

How far to your nearest park?



Photo: Courtesy of City of Minneapolis

By Peter Harnik and Jeff Simms

How far is the nearest park from your home? Is it within your neighborhood? Is it close enough to walk to? Close enough to walk there and back? How about pushing a stroller? Or with a senior using a cane? If it's a downtown park, is it near enough to your workplace to have lunch in?

These questions may seem obvious, but surprisingly few cities ask them. Even fewer have the kind of answers that would help guide them in the development of an excellent park system.

A survey of park officials in the 50 biggest U.S. cities by The Trust for Public Land found that only 14 have a goal for the maximum distance any resident should live from his nearest park - and among the 14, the standard ranges from as little as one-eighth of a mile to as much as a mile.

"Distance from a park is a profoundly important number," says Peter Harnik, director of the Trust for Public Land's Center for City Park Excellence. "It may be more important than counting up the absolute amount of parkland in a city."

For instance, although Los Angeles ranks fifth among big cities with more than 30,000 acres of parkland, the majority of its park acres - about 56 percent - are located in the mountainous - and relatively inaccessible - central section of the city. Meanwhile, several square miles of poorer neighborhoods in the city lack any significant parks at all. Realistically, large segments of L.A.'s 3.7 million residents are too far from a park to use one easily, conveniently or frequently.

Contact:

Peter Harnik
Director, Center for City Park Excellence

The Trust for Public Land
660 Pennsylvania Ave., S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20003
(202) 543-7552
peter.harnik@tpl.org

*The Trust for Public Land
conserves land for people to enjoy
as parks, gardens, and other natural places,
ensuring livable communities
for generations to come.*

www.tpl.org

“The fact is, it’s a lot easier to count gross acreage than to figure out how far everyone is from a park,” said Harnik, “so the average person can’t rate his or her city against a norm. What’s worse, there is not even an agreed-upon standard for acceptable distance.”

One common maximum distance - selected as a goal by Cleveland, Colorado Springs, Columbus, Ohio, Nashville and Phoenix - is half a mile. Another -- selected by Austin, Fresno, Indianapolis, Jacksonville and Charlotte -- is a full mile. Why the difference? No one knows. In neither case did any of the cities’ planners have a strong justification for the choice. In fact, a good argument can be made that even a half-mile is too far.

Only when the distance goal was shorter was there a reasonable explanation. As Denver Park and Recreation Department Planner Susan Baird said, “We just thought about being able to walk for 10 or 15 minutes.”

Because of that analysis, Denver selected a much more human-scale maximum distance of six blocks. The four other cities which also have a standard that calls for city parks to be easily reachable by all residents are Long Beach, Calif. (one-quarter mile), Minneapolis (six blocks), Seattle (one-eighth of a mile in crowded portions of the city) and Chicago (one-tenth of a mile in some circumstances). Denver made its goal even more explicit - six walkable blocks, meaning that parks cannot be counted if they are on the other side of such uncrossable barriers as interstate highways, railroad tracks or unbridged stream valleys.

“In my opinion,” said Harnik, “these five cities have selected standards that relate to the needs and capabilities of their citizens. The other cities seem to have set their standards based more on their perception of political realities - mostly the lack of funding and the difficulty of acquiring the amount of land they truly need.”

In reality, regardless of the standard, no city has yet attained the goal. Denver and Minneapolis claim to be close, with perhaps only 10 percent of residents falling outside the “walkability zones,” and both cities have put a priority on creating parks in these underserved areas. In most other cities planners do not even have factual data on how close they are to accomplishing their distance-from-a-park goal.

Nevertheless, even if no city can yet claim success, there seems to be a philosophical gulf between the “idealists” -- those cities which have selected an ambitious goal of one-quarter mile or less, and the “pragmatists” -- those which have settled for something easier and cheaper, such as half a mile or more.

Is the Standard Based on Walking—or Driving?

Not only is there disagreement on distance, there is also no concurrence on how the distance is to be traveled.

