. Monitoring these changes does not necessarily require high tech tools or software. Data collected through observation by staff and park users can help inform O&M standards and schedules. This is especially true for a newly developed park. Documenting staff time, materials required, and frequency of each maintenance activity throughout the first year (and biannually/annually thereafter) will help estimate future O&M requirements and allow for better management of resources.

5 Evaluate O&M standards & schedule

After the first six months, or at the end of every year thereafter, take time to evaluate how the existing O&M standards support the park. At this point, a thorough review of the park's overall condition will help fine tune and update the O&M standards based on any maintenance deficiencies noted at the park. The O&M standards themselves should also be evaluated for any inefficiencies. It may not be worth replanting an area where plants are consistently trampled—adding mulch and allowing the area to become a pathway might be more sensible and a better use of resources. These yearly evaluations are a great opportunity to further engage the community. The community can be involved in the park evaluation or an annual clean up or mulching day. Information gathered from surveys collected during step two can be summarized into a handout or infographic and presented back to community. Public review of this data supports compromise and community collaboration over shared park goals.

Management Structures

There are generally two available options for managing a newly developed park: **public management** by one or more government agencies or **private management** conducted by a local nonprofit organization usually in coordination with a public entity. Each park management structure has their pros and cons.

Parks are most commonly under **public management** structures allowing new parks to be incorporated into an already established parks and recreation framework. City or County level park agencies provide an experienced workforce and dedicated park budget necessary for O&M activities in the new park.

Publicly managed parks tend to use a mixture of funding sources to meet park operating demands with the most significant funding generated from tax revenue. On average, park agencies derive 60% of their operating expenditures from tax generated sources. This provides a reliable source for O&M activities, and accounts for half of the total responsibilities assigned to park agency staff, year after year.

Public agencies employ seasoned park and recreation professionals trained in O&M activities. From landscape maintenance to administrative duties like

staff scheduling, park agencies have the internal infrastructure to support the maintenance of a new park. This effectively reduces any lag time between the creation of a new park and the integration of routine operational and maintenance activities.

In addition to having maintenance equipment and supplies on hand, a skilled workforce, and potential funding, parks departments also have the opportunity to form inter-agency partnerships with other public service providers to form a more holistic management strategy. Public partnerships, between a parks and recreation department and a water district, health department, or transportation agency, for example, can be used to strengthen the efficiency of O&M. Parks often touch on the interests of multiple public agencies and these partnerships create the potential for data sharing, additional funding support, and the availability of specialized staff who can help provide analysis on best management practices ultimately offering a better experience for park goers. Additional support available as a result of the partnership might include site electricity and water use monitoring to better manage resources or access to local grants or special district revenue generation. Another potential avenue is around park programming.



School community playgrounds are an example of successful public-public partnerships

PS 62, NY

Photo: Jennifer Causey

CASE STUDY: Shape Up NYC

The Shape Up NYC program in New York City is a good example of the benefits of inter-agency public partnerships. For a number of years Shape Up NYC has provided free fitness classes specifically targeted at neighborhoods with higher rates of obesity and other chronic illnesses. Initially started as a partnership between the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC DOHMH) in 2003, the program has since expanded its inter-agency partnerships to increase the number of classes and reach even more residents.

NYC Parks has been working with the New York City Public Library, New York City Department of Education, New York City Department for the Aging, and the New York City Housing Authority, among others, to use parks and recreation centers for programming. These partnerships have facilitated

the addition of over 100 new classes, 80% of which are in neighborhoods with disproportionately high rates of chronic diseases. Additionally, NYC Parks is training community volunteers to lead these classes for their neighbors, thereby supporting social capital throughout the City.

In addition to providing a range of fitness classes with varying degrees of intensity, like Zumba, kickboxing, dance, and yoga, Shape Up NYC conducts annual surveys to track the progress and satisfaction of the participants and note improvements in health. The surveys are also used to collect data on how to improve the program. The partnership provides the additional support needed for NYC Parks to enhance their existing park programming and for various City departments to positively affect the health of their communities.



Shape Up NYC
Photo: Daniel Avila/NYC Parks





In some localities, the addition of a new park in a neighborhood can present challenges from an O&M perspective. Budget cuts and reallocated discretionary spending can leave a parks department's resources spread thin. In these cases, the decentralized location of a pocket park can be particularly challenging for a parks department since their location will have a disproportionate impact on O&M costs. Increased travel time and staffing may be required to reach the new park. Fortunately, [private management](#) via a public-private partnership is an alternative management strategy that can support park operations.

