



TRUST FOR
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LAND™

The Common Ground Framework

BUILDING COMMUNITY POWER
THROUGH PARK AND GREEN
SPACE ENGAGEMENT

APRIL 2023



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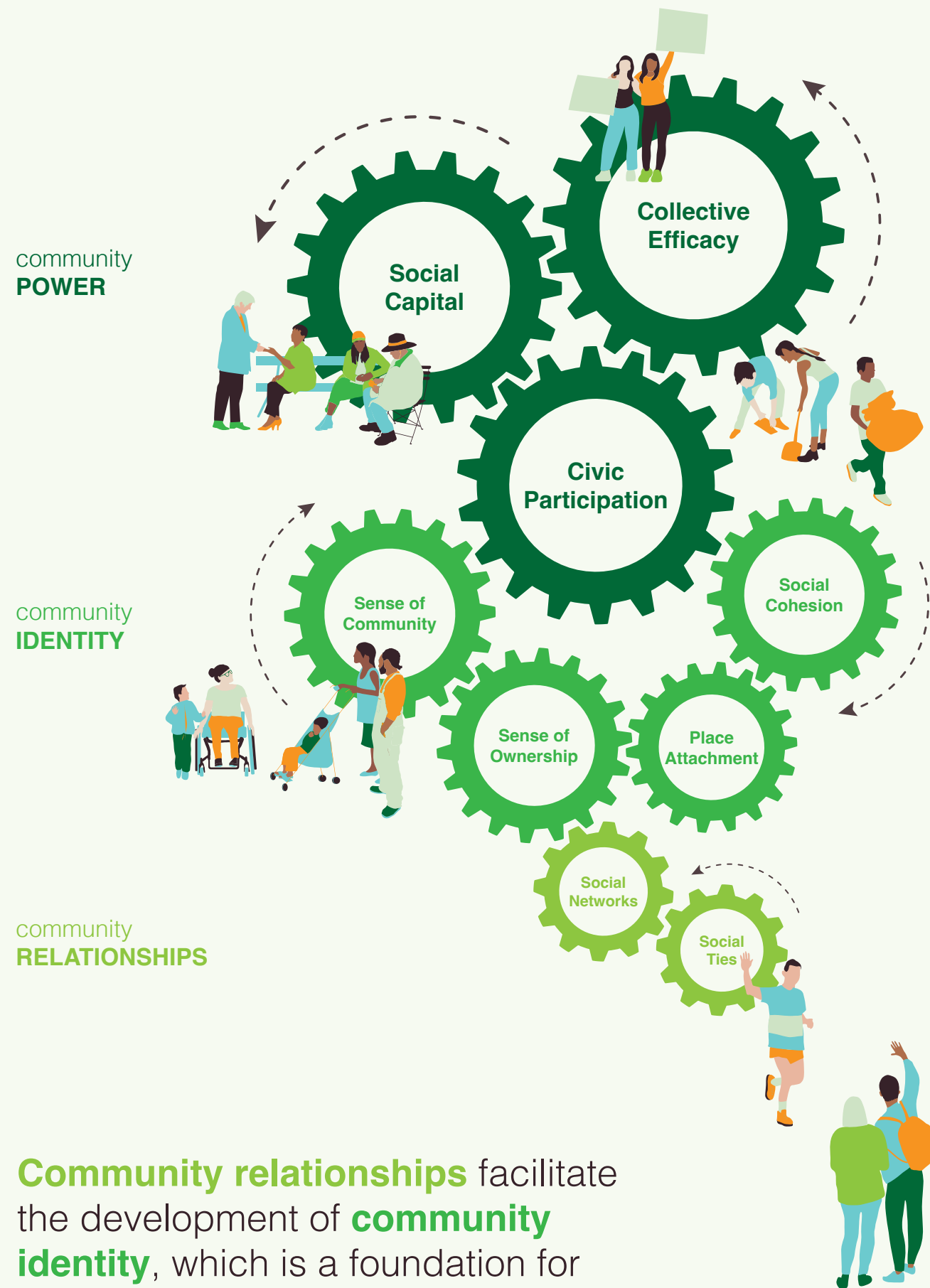
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For too long now, Americans have treated parks and green spaces as luxury amenities rather than as critical social infrastructure. In this important report, Trust for Public Land shows that parks are essential gathering places for people of all ages and groups, capable of transforming neighborhoods into communities and bridging divisions that might otherwise tear us apart. I hope every political official, city planner, and park advocate in the nation reads this. It's a blueprint for change.

— **Eric Klinenberg, Professor of Sociology at NYU and author of Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life**



Community relationships facilitate the development of **community identity**, which is a foundation for building **community power**.

Abstract

People widely appreciate high-quality parks and green spaces as public resources that promote climate, health, and economic benefits. But these spaces get less appreciation for their functions as social infrastructure. There is a need for greater understanding of how community engagement with the design and programming of such spaces can catalyze broader public engagement in civic and social issues. This paper explores the potential of parks and green spaces to increase a community’s power, particularly communities of historically marginalized and excluded groups. We present a theoretical model comprising three parts—community *relationships*, community *identity*, and community *power*—which generally operate sequentially: relationships are the foundation for building community identity, and identity facilitates the development of community power. We offer key definitions, expand on the three-part model, provide an illustrative case study and actionable strategy recommendations, and discuss evidence gaps and policy implications.



Equipo Verde and Parque Padrino members in front of Los Angeles City Hall. © Jorge Rivas

Introduction

As a country we currently face a number of interacting social crises for which parks and green spaces can be an important part of the solution. Three issues are especially salient. First, the nation is deeply polarized along political, economic, racial, and ethnic lines.¹⁻³ The divisive responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidential inauguration on January 6, 2021, are just two illustrations of this polarization. Further, only 20 percent of Americans trust the federal government to do what is right at least most of the time.⁴ Since at least the nineteenth century, park designers and advocates such as Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted have striven for peaceful socialization across social divisions.^{5,6} But exclusionary practices in park creation and management, often with discriminatory motivations,⁷ have undermined this goal. Today, though, parks and green spaces in the United States are increasingly recognized as fruitful settings for regular community interactions and activities that bridge divides.⁸

Second, the nation still struggles to reckon with its history of racism, discrimination, and white supremacy—not only the “original sin” of slavery and colonization, but also the repeated cycles of vilification, exclusion, and oppression of immigrants, indigenous people, low-income people, and members of ethnic, religious, national, and sexual minorities. Despite progress, these patterns persist. One study found that 81 percent of major metropolitan areas were more racially segregated in 2019 than they were in 1990⁹; meanwhile, hate crimes in the United States increased by 25 percent from 2010 to 2020.^{8a} Inequitable access to quality parks and green space is a concrete manifestation of this history,^{9,10} and park equity can be an integral part of advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion.^{11,12}

Third, many trends point to a fraying of the nation’s social fabric. From 1972 to 2012, the proportion of people who agreed “most people can be trusted” dropped by 28 percent.¹³ A study¹⁴ in 2018 found that one in five Americans report often or always feeling lonely or isolated, and recent studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated what some health professionals have called a “loneliness epidemic.”¹⁵ From 2019 to 2021, rates of volunteering dropped by 7 percent, the largest reported change in volunteering rates in the U.S. since tallies began in 2002.¹⁶ In hopeful contrast, parks and green space can facilitate social interactions and social connectedness, which get reflected in such outcomes as increased volunteerism.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

As these social issues are systemic and interrelated, their solutions must be equally so. Parks and other public green spaces are well positioned to be part of the solution. Based on well-established concepts and extensive field experience at Trust for Public Land, a national organization that creates parks and protects land, we propose a three-part Common Ground Framework (henceforth, “the Framework”) for parks and green space. The Framework comprises the formation of social *relationships*, the elevation of community *identity*, and the development of community *power*. These elements generally operate sequentially—relationships facilitate the development of community identity, and identity acts as a foundation for building community power—although in practice they may emerge in parallel and even reinforce each other.