In the olden days people might have “walked a mile for a Camel” cigarette, but numerous modern studies show that modern Americans are rarely willing to go that far on foot. Some are physically incapable of that distance; others may be scared to cross neighborhood boundaries; many more simply do not have the time. Lamentable as it may be, many people are too busy to devote 10 or 15 minutes to a half-mile walk and then again as much time returning. When seniors, children and pets are taken into con-

sideration, the time or capability equations become even more complex.

“Most people perceive parks as strong amenities, and more people will use them if they’re within walking distance,” said Rich Killingsworth, director of the Active Living by Design program at the University of North Carolina. “(We should) keep the (park) places close to home so people have natural settings close to where they work and live.”

Officials in cities with walkable park distance standards say that on-foot accessibility increases physical fitness and good health. Moreover, accessible city parks create important cultural circles inside which people connect with neighbors during morning playground sessions, lunchtime picnics, afternoon pick-up games, after-dinner strolls or weekend neighborhood festivals. “It’s relationships with people that make parks more than just fields, trees and playground equipment,” said Harnik.

On the other hand, maximum distances of more than a half-mile almost guarantee that most people will either skip the trip altogether, or that they will drive.

“Once you downgrade your standard so that it is one based on driving, you’ve lost the ‘community’ portion of your benefit,” said Harnik. “If someone has to get into her car - assuming she has a car -- she no longer really cares how far away the park is. One mile, two miles, three miles, it hardly matters. By then you are way outside your neighborhood. The park has become more of a distant, formal destination.”

Plus, numerous other issues enter the equation - knowing few if any of the people at the park, getting younger children and teens to the park and back again, finding places to park at the park, impacting the surrounding neighborhood with a flood of cars, devoting more of the park’s surface area to parking.

Moreover, the health value goes down. According to a forthcoming study on obesity, community design and physical activity by Lawrence D. Frank, every additional hour per day spent in a car is associated with a six percent increase in the likelihood of obesity. Conversely, each additional kilometer walked per day is associated with a 4.8 percent reduction in the likelihood of obesity. The National Household Transportation Survey also shows a nearly identical level of growth between miles driven in cars and the percentage of Americans now classified as overweight.

Austin, Tex., a city famous for plentiful quantities of parkland as well as a fitness-obsessed citizenry, exemplifies the challenges. Bowing to the realities of low population density and an auto-based culture, planners set a goal of every resident being within one mile of a park. But even that standard has been hard to meet.

“At some point you just can’t afford to do all those parks,” said Stuart Strong, division manager for planning, design and construction in the city’s parks and recreation department. “De facto, we just couldn’t keep up with a one-mile standard.”

Austin is financially unable to buy and maintain that much parkland in small parcels. (Although the city has acquired vast acreage in recent decades, most of it has consisted of large tracts of natural lands that require little or no management. As an alternative, Strong has tried to link Austin’s parks to greenway trails, encouraging biking as another transportation option.

“The money alone drives you to having your neighborhood parks at a longer distance (away),” he said. “Also, we’re kind of responding to the fact that more people will get in their car and drive to a park,” he said. He admits that the driving has sometimes had a negative impact. People living near the Barton Springs Pool in Austin’s Zilker Park

complain when swimmers try to avoid a \$3 parking fee and instead leave their cars along neighborhood streets.

Austin is not alone in not reaching its goal. An official in Indianapolis estimated that by “eyeballing” the city’s park map, about 70 percent of its residents live within a mile of the closest park. Jacksonville Planning Chief Phil Bruce was even more blunt in assessing his city’s one-mile goal: “We’re not even close.”

Seattle, on the other hand, is steadily closing its gaps, thanks to having added almost 2,000 acres of parkland in the past 35 years. In the single-family neighborhoods (which cover about 70 percent of the city), there is a half-mile standard, which is close to being met. In the 30 percent of the city which consists of so-called “urban villages” -- denser, taller, multi-family housing stock intertwined with commercial uses - Seattle has an ambitious goal of a park or mini-park no more than one-eighth of a mile from every resident. This has not yet been accomplished, but Kevin Stoops, planning manager for Seattle Parks and Recreation, estimates that about 60 percent of the “urban village” residents will have that level of service in the near future.

