

Parks as community development

When it comes to gritty cities, conserving pristine land is not the only way to create places to play.



By Peter Harnik and Kyle Barnhart

TPL ISSUE ANALYSIS



PARKS EQUAL “CONSERVATION,” right? Not always.

In cities, the more accurate word is often “development.” Rather than being a pristine swath of nature, the underlying property was something that had been previously built upon. Rather than being conserved and protected, the land was scraped, cleaned and sculpted. Rather than being saved and preserved, the trees and horticulture were chosen and planted.

For this reason, a small but significant percentage of city parks are being paid for out of a federal funding source known as the Community Development Block Grant program, or CDBG.

CDBG is not well known among conservationists and park people, but it is a huge engine of federal revenue sharing for cities. Administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), it is the premier source of direct aid for lower-income city neighborhoods. At its zenith (in 2002) it distributed more than \$5 billion per year to more than 1,200 so-called “entitlement communities.”

As “entitlement” implies, CDBG spending must benefit people of low and moderate income, and it is



The City of Denver used CDBG funding to purchase a blighted property that is now Cuatro Vientos Park

TABLE 1.
CDBG Funding for Parks & Recreation, 2005-2013

YEAR	TOTAL CDBG FUNDING	FUNDS USED FOR PARKS AND RECREATION	PERCENT USED FOR PARKS AND RECREATION
2005	\$4,848,113,239	\$92,393,011	1.91%
2006	\$4,714,773,198	\$96,546,192	2.05%
2007	\$4,566,471,065	\$103,614,917	2.27%
2008	\$4,354,161,601	\$93,071,045	2.14%
2009	\$4,042,246,168	\$87,688,204	2.17%
2010	\$3,887,063,388	\$87,075,225	2.24%
2011	\$3,906,542,017	\$98,311,484	2.52%
2012	\$3,882,915,749	\$103,183,829	2.66%
2013	\$3,565,021,407	\$102,729,909	2.88%
Average	\$4,196,367,537	\$96,068,202	2.29%
Total	\$37,767,307,831	\$864,613,817	2.29%

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

most commonly associated with affordable housing projects. But HUD lists 25 eligible activities and reports that about one-third of the money ends up going for public facility improvements, including parks.

“One of the great hallmarks of the CDBG program,” according to Marion McFadden, deputy assistant secretary for grant programs, “is local discretion.”

Between 2005 and 2013, more than \$864 million in CDBG funding was spent on parks and recreation, an average of just over \$96 million a year. While that’s a small percentage of the \$6-billion-plus spent annually by big-city park agencies, it is much more federal money than comes in to city parks from conservation programs through the U.S. Department of the Interior.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that there has been a steady decline in CDBG funding, from \$4.84 billion in 2005 to \$3.56 billion in 2013. As one of the premier “domestic discretionary” programs on Capitol

TABLE 2:
Major cities using the greatest share of CDBG funding on parks, 2008-2012

CITY	PERCENT USE FOR PARKS AND RECREATION (5 YEAR-AVERAGE)
Laredo	19.81%
El Paso	19.26%
Tucson	16.02%
Bakersfield	15.87%
Newark	12.04%
Atlanta	11.04%
Riverside	10.99%
Santa Ana	9.14%
Arlington, TX	7.79%
Sacramento	7.22%

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development



CDBG funding has been used for improvements to City Park in New Orleans

Hill, CDBG is a fat target for budget cutters, particularly since many cities are jurisdictions that are less than bipartisan.

Remarkably, park spending from CDBG has held up over the nine years, meaning that the percent going for parks has in fact increased sharply (see table). Combining the money with other funds, cities have built everything from recreation centers to neighborhood parks and skating zones to splash parks. Of the country's 100 largest cities, 57 have used at least some CDBG money for parks in the past five years. Los Angeles spent more than \$6.8 million in CDBG on improvements to athletic fields and parks. St. Paul invested \$2.5 million into playgrounds. Atlanta used \$6.1 million to improve a dozen parks and replace 18 playgrounds.

New York City used \$580,000 in CDBG money to operate 11 mini pools in 2014. The city also granted more than \$1.9 million to nonprofit organizations working to improve parks, build community gardens, and lead recreation activities. Seattle goes even farther, annually allocating \$800,000 in CDBG funds into a parks improvement program that helped 20 parks in 2014 alone.

The situation in New Orleans is unique. Beyond its traditional CDBG distribution, the city also receives CDBG Disaster Relief funds to help with Hurricane Katrina recovery. Through this, over the past five years, New Orleans has allotted more than \$60 million toward new parks and bike paths, added tree canopy, and improved existing parks. "Good recovery starts with good investment," says William Gilchrist, New Orleans's director of place-based planning, "and parks are a good investment."

In Newark, New Jersey, The Trust for Public Land partnered with the city, Essex County, and the Ironbound Community Corporation to develop the



Newark Riverfront

Newark Riverfront Park. Located on a brownfield next to the Passaic River, the park added much-needed greenspace while linking residents for the first time to the water. \$2.6 million of the city's CDBG funds were combined with \$4 million in other public money and \$2.7 million in private money, and the project's first phase was completed in 2013.

While CDBG is still a relatively modest funding source for city parks as a whole, its low-income requirement makes it special. These, after all, are areas that arguably have the highest need for quality recreation space. They typically lack the opportunity for special taxing districts or the private philanthropy of wealthy neighbors. Thus, CDBG is emerging as a powerful tool for providing quality park space to those who need it most.

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The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come.

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