This argument is hardly new. Decades of research on social capital support the interrelatedness of community relationships, identity, and power. Social capital can be defined in many ways; here we regard it as “the

resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions.”²⁰ In other words, social capital takes in both the tangible resources (say, receiving a job reference or a tip about an apartment for rent) and the intangible resources (like being able to ask a neighbor for help during a crisis) that one can access more easily as a part of a social group. This definition emphasizes resources that instigate action, whereas other commonly used definitions view social capital as the social networks and social norms themselves.²¹ We regard parks not as ends in themselves and not merely as settings for bringing people together; rather, we view them as catalysts for propelling a broad agenda of social initiatives and achieving a wide range of community goals. This concept of social capital requires focusing on the underlying policies and systemic conditions (environment, socioeconomic status, demographics, etc.) that drive social outcomes.²²

Social capital is associated with a number of significant community-wide benefits, including improved health, social resilience, civic participation, environmental volunteering, and economic well-being.^{21, 23, 24} Social capital can grow through social relationships, social cohesion, place attachment, and neighborhood attachment²⁵⁻²⁷—phenomena that this paper explores. In the following sections, we relate these phenomena to park and green space access, engagement, design, and stewardship.

Some research warns of a dark side to social capital.²⁸ High levels of social capital may bring excessive expectations of in-group participation, restriction of individual freedom and self-expression, and increased “othering” of out-group members.^{28, 29} To understand the downsides of social capital, we must understand the difference between bridging and bonding social capital. *Bridging* social capital forms between different groups, whereas bonding social capital takes place within a defined group.³⁰ The downsides of social capital occur most frequently in contexts with strong *bonding* social capital but weak bridging social capital.²⁸ Such situations can perpetuate inequity in accessing social capital, which suggests that connecting across social groups should be a priority when building social capital.²⁸

We regard parks not as ends in themselves and not merely as settings for bringing people together; rather, we view them as catalysts for propelling a broad agenda of social initiatives and achieving a wide range of community goals.

Social infrastructure is a relatively new concept that helps map social capital to the material world. We define social infrastructure as the “physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact” and the “physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops.”³¹ Parks are not just physical amenities for communities; they exemplify effective social infrastructure.³²⁻³⁴ Research points to a need to understand what makes spaces function as effective social infrastructure,³⁵ and this paper seeks to contribute new framing, case studies, and actionable strategies to that discourse.

Community engagement—defined in the next section—is integral to meeting the goals of the Framework. The mere creation or renovation of parks does not automatically advance community relationships, identity, and power. Instead, leaders in parks and green spaces must intentionally strive for authentic, consistent community engagement. Here, we build upon environmental justice theory, which calls for a balance of distributional justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice.³⁵ In the case of parks, we cannot reap their full benefits simply by achieving *distributional* justice—that is, ensuring that all have equitable access to parks. Rather, we must ensure procedural justice, so that communities without equitable access to parks and green space—which tend to be low-income and/or Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC)—become engaged in the decision-making processes that affect them. *Interactional* justice further requires that individuals of any demographic group not feel discriminated against or unwelcome in parks and green space settings.³⁶



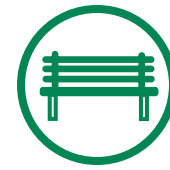
Tree planting in Dallas, TX. © Mark Graham/courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

In addition to the moral reasons for prioritizing community engagement, there are practical reasons as well. Parks and green spaces that meaningfully integrate community engagement perform better. They generate a stronger sense of community ownership and place attachment,^{25, 36} and they yield increased park use³⁷ with attendant social and health benefits. For several reasons, however, it can be difficult successfully to engage the community in park planning: planners tend not to belong to the demographic group of the community, typical park planning sessions are poorly attended by community members, and members of historically disenfranchised groups may feel unwelcome.³⁸⁻⁴⁰

This paper presents evidence that parks with equitable public engagement can help transform casual acquaintance into a socially cohesive, civically invested community. We ground this discussion in theoretical and empirical considerations, provide a case study drawn from a TPL project, propose community engagement strategies corresponding to the Framework, and close by considering outstanding challenges and questions. It is our hope that the Framework will provide practical and actionable insights for community advocates, parks agencies and practitioners, land protection organizations, and other sectors—including philanthropy and academia—that commonly support communities in developing and stewarding parks.



A community leader collects survey feedback in Chattanooga. © Photographer



Definitions



The term *community* refers to a network of individuals and groups who share a place, history, perspective, interest, and/or identity that creates a sense that they can better meet their needs together.^{41, 42} While there is much contemporary discussion of virtual communities, here we focus on the more traditional notion of community as rooted in place. Other key elements of community include that people have choice regarding whether they belong to a community (that is, they can self-identify as a member), that a community typically consists of subcommunities and therefore features a degree of variability and diversity within it, and that communities embody and are shaped by historical forces including, in many cases, legacies of privilege or systemic oppression.



A common definition of *community engagement* is “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situation to address issues affecting the well-being of those people.”⁴³ This definition presumes that an outside entity, such as an agency or organization, collaborates with a community, but it is silent about the terms of engagement—specifically, about the balance of power within that collaboration. Questions of agency and of power are central to this Framework, as we discuss below. Nor does this definition address the timing of engagement. Many park agency budgets allocate most of their community engagement spending for site programming and stewardship⁴⁴ while excluding the early planning phase, a ripe time for engaging communities in a bottom-up approach to park planning.³⁸ Lastly, this definition begs the question of which community members the process includes. Does it engage merely a “squeaky wheel,” who may be a self-appointed community leader, or does it include leaders, representatives,

and community members who reflect a representative cross section of the community and are elevated by others in the community.

In contrast, we define community engagement as the practice of building relationships with key community members in ways that earn trust, legitimize community voices, nurture grassroots collaboration and stewardship, build community capacity, and center the community in decision-making on issues that affect community members’ daily lives and environments. This definition draws from procedural justice, in which those affected by decisions participate equitably in the decision-making processes. Other common community engagement frameworks employed by the parks field and cross-sectoral partners include the IAP2 Spectrum of Community Engagement⁴⁵ and Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation,⁴⁶ which put the community engagement process on a spectrum of citizen control.



The last term, *parks*, denotes formally designated places, typically publicly owned and publicly accessible, that are set aside for recreation and enjoyment. By this definition, parks are inherently a social space where anyone can choose to meet someone outside. They often feature trees, fields, gardens, bodies of water, and other natural amenities, offering opportunities for contact with nature. They may also feature built infrastructure, such as baseball and soccer fields, basketball courts, playgrounds, and community centers. Parks are an important type of *third place*—“social settings/environments separate from home and workplace settings, which facilitate broader social interactions and serve as anchors of community life.”⁴⁷ Green space is a partially overlapping concept that includes “gardens, parks, greenways, and other areas with grass, trees, and/or shrubs,”⁴⁸ whether public or private.