Measuring Park Accessibility

The technology for measuring park accessibility is not difficult. Done as far back as the 1920s using a compass and a paper map, today it’s calculated on a computer using geographic information systems (GIS). In Charlotte, N.C. (where the city and surrounding Mecklenburg County have a merged park agency), officials plot one-mile service radii on maps marked with population figures and already-existing parks. A computer determines how many people live inside each service circle; the maps make it obvious where new parkland should be acquired. In 2004, only 49 percent of Mecklenburg County’s residents live within a mile of their closest park.

Doing the acquisition itself is considerably harder. Faced often with inadequate funding, many planners concede that they’re barely making a dent in reaching the goal. In Charlotte’s inner-city areas, DeKemper has to search for vacant lots and abandoned buildings that can be bought and converted to parkland. In one case, the city had to spend \$30 million to buy up and tear down a two-block stretch of fast-food restaurants to make room for a greenway trail.

“We’re competing with developers who want to build housing, and we have a very limited budget,” DeKemper said. “A quarter-mile or a half-mile would be a nice goal, but I don’t think it’s something we would be able to achieve here.”

“We’re running to try to keep up, but subdivisions are going up,” said Michael Krosschell, principal planner for Indianapolis’ Department of Parks and Recreation. “Yes, we’ve added parkland, but it doesn’t always happen strategically.” In Indianapolis, Krosschell admits that he strives for residents to live “only” a mile from the closest park. “That one seemed attainable. A half-mile would be better, but we knew we’d never do that,” he said.

David Fisher disagrees. Fisher, long-time superintendent of the Minneapolis park system and now executive director of the newly-created Great Rivers Greenway in St. Louis, says, “We tell people, ‘You need a park in your neighborhood just like everyone

else has one.’ This is about building dreams, talking about quality of life and capturing the imagination of the citizenry.”

Fisher thinks city park officials are too timid in their outreach and have too small a vision for how parks fit into the urban picture. “Park systems suffer too quietly,” he said. “Fire departments don’t do that. My complaint has always been that we’re too good at suffering, and we just continue to lose ground. You lose out when the money gets low because people don’t think parks are a priority.”

He believes that park officials should take a more marketing-oriented approach so that they can overcome the resistance of mayors and city councils to buying land and developing parks in needy areas.

Most of the nation’s fastest-growing cities are in the Southwest and are spreading out over virgin land that is relatively cheap and obtainable for parks. Some cities in the North, including New York and Chicago, are “regrowing” and densifying after years of decline. There, says Kathy Dickhut, assistant commissioner of Chicago’s Department of Planning and Development, planners must take aggressive steps to add parkland, or what Seattle planners call “breathing space.”

“If rapid development is causing a decline in open space,” Dickhut said, “I recommend implementing an open space impact fee - a fee paid by developers when they add houses or apartments to a neighborhood -- based on clear open space goals and objectives.” (Chicago’s impact fee ranges from \$313 to \$1,253 per unit, depending on the location, and the money goes toward buying parkland.)

“Also, look at all your natural resources and implement ordinances to protect them,” Dickhut added. “We implemented a 30-foot setback for all new development along the Chicago River.”

In San Francisco, park advocates are working with the city to make its existing hilly park system more accessible to residents. “If a bus stops a steep block away from a park, maybe we could redirect the bus routes,” said Isabel Wade, executive director of the Neighborhood Parks Council.