Public-private partnerships offer an alternative to traditional park management strategies where public and private sector entities share the financial liability, maintenance responsibility, and community benefit. Organized community stakeholders such as land trusts, 'friends of' groups, or other local nonprofit conservancy groups can adopt, own, or lease newly developed park spaces and provide basic O&M activities. The idea behind this management structure is that a private group solely focuses on the management of a single park, thereby providing a higher level of attention to the site.

These partnerships have become an increasingly important method used to support parks all over the country. The Central Park Conservancy in New York is cited as one of the most successful examples of private sector group supplementing public park O&M activities. Since the group's establishment in 1980, they have grown to provide almost 85% of the park's \$46 million annual budget through fundraising and other revenue generating processes. The group even conducts meaningful O&M activities usually restricted to public agency park staff. Pocket parks will require a much more modest commitment from local private partners, but the private management structure is a replicable model for any size park.

Parks under private management have unique opportunities to fund their ongoing O&M that is not readily available for publicly managed parks. For example, business improvement districts (BID) can be a significant funding source for a privately-operated park. In this structure, nearby private sector businesses voluntarily and routinely contribute money to a park's O&M budget with the goal of supporting the health and resiliency of a neighborhood. Under a privately managed park, larger, more technical maintenance activities beyond the capacity of the private group can be outsourced to a third-party contractor or to the city's maintenance staff.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

-  Planning for O&M begins in the design phase.
-  O&M standards should be tailored to each individual park, not a general O&M plan for a larger park system.
-  Evaluate the site after the first six months and then yearly thereafter to determine how existing O&M standards are working, and then adapt accordingly.
-  Use O&M as an opportunity to engage local volunteers or paid stewards and incorporate community or non-profit led maintenance structures where possible.

CHAPTER 6: Common Challenges

Park building is important and rewarding work but does not come without challenges. The process is complex, involves multiple stakeholders, organizations, and agencies, and it requires a significant amount of time and resources. The previous chapters have provided tips on how to pull together all the pieces needed to build a park, the community, funding, design and ways to structure operations and maintenance. But, there are still common challenges that inevitably arise. Below are some examples of those challenges and suggested solutions.

Challenge: Measuring the Success of a Completed Park Project

The best way to measure the impact of a new park is to talk to the community before the park is built, and then after. Include questions that provide insight into how the park has affected the community. Questions may be; 'How safe do you feel in your neighborhood?', 'How often do you currently visit parks/greenspaces?', 'How often do you exercise?' Quantitative data is hard to collect but establishing a mechanism, such as a survey, to collect qualitative data from park users can be equally insightful. The answers will likely change from before to after the project is built. Measuring the impact of your park project not only can help make a case of allocating resources for maintenance, but demonstrates success for future funding and park development endeavors.

Solutions:

- Create a survey format the community will respond to and collect surveys online and in-person before building the park and then again, six months after it is open. Surveys should be in all appropriate languages for the local community.
- Take survey results into consideration for future park programming and staffing. Adapt operations accordingly to create a better user experience.

Challenge: Community Distrust

Communities and neighborhoods that have been historically marginalized, underrepresented, and left out of the decision making process can be skeptical about outside organizations or agencies attempting a park development project. This lack of trust can limit community member participation in the park planning process.

Solutions:

- Design outreach specifically around the community and provide project information in a variety of languages relevant to each specific neighborhood.
- Actively seek out community members who are historically less likely to voice their opinions. Door knocking and phone banking are great ways to engage residents who don't come out to larger meetings.
- Partner with local community members, leaders, and groups that can act as a bridge between the community and the park building group. Bring locals on as team members, pay them for their work, and support them to guide the conversation and inform the initial direction of the outreach.
- Plan engagement and outreach activities that help to build trust with the community. Create an atmosphere where the community feels safe to openly share ideas, such as small table discussions and comment cards for those who are not comfortable speaking in front of a large group.

Challenge: Staff and Community Member Turnover

From the early planning phase until it is open to the public, many individuals and organizations will work on a park project. Turnover of staff and community members can slow down development progress and jeopardize the ongoing activities of stewardship groups.

Solutions:

- Ensuring multiple staff are up-to-speed on high-level project details provides a safety net to keep the project moving if staff is lost and can help bring new staff up to speed quickly.
- Maintain a well-informed community base. Staying in touch with the community throughout the course of a project will create long-term relationships that are critical. If one community member leaves the neighborhood, you will not lose your entire base.

Challenge: Diminishing Park Use

A decrease in park use can be caused by a variety of reasons. Lack of maintenance, the presence of illicit activities, changing neighborhood demographics, and neighbors not being aware of the park due to its small size are all factors that can result in less people using the park. A park, particularly a pocket park, should always feel safe, clean, and comfortable for its users. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to activate the park.