Chiloquin Elementary School playground ribbon cutting ceremony on August 26, 2022.
© Spayne Martinez



Community Relationships

Community relationships are social bonds between people. Community relationships form and are nourished by such quotidian activities as attending your monthly book club, greeting your neighbor in the park, and chatting with your barber. This may sound quaint but these interactions can have a profound effect on a person's health, resilience, and feelings of personal power.²¹ Community relationships are what animate latent space into productive social infrastructure.^{31,34} That said, community relationships can occur outside the physical realm—these days, for instance, more couples meet online than through friends.⁴⁹ For the purposes of this paper, we use the term to refer to the social bonds between individuals who are likely to share physical spaces—parks, places of worship, local businesses, and so on.

We argue that cultivating and strengthening community relationships leads to reduced loneliness, greater trust among neighbors, and decreased polarization. Community relationships are measured through neighborhood social ties and social networks. Neighborhood social ties are “the glue which makes a collection of neighbors into a neighborhood,”⁵⁰ in other words, the bonds that together form a community's social networks. There are two types of social ties: strong and weak.⁵¹ Strong social ties are the formal and intimate bonds we have with friends, coworkers, and family members. Typically, they form the foundation of bonding social capital. Weak social ties—the superficial, day-to-day interactions between people—typify bridging social capital.⁵¹ *Social networks* are the web of relationships that connect people to each other in a community. They can be characterized by such attributes as the density, strength, and types of relationships that comprise them. Social networks facilitate people's exchange of resources and information—the platform for social capital.^{52,53} An

Individuals with strong social relationships have a remarkable 50 percent lower mortality rate than those with few social relationships.

effective and equitable social network will have not only weak ties that cut across various social divides but also strong intracommunity ties.⁵⁴

To decrease polarization and segregation across society as a whole, it's important that people engage in cross-group interactions and form bridging ties. *Intergroup contact*, as this type of engagement is called, refers to consistent, face-to-face interaction between members of distinct social groups (i.e., racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, or national groups).⁵⁵ Such interaction has proven to be one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice, improve group relations, and promote social inclusion—a powerful tool in times of deep polarization.⁵⁵ Because historically advantaged groups hold more power and influence in society, intergroup contact may play a role in determining whether minoritized groups succeed gain access to economic and cultural resources controlled by majority groups.⁵⁶

It seems intuitive that community relationships are good for us—humans are social creatures after all—and evidence provides strong support for that intuition.^{57,58} A meta-analysis of studies on the association between social relationships and mortality found that individuals with strong social relationships have a remarkable 50 percent lower mortality rate than those with few social relationships.⁵⁷ In other words, according to this

study, having few social ties is as strong a predictor of mortality as smoking cigarettes and a stronger predictor than being sedentary.⁵⁷

People who are part of a strong network of community relationships report feeling less depressed,⁵⁹ safer in their neighborhoods,⁶⁰ and a greater sense of belonging and security.⁶¹ Studies show that neighborhoods with stronger social networks endure and recover from natural disasters better, largely due to the good will of neighbors who act as first responders and share resources in a disaster's wake.⁶² Further, community relationships are also associated with stronger place attachment²⁶ and social cohesion,²⁷ and with greater rates of civic participation,⁶⁶ volunteering,^{21, 63} and collective efficacy.²⁷

Residents who visit parks regularly have 66 percent more social ties than those who do not visit parks.

As essential as community relationships are to health and well-being, evidence points to their decline. In late 2021, nearly two years into the COVID pandemic, a survey found that 58 percent of Americans were lonely and that loneliness disproportionately affected low-income people, young people, and people identifying as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).⁶⁴ From 1990 to 2010, there was a threefold increase in

Americans who felt they had no close confidants.⁶⁵ Americans who agree that “most people can be trusted” dropped from 46 percent in 1972 to 31.5 percent in 2018.⁶⁶ Adding to this, the pools of people to whom we feel we can be close are shrinking as political polarization increasingly isolates us from opposing views.⁶⁷ As Holt-Lundstad puts it, “Such findings suggest that despite increases in technology and globalization that would presumably foster social connections, people are becoming increasingly more socially isolated.”⁵⁷

Fortunately, public green spaces help satisfy not just our need for nature but also our need for human interaction.⁶⁸ High-quality parks are especially powerful forms of social infrastructure: they are attractive, accessible, free spaces, one of whose main appeals is the opportunity to socialize and meet people.^{17, 33} These positive conditions invite longer, more consistent visits and, thus, stronger acquaintanceship with other park visitors.¹⁷ A number of studies have found that access to green space promotes community relationships, as reflected by stronger social ties,¹⁷ reduced loneliness,⁶⁹ place attachment,⁷⁰ greater social cohesion,²⁵ and improved rates of community trust in local government.⁷¹ In one study, researchers of three inner-city parks in Manchester (U.K.) found that residents who visit parks regularly have 66 percent more social ties than those who do not visit parks.¹⁷

In addition to cultivating relationships in general, parks have great potential for cultivating cross-group interactions^{72, 73} and improving social cohesion in communities.²⁵ People sometimes come to parks specifically for the sake of intergroup contact; parkgoers across diverse ethnic groups report being interested in meeting people from different backgrounds when visiting their local park.²⁵ Even when people don't have the explicit goal of connecting across group lines, parks can offer them the opportunity to connect over shared interests (such as sports, hobbies, and recreational activities),⁴⁴ participate in community development projects (building playgrounds, painting murals, or gardening), or organize collective action around important civic and political issues.⁷⁴ What makes parks ideal for cultivating intergroup contact is the opportunity they provide, through consistent visitation, to encounter the same individuals and build relationships over time.⁵⁵

Still, parks and green space are not inherently positive spaces for social mixing. People experiencing a lack of a sense of safety stands as a major barrier to fostering community relationships. Common causes of feeling unsafe include perceived risk of crime⁷⁵ and poor physical design and maintenance.⁴⁸ People may feel also less safe when other park users make them feel unrepresented or unwelcome.⁴⁴ This most severely affects BIPOC and immigrant communities, who have been historically excluded from park systems across the U.S.^{7, 44, 73} For these groups in particular, parks and green spaces can conjure memories of generational trauma, injustice, and intergroup conflict that played out on contentious landscapes.^{7, 44, 73} Parks continue to be the scene of negative intergroup contact; and park users who experience overt discrimination, racism, and prejudice from other parkgoers or park staff are less inclined to use these spaces, thus perpetuating interactional injustice.^{76, 77} For this reason, cultivating community relationships requires an intentional focus on equity and environmental justice.⁷ Thus, when setting out to enact the Community Framework, it is essential that parks stakeholders start with *community relationships* that represent and bridge across groups if they are to reach the next stage of *community identity*.

Ensuring community engagement in the park planning, design, and stewardship processes has proved to be one mechanism for building intentional, equitable community relationships. Community engagement can enhance intergroup contact in parks by increasing sense of ownership, feeling welcome, and belonging.⁴⁴ Shared tending of the civic commons (mural painting and garden stewardship, for example) predicts greater trust among neighbors.⁷⁸ In a neighborhood experiencing green gentrification, agency-facilitated dialogue between long-term residents and newcomers helped to establish trust between the two groups.⁷⁹

Thus, engaging community members in park procedures, planning, design, and maintenance is an effective means to promote social ties and social networks. Community engagement and design strategies for promoting community relationships appear in Table 1 (see p. 27).



