TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND®

LOS ANGELES PARKSCORE®
SPECIAL REPORT

Creating L.A.'s Park Legacy

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Ribbon cutting and grand opening ceremony for the Castellanos schoolyard playground in Los Angeles, CA. © Joe Sorrentino; COVER: Watching the sunrise from Runyon Canyon in the Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles, CA. © Darcy Kiefel

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Executive Summary

The Red Car property is a 10-acre, mile-long, former Red Car Trolley right of way in Silver Lake that has been used like a park and recreational trial since the Red Car Trolley tracks were removed in 1955, Los Angeles, CA. © Darcy Kiefel

Each year, Trust for Public Land ranks the park systems of the 100 most populous U.S. cities in its ParkScore® index. Over the past five years, Los Angeles has fallen from the middle of the pack (49th) to the bottom (90th). The precipitous decline can be traced back to a century of leadership that failed to prioritize adequate or equitable park investments.

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated why parks are so critical for societal health and wellbeing. They were among the precious few places where people could safely gather and spend time outside their homes. They're also among the few settings free from partisan divide. According to TPL research, a plurality of Americans wish they'd spent even more time outdoors last year than anywhere else, including home, place of worship, or the gym. For most Americans, local parks are the nearest "outdoors." In the five years since the pandemic began, big cities across the country have doubled down on their park systems, in many cases increasing and accelerating their investments in these need-to-have resources. Los Angeles wasn't among them.

The good news is that the city is conducting its first parks needs assessment in more than 15 years, which will help identify areas, geographies, and opportunities for strategic improvement. We've reviewed and analyzed more than a decade of ParkScore data to better understand how L.A.'s history of disinvestment has manifested in its low scores, especially compared to its peers, and to offer informed recommendations.

As the city prepares to share the findings of its parks needs assessment with the community, these recommendations can help inform a roadmap for recovery. We believe the insights in this report can help put L.A. on track to climb the ParkScore ranks and develop a world-class park system befitting a world-class city.

Key Challenges

- **Access Gap: Over 1.5 million Angelenos lack a close-to-home green space.** Los Angeles ranks near the bottom of big-city park systems in California when it comes to access. For a hundred years, the city has viewed and treated its parks as nice-to-have amenities rather than must-have infrastructure. It's one of only five of the country's 100 biggest cities that haven't updated their park system master plan this century.
- **Inequity: While the city's large natural areas are a strength for L.A.'s overall park acreage scores, they don't serve everyone.** They're concentrated and not well dispersed, with their locations running along racial and economic lines. Residents in low-income parts of the city and in neighborhoods of color have 70–80 percent less nearby park space than those in predominantly white and high-income neighborhoods.
- **Flat Investment: The city is getting lapped by its peers.** Los Angeles's collective park investment over the past five years has remained relatively flat, while the average big city has increased its annual park investment by 50 percent. What's more, Proposition K, one of the city's primary park funding sources, will sunset in 2026–2027.

Strategic Opportunities

- **Open schoolyards to the public:** There are at least 600 public schools across the city with: playgrounds, basketball courts, walking/running tracks, and/or green space. Simply opening these sites for community use after school hours and on weekends would significantly reduce the current access gap, slashing the number of people without a close-home-park from 1.5 million to 500,000. For perspective, had those spaces been open, Los Angeles would have ranked 55th in this year's ParkScore index.
- **Scale the city's dedicated funding mechanisms:** With Proposition K expiring, the city will need, at the very least, a replacement stream of money for parks maintenance and creation. That stream will need to be bigger and stronger—and/or combined with other sources of money—to address the city's investment deficit and put L.A. on track to begin climbing. Seven of the nation's top 10 big-city park systems have dedicated funding mechanisms, such as portions of property taxes, for their parks. By leveraging its parks needs assessment and the recommendations in this report, L.A. can make a strong case with voters for funding must-have city park infrastructure. Not doing so would be a missed opportunity.
- **Pursue creative partnerships to increase equitable access:** Improving L.A.'s portfolio of public spaces shouldn't rest solely on the city's recreation and parks department, especially since half of them are already managed by other agencies. Leaders can turn to creative partnerships with other land management agencies to ensure every person in the city has quality nearby park space. One of the untapped strengths of L.A.'s park system is its wide range of public land management agencies. Can city leaders collaborate with these agencies to transform even more public land into active and natural park spaces?