Solutions:

- Implement community events, workshops, volunteer days, and other events at the park to up attendance and make it an active space.
- Increase the presence of park staff and encourage the local police department to increase their presence in the area as well.
- Designate community stewards to keep an eye on the park and report any problems to the police and maintenance staff. Ensure the community knows who the best person to contact is and how to contact them.

Challenge: Support for Green Infrastructure

All park projects are green infrastructure projects. Although some pocket parks may include more robust green infrastructure technologies than others, anytime a site transforms from a vacant lot to a place with trees and greenery the surrounding environment cools and stormwater is more effectively managed. That said, some green infrastructure technologies can place a strain on the project budget. Therefore, it is imperative to communicate the green infrastructure benefits and how they support community priorities.

Solutions:

- Make the benefits of green infrastructure more accessible to neighbors and park supporters, limit technical jargon and use graphics and relatable examples.
- Outline a local issue affecting neighborhood that the green infrastructure will help to fix (i.e. using permeable surfaces in the park can reduce the risk of nearby flood damage).
- Partner with the municipal environmental department, such as the sanitation department, or the public works department to identify funding incentives for green infrastructure.

Challenge: Fundraising as a Grassroots Organization

While grassroots organizations can be very successful at fundraising for a park project, they may not have a structure in place for accepting donations without taxes or other fees being assessed. Grassroots organizations should look for partners with access to tax advantaged fundraising accounts to ensure all money raised supports the park development work.

Solutions:

- Partner with an IRS approved 501(c)(3) organization that can manage a tax-exempt fundraising account for the project.
- Identify and reach out to qualifying local nonprofits and charitable organizations that specialize in greenspace and other neighborhood development projects.



Creative placemaking
EM Stanton School, PA
Photo: Jenna Stamm

Challenge: Lack of funding for Creative Placemaking Activities

Arts and cultural design elements may at first appear to be superfluous for a tight budgeted project, but it is in fact a core facet to ensuring capital investments are meaningful to and successful in the community. While paying an artist to paint a mural or design sculptures may not always be feasible, much of creative placemaking is about the process of convening residents and stakeholders in a culturally-specific and engaging ways, which is not only affordable, but priceless.

Solutions:

- Start early. Identify local artists in the beginning of community outreach who can be advocates as much as designers in the park planning. You can turn on your artist brain, too.
- Thoughtfully incorporating arts and culture in feedback and community engagement strategies lends itself to rich and often more accurate local needs
- Do not be afraid to scale back ambitions in the short term so that creative placemaking can happen immediately. Start small and make it easy, keeping supplies to a minimum. Prioritize the social aspects over the materials.
- Examples of easy creative placemaking events include: story gathering activities where community members gather to tell stories about what their neighborhood and community means to them or [create a pop-up playground on a vacant site](#) using simple loose parts like cardboard boxes and tubes, tape, string and fabric.
- Hosting routine events can be especially successful because consistency gives community members a chance to engage.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Every project has its challenges, work with your community to resolve them and keep people engaged.

CHAPTER 7: Pocket Park Toolkit Checklist

ENGAGEMENT, ORGANIZING, & PARTNER BUILDING

- Reach out to local residents and existing stakeholder groups/local organizations
 - Form an outreach team
 - Draft mission statement and express intent
- Find a suitable location for a pocket park
 - Asset mapping
 - Community surveys
 - Pop-up events
- Begin collaborating with the community
 - Host routine community meetings
 - Organize community driven charrettes
 - Education/Leadership Building - support community champions to take on leadership roles
- All outreach materials are translated into the appropriate language(s) for your community

FINANCIAL PLANNING

- Locate funding
 - Preliminary research should include scanning the internet for local, state, and federal grant programs
 - Reach out to an organization with experience in fundraising activities
- Budgeting
 - Outline both development and operation costs
 - Work with the community to ensure transparency and clarity on budget decisions

DESIGNING A PARK FOR ALL

- Consider what existing site elements can be preserved
 - Historical or cultural
 - Existing landforms, trees, etc.
- Does the design accurately reflect the community's input and needs? Examples include:
 - Will sensitive populations such as seniors, mothers, or children feel welcome using the space?
 - Is community culture reflected in the design?
- Ensure environmental benefits are inherent to the design. Examples include:
 - Stormwater management through bioswales, cisterns, infiltration areas
 - Urban cooling through tree planting and shade structures
- Select durable amenities that will stand up to heavy use, extreme weather conditions, and limited maintenance

OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

- Identify who will manage the park space
 - Define whether a public or private entity will be taking ownership of the park
- Create an O&M Strategy
- Engage local residents to participate in park stewardship
- Evaluate the park after it has been opened to ensure it is meeting the initial intent

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