Community member greeting a local hospital director in Wenatchee, WA. © Wenatchee World



Schoolyard opening in New York.
© Timothy Schenck



Community Identity

An underperforming neighborhood park or littered trail can diminish a community's pride. Conversely, a green space that mirrors a community's values, cultures, and histories—through art, ecology, design, and programs—inspires the community to take greater pride, care, and ownership, for the space and for each other. Community identity refers to the ways that people identify as members of a group based on such shared attributes as geography, religion, occupation, hobby, age, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Just as individuals contain multiple identities, a community comprises diverse identities as a whole and complete place in which to live.

This paper focuses on place-based community identity: how people and groups identify with a town, neighborhood, park, block, or other physical space. Place cuts across identities. People of many races, political views, and ages can proudly identify with the same place. In this section, we discuss how parks and green space strengthen place-based identity, how parks improve when they tap into community identity, and how place-based identity can strengthen other forms of community identity.

Four concepts—social cohesion, sense of community, place attachment, and sense of ownership—bear directly on the idea of place-based identity. *Social cohesion* denotes the “degree of trust, familiarity, values, and neighborhood network ties shared among residents.”²² *Sense of community*,¹⁹ encompasses “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment together.”⁴¹ Place attachment is that “positive emotional bond that develops between groups or individuals and their environment.”²⁵ And *sense of*

Place cuts across identities. People of many races, political views, and ages can proudly identify with the same place.

ownership, finally, names “the attitudinal state that one possesses a place and has a sense that that place is ‘theirs.’”³⁶ As these elements of community identity thrive, community members feel they belong to, are taken care of, and relied upon by their community.

As measured through social cohesion, sense of community, place attachment, and sense of ownership, community identity acts as a powerful social motivator with numerous benefits. One national study conducted by the Knight Foundation and Gallup found that community attachment correlates positively with local gross domestic product (GDP) and that people with a strong sense of community identity are more open to living in a diverse community.⁸⁰ This same study found that the primary drivers of community attachment were not the “usual suspects,” such as the economy or safety, but quality-of-life indicators such as attractive public spaces and opportunities to socialize.

Community identity both stems from community relationships and becomes a foundation for building community power. It can increase feelings of safety and overall well-being.^{19, 81} Community identity inspires feelings of interpersonal trust, which in turn propels social cooperation⁸² and may help communities resist green gentrification.^{36, 83} Community identity is linked to increased social, cultural, and financial capital.^{25, 80, 84} Stronger community identity can drive

The primary drivers of community attachment were not the “usual suspects,” such as the economy or safety, but quality-of-life indicators such as attractive public spaces and opportunities to socialize.

civic participation such as voting, volunteering,⁸⁵ and seeking approval for more investment in the public realm.^{71, 85}

Much literature exists linking access to quality parks and green space with improvements in community identity.^{19, 86, 87, 48} Parks can promote community identity in two ways, corresponding to the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital. They can be places where members of a group meet and reinforce their shared identity, and they can be places where different groups encounter each other and build a shared identity.

When friends and family members gather in parks, their shared sense of belonging, place attachment, and social cohesion is enhanced.^{25, 44, 88} Parks may also serve a bonding function when groups use them to engage with art, language, and design to create narratives through which communities can relate their own stories.⁷¹

As bridging infrastructure, parks can link diverse communities that share a mutual appreciation of the park, even if their identities do not strongly overlap. One study found that positive interactions between diverse individuals in parks can promote a sense of belonging for racial and ethnic minorities.⁹¹ Conversely, negative experiences of discrimination can lead to a sense of exclusion. Not only does accessing a park increase a user’s sense of attachment to the park itself, but it can also increase overall attachment to the neighborhood and community at large.⁹¹

But community identity, like social capital, is a double-edged sword. These same sentiments of attachment and ownership may drive in-group territoriality³⁶ and

social divisions.²¹ It is worth recalling that the conservation field in the United States remains inextricably bound to a history of white supremacy and colonialism. And while this legacy is increasingly critiqued by the conservation and parks field, it is by no means eradicated.^{7, 77} This matters to community identity in urban parks for manifold reasons. Racial and ethnic discrimination inhibits marginalized communities from forming a connection to their local parks.⁷⁶ A park that feels welcoming and safe to one group may not be inclusive of more diverse usership.⁸⁹ When certain groups feel unwelcome in a place, its members may avoid that place and self-segregate, which reinforces stereotypes of who belongs.^{72, 90, 91} These feelings can be caused by negative intergroup contact, a lack of representation in park usership, and cultural insensitivity.^{91, 92} So, while a park may have the potential to serve a whole community, if there has been no intentional effort to make all community groups feel reflected and included in the space, it can do quite the opposite.

Deep community engagement in parks can maximize their function as drivers of community identity and mitigate this double-edged quality. A study of parks in Philadelphia found that engaging the community in parks planning and management had a major positive effect on the sense of ownership, leading to a greater sense of belonging among residents of color.⁷² A sense of ownership of green space is also a stepping-stone to feeling connected to the larger community.^{36, 93} Designing and programming public space with resident-led arts and culture can increase a community’s sense of belonging, social cohesion, inclusion, and trust.⁹⁴ People engaged in park stewardship are more likely to believe people get along with each other, can be trusted, and share similar values,⁴⁷ and more likely to feel stronger place attachment.⁷⁰

Such findings suggest that engaging community members in park planning, design, and maintenance effectively promotes sense of community, place attachment, and social cohesion. Table 1 (pg. 27) provides evidence-based strategies and tactics for community engagement that build community identity.



LEFT: Homecoming celebration in Nicodemus, KS. © Leah Evans; RIGHT: Community members in Chattanooga’s East Lake Park wearing traditional Guatemalan dresses. © Brooke Bragger Photography



Rally for Bears Ears and Public Land in Salt Lake City, UT. © Jay Dash



Community Power

When neighbors come together to envision and create a shared community resource such as a park, it can catalyze change far beyond the project itself. Community power refers to a community's ability to use democratic processes to develop, sustain, and perpetuate an organized base to achieve their self-determined vision, regardless of identity or status. The nature of working through a democratic process—"to set agendas, shift public discourse, influence who makes decisions, and cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual accountability"⁹⁵—requires that community power operate and be sustained not through a handful of elected officials, but through a collaboration of community groups, the private sector, nonprofits, and government agencies.

Community power can manifest in a high level of effective political engagement, active civic participation such as park stewardship groups, strong turnout to public meetings, community-led programs, and community-organized initiatives such as park cleanup days. Community power also stands as an important resource for responding to acute challenges, such as natural disasters, and to the chronic challenges this paper seeks to address—polarization, structural racism, and the fraying social fabric.⁹⁶ Moreover, community power can be a resource for addressing concurrent crises such as climate change, COVID-19, and racial injustice.