Introduction

A man holds up his child with a backdrop of Cahuenga Peak in Los Angeles. Fun Fact: Trust for Public Land helped preserve the land around the iconic Hollywood sign in 2010. © Annie Bang

Los Angeles, one of the world's great cities and host of the upcoming 2028 Olympics, has one of the most challenged big-city park systems in America. Over the past five years, the City of Los Angeles has plummeted from 49th to 90th in Trust for Public Land's annual ParkScore ranking of the 100 largest cities in the country.

The cause? A century of disinvestment.

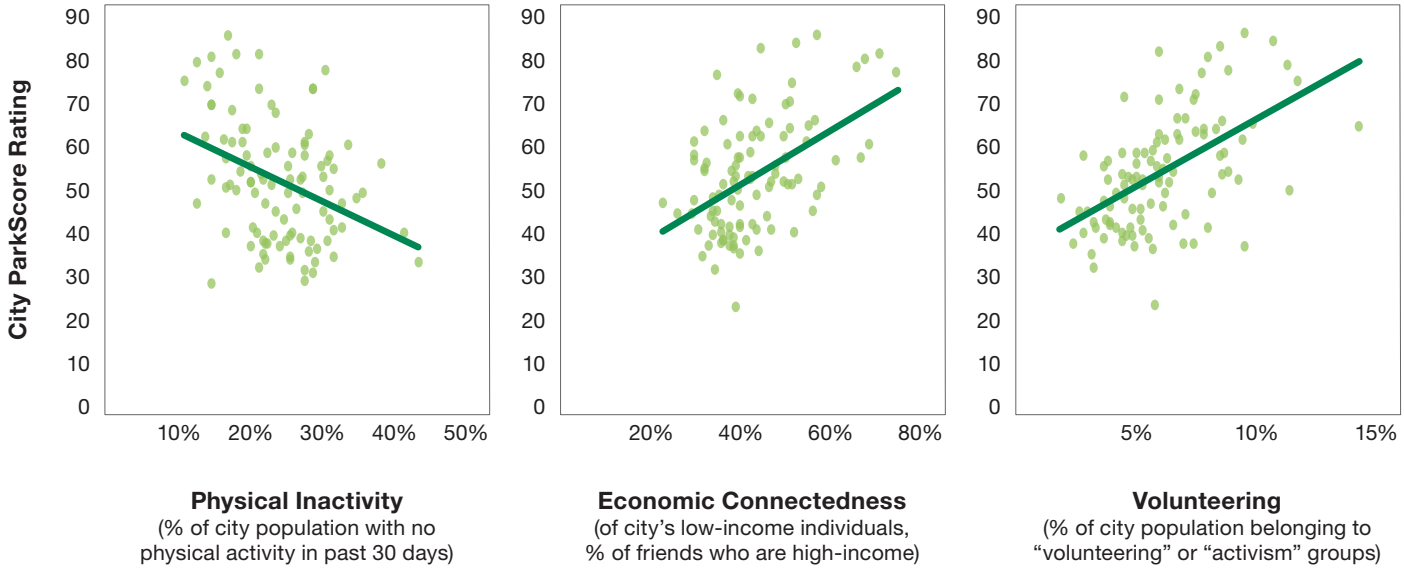
The results? Over 1.5 million Angelenos whose city is depicted with images of lush, rolling ridgelines and sparkling ocean waves yet who lack even a nature path, shaded park, or community swimming pool within a 10-minute walk from home. For one in three residents of the city, nature might be in sight, but it's profoundly out of reach.

From our research, we know that having a top-ranked park system correlates with a city's health, social cohesion, and civic engagement (Figure 1).

From our experience, we know L.A.'s low ParkScore rank contradicts the city's potential. Trust for Public Land (TPL) has partnered with community groups, park conservancies, council districts, L.A. County, and the L.A. Recreation and Parks Department for decades to achieve greater green-space equity.

FIGURE 1. TOP-RANKED PARKSCORE CITIES ARE MORE ACTIVE, MORE CONNECTED, AND HAVE MORE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Relative to the bottom 25 ParkScore cities, the top 25 ParkScore cities have 19% lower rates of physical inactivity, 26% more friendships between people of different income groups ("economic connectedness"), and 61% more volunteers per capita.