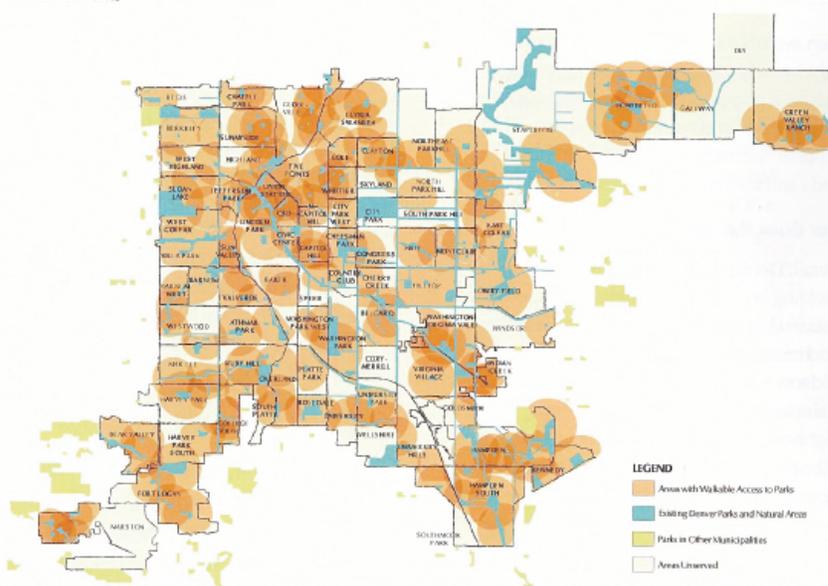
Case Studies

Denver

City planners in Denver have done an exemplary job of evenly distributing 6,200 acres of parkland among 555,000 people. Upwards of 90 percent of the city’s population lives within six “walkable” blocks of the closest park, said Susan Baird, director of community outreach and partnership for Denver Parks and Recreation.

The city solicited resident input on parks during public meetings leading up to the adoption of its most recent master plan in 2003. Focus groups - comprised mainly of non-English speaking families - clearly indicated that parents were not comfortable with their children walking (without them) to parks farther than six blocks away. Ultimately, Baird said, the planners relied on common

Walkable Parks



sense as much as anything else.

With new developments, Denver has set a higher goal - no house further than three blocks from a park. The city justifies this standard because the new development is being built more densely than in the past -- “these newer homes have virtually no yards, so it kind of balances,” Baird said -- and the closer parks help give more breathing room and play space.

Denver officials have also had success “repurposing” land for parks. One particular approach is with so-called “learning landscapes.” Using bond funding, more than 200 old, pea gravel-covered elementary and middle school grounds will be revamped with trees, gardens, artwork and playground equipment. The new landscapes remain part of the schools, but will also be accessible to the public after school hours and on weekends. With schoolyards located every half-mile, Denver officials use learning landscapes to add green space to built out neighborhoods that previously lacked adequate parks and open areas. “They really provide a large amenity in the neighborhoods. They become compelling places to go to,” Baird said. “There’s a big community component to it.”

Chicago

With more than 7,000 acres spread over more than 500 parks, Chicago Park District officials estimate that more than 90 percent of the city’s 2.9 million residents have parks within a half-mile of their homes.

Chicago’s relatively equitable park system (it gets less equitable as it moves west from the lakefront) grew out of residents’ demands - dating back 70 years - for close-to-home parks. Nineteen different park districts operated separately across the city before being consolidated in 1934. “I think that helped get this distribution across the whole city,” said Kathy Dickhut, the assistant commissioner of the city’s Department of Planning and Development. “You had separate focuses on different parts of the town and everyone wanted to make sure they had their own parks.”

In the 1990s, after years of charges by the African-American community that Chicago’s park system was inequitably distributed, the city undertook a highly detailed study which led to its “City Space” plan. That plan identifies - by community - gaps in parkland. Based on those findings, the Planning Department and the Park District now earmark impact fees paid by developers of new housing units. Since 1998, more than \$23 million in impact fees have been collected.

Like Denver, Chicago has also converted other previously used public land for park spaces. The city recently closed a 30-acre landfill that sits adjacent to an existing 20-acre park. Soon, following \$11 million of capping and development, the combined park, complete with limestone walls spotted with fossils that were discovered inside the landfill, will open to the public.

Peter Harnik is director of The Trust for Public Land’s Center for City Park Excellence. He can be contacted at peter.harnik@tpl.org. Jeff Simms was a 2004 intern at the Center and now works in TPL’s Chesapeake Field Office. They are both based in Washington, D.C.