While building and sustaining community power is no easy task, a strong foundation of community relationships and community identity makes it more achievable. Social networks and social cohesion—indicators of community relationships and community identity, respectively—are necessary precursors to developing social capital, which is a primary indicator of community

power.^{22,97} In other words, resident coalitions that propel their community's agenda are products of robust community relationships and strengthened community identity. The growth and consolidation of community power are illuminated by a socioecological approach; to achieve durable and equitable social impacts, parks stakeholders need policies and programs that remove systemic barriers to accessing power and intervene on a systems- and environmental-level.^{95,96,98,99}

In addition to social capital, we focus on civic participation and collective efficacy as key indicators of community power. Civic participation covers a number of actions characteristic of a healthy democracy, including political acts such as voting and campaigning; and routine choices such as attending public meetings, volunteering, or participating in social organizations.⁷³ We view collective efficacy as "social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the community good."¹⁰⁰ Civic participation and collective efficacy signal agency—or potential agency—for a community to exercise its power. Their relevance to parks is discussed below.

The benefits of community power, as reflected in social capital, civic participation, and collective efficacy, are profound. Increased community power is associated with positive physical and mental health outcomes,^{59,101-103} lower crime rates,^{27,47} higher GDP,⁸⁰ and more equitable recovery following natural disasters.^{53,104,105} Communities with more power are less socially isolated, take greater pride in their neighborhoods, and feel an increased sense of purpose.¹⁰¹

Community power can perpetuate itself in a virtuous cycle.¹⁰⁶ Activities such as political participation (voting, campaign work, and protesting) help disenfranchised

communities consolidate, expand, and utilize their power.^{21,107} Likewise, an absence of community power can be self-perpetuating and insidious; nowhere does this dynamic play out more than in the voting booth. As of the 2020 election, constituents who are Black, Latino, Asian, or below the age of 45 are less likely to vote in national elections than those who are older or white.¹⁰⁸ Voting can determine which communities get funding for infrastructure improvements. Thus, communities with low voter turnout run the risk of receiving fewer resources to fund civic improvements such as parks.¹⁰⁹ Patterns such as these only further underscore the importance of approaching community power through a systemic and equitable lens. Iton et al. (2022) illustrate this complex interaction, saying:

Community power can protect health directly, such as when a community successfully deflects the placement of a toxic waste facility in its neighborhood, and indirectly, such as when community action fosters social support and inclusion, which can, in turn, increase trust among community members, reduce alienation, and improve mental health. In these examples, community power is an instrument, a means to an end. But community power is also fundamental, an end in and of itself. This is best illustrated by its absence. When a community feels powerless, it can lead to a collective sense of mistrust, which causes distress. This distress can lead to poorer mental and physical health.⁹⁵

Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* (2000) elevated the concern of civic life in decline, citing plummeting rates of volunteering, civic participation, membership in labor unions, and several other indicators. More than two decades later, these trends are still relevant, though they are complicated and changing. It is well-known that voter turnout in the U.S. is remarkably low compared to other democracies, with only 20 percent of city dwellers turning out for local elections.⁷¹ Societies with greater income inequality have lower social capital, social trust, and membership in social groups,¹¹⁰ which is of concern as the United States income gap continues to widen.¹¹¹ It is increasingly necessary for citizens and neighbors to take care of each other and their community assets, in response to government and

private sector institutions relegating responsibility for service provision to individuals and nonprofits.¹¹² Parks are no exception; the decline in public funding for parks has driven parks systems to rely on volunteers and volunteer organizations to fill important stewardship roles.¹¹³ While declining park budgets are regrettable, the opening for community groups represents an opportunity, not only for stewardship but also for the exercise of grassroots power that can restore public funding. As such, growing community power is not only an ethical question for the parks field, but one of financial sustainability.

Community power-building should not culminate in a single winning campaign, policy, or parks initiative and then fizzle out; rather, it should take root in community agendas.¹⁰⁶ Parks can help maintain and grow community power, bucking a broader trend of declining social capital. One study found that simply living with a park nearby can account for a 27 percent increase in social capital.¹¹⁴ But proximity does not tell the full story; perceptions matter. When people perceive that a park is a sociable space, with plenty of people and activity, then social capital increases as well.¹¹⁵ People who access parks more frequently and for longer periods feel a greater sense of social control; this in turn facilitates maintaining social order and keeping the neighborhood free of delinquent and criminal activity.⁴⁷ Parks are associated with increased civic engagement, offering a unique communal space for grassroots participation¹¹⁶ and providing a common grounds to tend with neighbors, thus promoting involvement in community efforts.⁷⁸

The true efficacy of parks for community power, though, resides in their community activation, engagement, and stewardship. Evidence shows that community power builds and endures when people across social divides work on shared goals together, and that parks are an effective setting for this dynamic to set roots.^{72,73} One evaluation of public space investments in four American cities found that sites with robust resident engagement in the early stages of planning exhibit stronger neighborhood stewardship in the long run.¹¹⁷ A best practice for cultivating civic participation is to engage young people in tending to the civic commons.¹⁰¹ Community engagement around park improvements has been leveraged to mobilize marginalized communities

against residential displacement, inequitable parks budgets, and underrepresentation in local leadership positions.^{38,95,118}

Perhaps there is no better illustration of parks-based community power than park stewardship groups, commonly referred to as “friends-of” groups. Park stewardship groups cover a wide range and include groups that focus on a community forest, a single park, or an entire city parks system and can be fully volunteer-based or an established nonprofit with paid staff.⁹⁶ For decades, environmental stewardship groups have been a rare exception to the decline in civic participation^{21,119}—perhaps, as noted above, a response to declining public funding for parks.¹²⁰ The compelling case study of Parks4All, a friends-of group in Fresno, California, documents how a BIPOC coalition of residents began with an agenda to update the city's land-use general plan with commitments to equitable investments and maintenance. The group not only won this policy but has continued advocating on the local and state level for park investments in the highest-need areas, passing a ballot measure that will raise more than \$2 billion in 30 years for Fresno parks.⁹⁵ The case study on Methow Park below provides another example of a friends-of group building community power.

Though many parks stewardship groups are informal organizations, they are vital players in a local organization

ecosystem that provides the infrastructure for community power.⁹⁵ Environmental stewardship groups help shore up their community against future disasters, including COVID-19 response, natural disasters, and residential displacement.^{34,95,96,120} Research on the impact of community-based nonprofits sheds light on the possibilities that friends groups can perform. For instance, a robust geospatial analysis of cultural institutions in Philadelphia showed that neighborhoods with high concentrations of cultural entities—which includes cultural spaces such as public parks and recreation centers, culturally engaged residents, and cultural nonprofits—exhibit greater civic participation and economic development.¹²¹ A longitudinal, nationwide analysis found that for every 10 additional organizations focusing on crime and community life, there was a 9 percent reduction in murder rates, a 6 percent reduction in violent crimes, and a 4 percent reduction in property crimes.¹²² Parks stewardship groups rank as an important and underinvestigated contributor to an ecosystem of actors that makes community power possible.

There is promising evidence that engaging community members in park procedures, planning, design, and maintenance proves effective in promoting social ties and social networks. Community engagement and design strategies for promoting community power appear in Table 1.