Data source: *Trust for Public Land analysis of the ParkScore Index, Social Capital Atlas, and CDC PLACES data.*
Physical inactivity analysis reflects 2023 ParkScore Index rankings; Economic Connectedness and Volunteer reflecting 2024 ParkScore Index rankings.

Nearly 15 years ago, TPL began working with residents of the Watts neighborhood and the city's department of recreation and parks to transform a vacant lot into a beautiful park with significant tree canopy, native plants, interactive play equipment, and picnic and gathering areas. Watts Serenity Park, which opened in 2015, provides quality outdoor space within a 10-minute walk of about 11,000 people, and it has helped fill the access gap for an historically underserved community.

It's in this spirit of possibility—as L.A. undertakes an ambitious and dire park needs assessment—that we set out to learn from other large cities' success. In analyzing decades of ParkScore data, three main culprits emerged that explain L.A.'s low rankings.

1. Too many Angelenos lack a close-to-home park.
2. The city's nature-rich park acreage is concentrated in the whitest and wealthiest neighborhoods.
3. The city is falling behind its big-city peers in terms of park investment.

In exploring case studies from other large cities, three promising opportunities arise that could help L.A. reverse its trajectory.

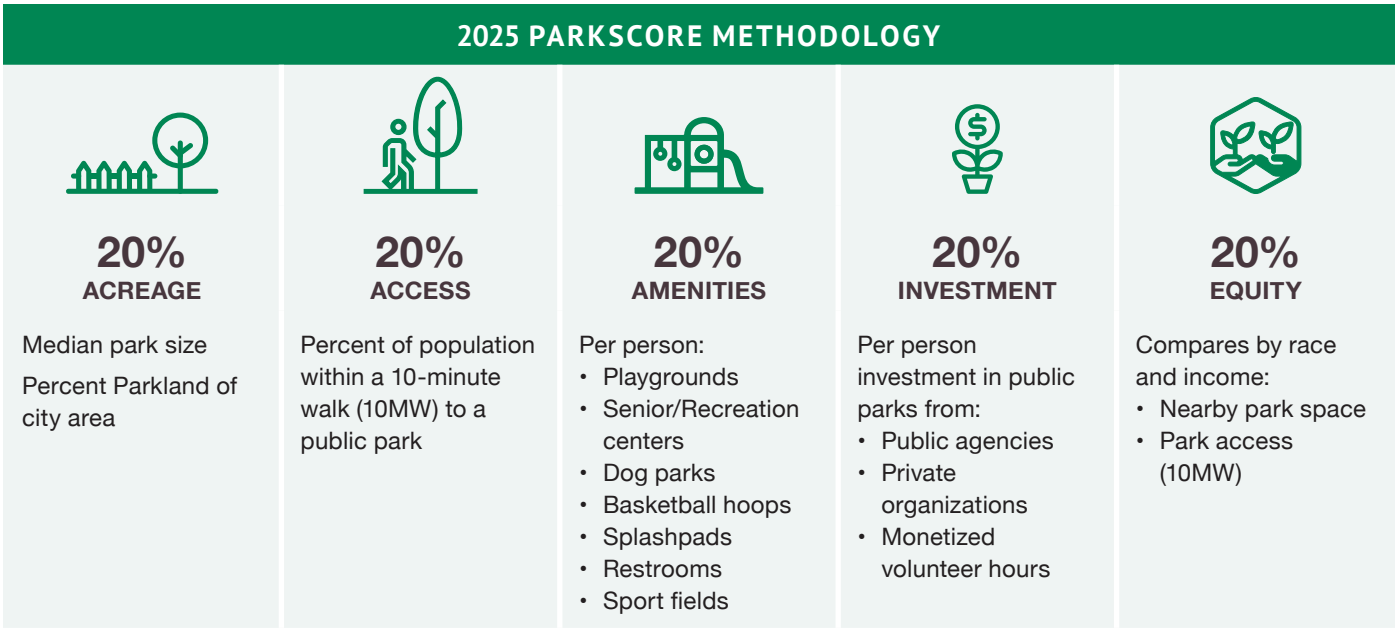
1. Opening schoolyards for community use after school hours.
2. Joining forces with other land management agencies to make budgets go further to transform under-utilized public lands into active, natural park spaces.
3. Renewing and/or expanding dedicated funding sources for parks.