The 606 Grand Opening youth procession. © Adam Alexander Photography

CASE STUDY: Methow Park

Wenatchee, WA



Ballet folklorico dancers show how wide a kiosko needs to be for performances in Methow Park. © Jorge Rivas

INTRODUCTION

Wenatchee, a town of 35,000 people, sits at the confluence of the Columbia and Wenatchee Rivers in Central Washington, in a perfect ecotone for growing apples, pears, and cherries. Since the 1980s, Mexican migrant workers have flocked to Wenatchee to help in the harvest and, over the years, have settled in South Wenatchee. In contrast to the rest of the city, which is mostly white, middle class, and conservative, South Wenatchee bursts with Latino culture and heritage. Latino-owned small businesses dot the neighborhood, and the sound of mariachi music spills into the street. Despite decades of disinvestment, underrepresentation in local government, few Latino advocacy nonprofits, and a conspicuous lack of quality park space, the neighborhood has managed to support a thriving community.

In the heart of South Wenatchee is Methow Park, a 1-acre space within a 10-minute walk for more than 4,200 residents, most of whom are Latino and low-income. The park hadn't received significant renovations since the 1960s, when it served a largely white, working-class neighborhood. Until the late 2010s, Methow Park consisted of only a patchy soccer field, deteriorating playground equipment, flood lights, and a chain-link fence. These conditions encouraged vandalism and gave rise to perceptions of crime and gang activity. The park's poorly maintained condition spoke of wider neighborhood issues, including education gaps, tenuous employment opportunities, and childhood obesity.

In 2014, the City of Wenatchee invited Trust for Public Land to engage the community in renovating Methow Park. What could not have been predicted was how this effort would ultimately propel the community's larger goals of building community relationships, identity, and power.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

TPL began with traditional methods of engagement, such as hosting planning meetings in the high school gym, but these early efforts garnered poor turnout. Conversations were framed from a deficit mindset ("What's *missing* in the park?") instead of identifying and showcasing community assets. The TPL team faced many barriers: not living in Wenatchee or sharing the community's culture or language, entering the community amidst decades of distrust in the local government, and bucking a history of plans being overpromised and underdelivered. In addition, many residents were undocumented and wary of outsiders, so why would they trust TPL?

To build trust with the community, TPL's program manager, Cary Simmons, made the three-hour drive from Seattle at least once a week to spend time in the neighborhood. He'd chat with the bodega owner, get a coffee with some neighbors, join a popular exercise class, and so on. His purpose was not to talk about the park, but to **learn more about the community as a whole and to form neighborhood connections**. "I started seeing that community engagement wasn't about the park, but the park was a delivery mechanism," Simmons explains.

TPL **hired two community organizers**—Misael Fajardo-Perez, a minister, and Terry Valdez, an artist—and paid them \$25/hour on a flexible basis to help connect TPL with the community. At the organizers' recommendation, Simmons attended the **Northwest Mariachi Festival** held in Wenatchee every year, an event that draws thousands of attendees from across the region. Simmons staffed a TPL table, on which early conceptual drawings of the park were displayed, and conducted hands-on feedback activities. Serendipity contributed to success; next to TPL's table was a voter registration booth manned by Teresa Zepeda, a woman who lived close to Methow Park and had spent years advocating for her community and cultivating a network of trusted neighbors. "She saw me fumbling to engage attendees because I couldn't speak Spanish and came over and helped me explain to local residents what was going on at the park," says Simmons. From there on, **Zepeda became one of the most essential community leaders** involved in Methow Park.

Zepeda started getting her community involved, including her own daughter, Teresa "Teresita" Bendito, a college student who initially helped translate for her mom. Bendito soon realized there must have been many others like her mom who wanted to be involved in the park but who didn't have a bilingual child to **provide a cultural and language bridge**. TPL later hired Bendito as a summer intern to **run programming at the park five days a week**. The park quickly became a place for neighbors to share their skills with others in the community, such as piñata design, tamale making, and folkloric dancing. "**We were connecting the community to the park and to themselves,**" says Bendito.

Community engagement spilled out to the whole neighborhood. TPL joined events such as health fairs, school events and, worship services, and **paid community members to lead engaging activities** such as Aztec dancing and *papel picado* (perforated paper), both of which are **treasured forms of Mexican arts and crafts**. To encourage engagement at

 **COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS**

 **COMMUNITY IDENTITY**

 **COMMUNITY POWER**



Spend time unstructured time in the community



Hire community organizers



Spend time at existing community events



Build trust with residents who have close ties to the community



Communicate in accessible languages



Activate the site with consistent programming



Relationships outcome: Social ties



Identify and invest in community skills and assets



Intentionally organize around arts and culture

- 
 Compensate community members for their time and wisdom
- 
 Tell the story of the community through design elements
- 
 Include community members in strategic decision-making
- 
 Identity outcome: Place attachment

these events, **TPL gave participants tokens of compensation** such as free diapers for parents, raffle tickets for a gift card, or back-to-school supplies for kids. TPL funded these giveaways through both its budget and community partners' resources. This strategy of supporting community events yielded rich feedback on the park's amenities and established a foundation of trust and willingness to engage in the project.

As trust between TPL and the community grew, community input on the park's redesign came flooding in. TPL developed many engagement activities—frequently led by Fajardo-Perez, Valdez, Bendito and Zepeda—including participatory design exercises, a park needs-assessment survey, and focus groups. From this, an ambitious park design emerged that included a soccer field, a splash pad, a playground, picnic tables, and a pavilion.

At the heart of the design was the *kiosko*, a pavilion common in Mexican town centers, where the community imagined mariachi performances, Zumba classes, and *ballet folklórico* dance performances.

To some, this design seemed impossible to accommodate on just one acre and with the available budget. Even Simmons, who encouraged dreaming big, said the *kiosko* should be scaled back to meet “standard” dimensions of a neighborhood park pavilion. Zepeda and Bendito brought a group of folkloric ballet dancers in their colorful, floor-length dresses to the park to show Simmons that, indeed, the *kiosko* needed to be bigger than a standard pavilion to **accommodate the uses the community envisioned**. The full-size *kiosko* stuck, and when partners revealed the final park master plan to the community, a community member who runs a local childcare business told Simmons emotionally, **“I guess the park is really happening?”**



Teresa Bendito leading a community engagement event in Methow Park. © Steven G .Gnam







COMMUNITY OUTCOMES

The engagement process was not without its roadblocks. The initial construction estimate came back almost \$1 million over budget. With the project at risk of losing the *kiosko*, Zepeda and Bendito helped form a **park stewardship group** in 2018, calling it Parque Padrinos, or Godparents of the Park. The Padrinos, which at this point was a dozen Latina neighbors, **attended their first city council meeting** to make the case for approving the park design and budget. With additional neighbors and local children joining the advocacy effort, the Padrinos won their *kiosko*.

Even with the park design approved, the work of the Padrinos had just begun. Within a few years, the group had grown to more than 1,000 members and had served on the front lines to represent interests for Wenatchee's Latino community. **TPL helped the Padrinos apply** for technical assistance and funding from the Latino Community Fund to run a voter drive for the 2018 elections, which led to a **300 percent increase in Latino voter turnout**.

The fully renovated Methow Park opened to the community in January 2020, just two months before the COVID-19 pandemic sent the world into full lockdown. As impressive as the Padrinos' park and political advocacy efforts were, the group was proudest of its ability to **support its community through the COVID-19 crisis**. Initial COVID infection and death rates ran disproportionately high among Latinos; neighbors in South Wenatchee still had to go work in the orchards and return to homes with extended family sharing tight quarters, thus increasing the risk of infection. In response, leaders from the Padrinos received \$200,000 in local hospital funding to lead a regional vaccine equity initiative to reach the Latino and migrant farmworker communities with culturally relevant and accessible resources. The Padrinos held more than 100 vaccination pop-ups and ultimately vaccinated more than 3,000 community members. “All that relationship and trust building helped us when we really needed it, to get through something that affected the whole world,” says Bendito. One Parque Padrino leading the effort, Beatriz Elias, says that before she joined the Padrinos, she would have been “too embarrassed” to pass out masks or encourage her neighbors to receive the vaccine. Now, there's a brick in the park with her name on it, and she says, **“I now see my power in that brick—my legacy.”**

Soon after Methow Park park was reborn, that legacy was coming alive there every day. “When I step into the park now, I feel really joyful and get a sense of accomplishment,” says Bendito. “When I see neighbors and new faces at the park, it's a reminder that all the work was worth it.” She believes that even though a visitor may not see all the organizing it took to bring about the park her community has today, the families and local leaders who worked so hard “can see and point out to their families that they left a mark there and that they contributed.” By using the community engagement process as a catalyst—rather than just a means to renovate a park—the residents of South Wenatchee have been able to strengthen their community relationships, organize around a sense of community identity, and leverage community power in ways that will serve them for years to come.

- 
 Support the establishment of park stewardship groups
- 
 Transfer knowledge on navigating public processes
- 
 Train community in fund raising
- 
 Power outcome: Increased civic participation.
- 
 Power outcome: Greater collective efficacy
- 
 Identity outcome: Increased community pride



The Story Mill Community Park hosts a campaign celebration dinner in Bozeman, MT, on July 18, 2019. © Bruce Muhlbradt

Community Engagement Strategies

The following table outlines engagement strategies that Trust for Public Land staff and our community partners commonly implement as part of our park development, schoolyard renovation, trail building, and land conservation projects. Specific implementation tactics and expected social infrastructure outcomes accompany each strategy. Letter codes denote the correlated section(s) of the Common Ground Framework—relationships, identity, and/or power—for each strategy. This list is not exhaustive, and the strategies listed here should be tailored to complement local customs, norms, and cultural identities.

TABLE 1: TPL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES





STRATEGY	TACTICS	OUTCOME	 RELATION- IDENTITY POWER SHIPS
Structure engagement to be active and collaborative, rather than passive and individual-oriented ¹²³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complement individual engagements such as surveys with more interactive activities, such as community gardening or mural painting Intentionally set up small groups to have mixed representation across demographics 	Greater trust among participants and willingness to continue working together	
Identify and invest in community leaders and organizations that have close ties to the community ^{77, 124-131}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hire community organizers with deep relationships in the community and who represent specific groups of interest Partner with and compensate local nonprofits and community groups that have trust with the community Hire facilitators from the community to bridge communications between decision-makers and the community 	Access to deep community knowledge and connections that outside organizations do not have; greater trust with underrepresented groups and identities; more resources and capacity stay in the community	
Spend time and resources on existing community touchpoints and events ¹³¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up tables at community events such as school fairs and cultural festivals Patronize neighborhood institutions such as libraries, restaurants, grocery stores, and salons 	Trust with community members in non-threatening environments and increased participation in park agency-led events	

TABLE 1: TPL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES







STRATEGY	TACTICS	OUTCOME	RELATION- IDENTITY POWER SHIPS
Activate the site with consistent, inclusive programming led by community members ^{130, 132}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host fun events such as potlucks, art classes, or exercise classes that de-center data gathering and prioritize relationship building Give small grants to community members to activate the site with events 	Site is established as a community asset and builds trust with the community	
Identify and mitigate barriers to community participation such as timing and finances ^{129, 131, 133}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide food, childcare, transportation and, if possible, participation stipends Schedule events that do not conflict with hours of school, work, worship. Hold multiple events so that groups who have conflicting schedules can still be included 	Increased ability for community members to engage fully; park agencies and recipients are on a more even, personal level	
Compensate communities for their time and expertise ^{129, 134-137}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create policies that allow for providing cash and/or gift cards for community participation in focus groups, surveys, meeting attendance, and other contact points In addition to financial compensation, consider bringing small gifts like a cup of coffee or home goods (diapers are especially popular giveaways) as a sign of respect Pass through funds to nonprofits that have systems in place to administer participation compensation 	Community members' time and expertise is respected and helps jump-start broader capacity-building efforts	 
Understand what issues are top of mind for the community and connect them with relevant resources ^{77, 132}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leverage parks and recreation sites as frontline resources in times of urgency, such as distributing COVID PPE or expediting permits for protest Leverage contacts, such as within local agencies, to connect the community with available resources and initiatives 	Ensures the park project is relevant to broader community needs; builds trust between community and parks agency; starts to support the build-out of community coalitions around specific issues	 

TABLE 1: TPL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES









STRATEGY	TACTICS	OUTCOME	RELATION- IDENTITY POWER SHIPS
Map out assets and barriers within the community, with a lens to representing various experiences in the community ^{124, 132}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and celebrate as-sets and talents of community members that can be celebrated and employed in broader engagement initiatives Acknowledge the negative experiences communities have had with government agencies and other key partners Identify places of gathering in which various community groups feel comfortable, such as schools, places of worship, local restaurants 	Old wounds begin to heal, building trust between agency and community; captures a more complete picture of the local culture	 
Balance participation across key identities to avoid the "squeaky wheel" effect ¹²³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit similar numbers of people from key groups Ensure groups have an even entry to participation by communicating in appropriate languages and messaging 	Data-informed decisions on park design and programming will accurately represent a diversity of perspectives	 
Communicate in accessible, contextualized language and platforms ⁷⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide interpretation services Avoid jargon and technical language Partner with trusted media outlets that reach underrepresented communities (i.e., Spanish-speaking radio station) 	Communities feel included and welcome to the table; ensures equitable and accurate representation of community perspectives	
Intentionally organize communities around their identity and culture ^{130, 138}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hire community leaders from a range of backgrounds as organizers and outreach specialists Provide youth with stipends to reach their peers Employ local artists with underrepresented perspectives to engage the community in park design and programming, such as participatory mural design 	Working with individuals who "look like" or share the values of a community increases trust and willingness to engage with the project	  

TABLE 1: TPL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

STRATEGY	TACTICS	OUTCOME	RELATION- IDENTITY POWER SHIPS
Meet communities in settings of cultural familiarity ^{132, 139}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be invited to table at community events such as church services, art openings, or school fairs to meet community members in a comfortable setting Conduct targeted outreach such as door-knocking and media campaigns on bilingual radio stations 	Reaches targeted audiences where they are comfortable to express themselves and lends authentic feedback on park procedures	
Prioritize retention of the community's unique history and culture, especially those that typically go untold ¹²⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include cultural placemaking and place keeping elements in park design and programming Provide indigenous land acknowledgements in communications and signage 	Increases welcomeness for identities represented and tells an honest story of the community to visitors	
Support and fund establishment of stewardship groups ^{124, 130, 139}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train stewardship groups in capacities that agencies have, such as grant applications, public speaking, and data collection Connect stewardship groups to one another to exchange peer knowledge Fund stewardship groups to host continuous engagement events in the neighborhood 	Ensures human resources and capacity in communities remain after project and funding end; increases community ownership through capacity building	
Introduce community members to cross-sectoral partners that can build momentum beyond park project scope ^{77, 135, 139}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite community members to meetings with partners and funders Create or share a directory of city services and contacts Inform neighbors of other local initiatives that affect their community Use trust built in the engagement process to facilitate dialogue between community and officials with whom the community wants to improve relationships, such as the police department 	Forms connections with other institutions with power, which helps transition ownership of parks and green spaces to the community	
Include community members in strategic decision-making ^{77, 124}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-create a theory of change as part of master planning processes Conduct a participatory budgeting process 	Helps ensure accountability to the community throughout the process; creates a culture of trust and reciprocity	

TABLE 1: TPL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

STRATEGY	TACTICS	OUTCOME	RELATION- IDENTITY POWER SHIPS
Plan for projects to engage the same community members over the course of multiple meetings ^{123, 140}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan events at reliable, recurring intervals to ensure participants are available Keep participant groups consistent throughout projects so the same members have a chance to strengthen relationships over time 	Increases community ownership of public space and project; trust among park advocates	
Transfer knowledge on how to navigate public funding and programming directly to community advocates ⁹⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train community members in advocating in city council meetings Skill-building workshops in community spaces Invite community advocates to facilitate partner meetings collaboratively 	Community leaders gain the skills and confidence to carry out change on their terms	



Neighbors paint murals for Westwood Via Verde project in Denver, CO. © F4D Studio



Students in Boston during a participatory design session. © Erin Clark

Discussion and Conclusion

Parks and green spaces are America's common ground. As social infrastructure, they have the potential to ease pressing challenges of polarization, racism, and mistrust. Bold investments in community organizing and capacity-building are called for in the park and green space sector, not only to advance time-limited political or green space goals, but also to heal national divides.

Parks serve as collective spaces in which residents can develop community relationships across social divides, and cultivate a shared identity around the space and with each other. With strong relationships and a shared identity as a foundation, parks can spark profound and far-reaching changes in a community's power landscape. As illustrated above in the Methow Park case study, an investment in high quality park engagement and organizing can leverage parks as an effective platform for learning civic skills such as building organizations, listening to different perspectives, forging consensus, and understanding how to negotiate with authorities. This can give people a sense of agency and belief in their ability to influence and reform democratic institutions, which is especially important during a time of low trust and engagement in those institutions.

To build community relationships, identity, and power, park practitioners and philanthropies must work toward authentic methods of community engagement that prioritize sharing power between traditional decision-makers and those community members who represent local wisdom, expertise, and the interests of historically marginalized populations.

Indicators of community relationships, identity, and power are both measurable and intrinsically interconnected. Elements of community relationships,

namely social ties and social networks, help drive an increase in community identity, as reflected by social cohesion, place attachment, sense of community, and sense of ownership.²⁵⁻²⁷ These outcomes serve to build community power, as reflected in civic participation, collective efficacy, and social capital. We offer this Framework for building relationships, identity, and community power within green space settings as an entry point for practitioners, funders, and researchers, in the hope that it will accelerate their attention, understanding, and investment in social connection and power shifting. To enact the Framework, we provide recommendations for community engagement strategies and tactics in Table 1, along with expected social infrastructure outcomes those efforts may bring.

The year 2020 showed starkly—especially against the backdrop of the COVID pandemic, the challenges to the legitimacy of the 2020 election, and the continued police violence against Black lives—the urgent need for social connection and infrastructure. But in the years since 2020, opportunities to build social infrastructure have emerged, in the form of unprecedented legislation and funding to support large-scale infrastructure initiatives and investment in communities historically neglected by government support. These include the Great American Outdoors Act of 2020, the American Rescue Plan of 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, and the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022. This investment in nearly all corners of the nation's physical and social infrastructure sets the stage for cultivating place-based relationships, identity, and power, and harvesting the considerable social benefits that can follow.

Progress may be promoted through evidence generation; education and training; and policy advocacy.

EVIDENCE GENERATION

This paper highlights the role of parks and greenspace as social infrastructure, citing considerable available evidence. But many unanswered questions remain, and more evidence is needed on the role of public spaces in advancing depolarization, racial justice, and trust. How are relationships most effectively cultivated, especially across cultural divides? What interventions most effectively build community identity? How is community power best measured?

Several challenges exist in advancing this research. First, much parks research has focused on concrete factors such as tree canopy and budgets; a broader agenda focusing on social factors is needed. This implies a broadened paradigm; concrete outcomes studied in health and environmental research, such as disease rates or tree canopy cover, differ from the emotional and psychological changes that accompany positive community transformation.⁹⁵ Second, there is little consensus on definitions and measurements of key factors, such as community identity. Third, many of these factors are difficult to measure.¹⁰⁶



Students in Newark, NJ, on an outdoor field trip. © Heidi Cohen

We recommend several approaches to strengthening the evidence base. First, the park research community should broaden its view to embrace social questions including relationships, identity, and power in the context of parks. Second, the research community should work toward standard definitions of key variables such as community engagement and power; this will require cross-disciplinary collaboration involving social scientists, parks and recreation professionals, epidemiologists, and others. Core concepts discussed in this paper—social capital, civic participation, and collective efficacy—can be operationalized in such indicators as voter turnout, policy enactment, nonprofit organization density, extent of collective decision-making, sense of social control, neighborhood turnover, and housing equity. But considerable care is needed in selecting measures. This leads to a third recommendation: that researchers commit to the co-creation of research questions, and the collaborative conduct of research, through authentic community partnerships. Finally, researchers should fully utilize both qualitative and quantitative data as appropriate.¹³³

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Public space practitioners—including urban planners, architects, real estate professionals, parks and recreation professionals, and landscape architects—encounter little or nothing in their training that would spur them to consider the social infrastructure and community engagement outcomes of planning, design, and construction activities. Most undergraduate and graduate curricula in these fields lack even a single required course on strategies for relationship building, identity representation, and/or power building. As a result, the public space practitioner work force is insufficiently prepared to grapple with the procedural inequities inherent in physical park spaces and the social processes behind their planning, design, construction, and stewardship. Rigorous curricular content for the design professions—specifically, coursework that bridges the academic/community divide—could provide opportunities for students and practitioners to embed social principles into their work.

Certification for community engagement processes, like LEED certification for the building trades, could help normalize this approach in professional practice.

POLICY ADVOCACY

Well-crafted policies could substantially advance the role of parks as social infrastructure, delivering community relationships, identity, and power. Successful policies would codify and incentivize best practices, and steer municipal, state, and federal funding for park, recreation, and public spaces. Policies should be flexible enough to accommodate local realities; they should be place-based, dynamic, and contextual to the community. Policy recommendations include:

- Prioritize cross-sector collaboration that enables local resident experts and their allies to address multiple community challenges in coordination (housing, economic development, education, public space). Such collaboration is especially important at the municipal level; city departments of parks and recreation, transportation, health, housing, water, public safety, and others should work across silos to support communities and address community challenges holistically.
- Increase investment in community human capital such as organizers, grassroots nonprofits, and other community advocates for the role they can play in leveraging public space investments to deliver durable, effective social outcomes. While such investments often take a back seat to capital investments such as land acquisition and renovation, they are vitally important and should be prioritized.
- Utilize available mechanisms to promulgate evidence-based community engagement standards and best practices. For example, such content should be included in state comprehensive outdoor recreation plans (SCORPs) and publicly funded local park master plans, and these perspectives should be represented in the membership of state and local park, planning, and recreation citizen advisory boards.

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