Methodology

Children playing soccer at Watts Serenity Park in Los Angeles, CA. © Annie Bang

The findings in this report are primarily derived from an analysis of Trust for Public Land's ParkScore index, a ranking of the 100 most populous U.S. cities on five categories reflective of an excellent park system: acreage, access, amenities, investment, and equity (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. 2025 ParkScore Methodology



The ParkScore index emerged out of collaborative discussions with national park and recreation experts in the early 2000s about the elements of an excellent city park system. Trust for Public Land has published the index annually since 2012. It's widely used by practitioners, and researchers have found a city's ParkScore rating is associated with more physical activity, better mental health, more social connections between people of different income groups, more volunteering, and more civic organizations.

The ParkScore index is best used to identify strengths and weaknesses relative to other city park systems at the system scale (as opposed to what makes any single park successful). For this report, we compare Los Angeles with the other 99 biggest U.S. cities as well as with the 16 other California cities in the index.

To determine a city's ParkScore rating, we assign points for 15 measures across the five categories on a relative basis, based on how a city compares to the other 99 cities. The index aggregates data across all public and private organizations managing or supporting publicly accessible parks in the given city. For more information and to see this year's rankings, visit tpl.org/parkscore.

For each measure in the ParkScore index, cities are awarded points on a scale of 1 to 100 (100 is high; 1 is low), which loosely translate to their overall percentile. So a score of 33 would suggest a city is in the 33rd percentile nationally on that measure.

For comparisons against California cities, we simply compare Los Angeles's overall rank on each measure—e.g., it has the fifth-lowest score of any city in California. There are regional variations in park systems; comparing against California peers allows for some control over those regional factors when identifying strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to identifying relative strengths and weaknesses, we identify several best practices from the cities that have improved the most in recent years on key ParkScore metrics and share insights from those cities here. And finally, we share several stories of community leaders (and TPL partners) in Los Angeles who give us hope that the next 100 years can be different than the last.

Challenges

A man sits on a concrete bank, looking out at the LA River, Los Angeles, CA. © Julia Stotz Photography

Widespread Lack of Close-to-Home Green Space

Pacoima is a vibrant, predominantly Latinx community in California's San Fernando Valley, dominated by industry and hemmed in by freeways.

The community is flecked with hazardous-waste sites, landfills, and autobody shops. Temperatures run higher than in other parts of Los Angeles, because of both its microclimate and the lack of parks. When it does rain during the winter months, water comes down in torrents, inundating streets and stranding residents. Nearly half of the residents live in poverty. Yet the neighborhood abounds in culture.

With over 1.5 million Angelenos (more than a third of the city) without a park or green space within a 10-minute walk of home, the story of Pacoima is a common one for neighborhoods across the city. As UCLA professor Jon Christensen explains,

"The lack of parks, especially in the San Fernando Valley, offers a window into the past, where the rise of the automobile promised a world in which everyone could have a green space in their yard. As the suburbs of Los Angeles expanded, too few parks were created. And as density increased with more multi-family apartment buildings in the mix as well, the pressure on too few community parks has only increased over time."

While L.A. ranks about average nationally on park access, it lags behind 13 of its 16 California peers (Table 1). In Fresno, 66 percent of residents have a nearby green space. Meanwhile, every San Franciscan can walk to a park in 10 minutes. People often cite a lack of time as a barrier to visiting parks, and for 38 percent of Angelenos, a minimum 20-minute journey separates them from their nearest park.

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS WITHIN 10-MINUTE WALK OF A PARK, CALIFORNIA CITIES

CA Rank	City	% 10MW	National Percentile*
1	San Francisco, CA	100%	100
2	Irvine, CA	94%	92
3	Sacramento, CA	89%	85
4	Oakland, CA	88%	84
5	Long Beach, CA	82%	75
6	San Diego, CA	81%	74
7	San Jose, CA	79%	71
8	Stockton, CA	75%	65
9	Santa Ana, CA	72%	61
10	Fremont, CA	70%	59
11	Chula Vista, CA	70%	58
12	Fresno, CA	66%	52
13	Anaheim, CA	65%	51
14	Los Angeles, CA	62%	47
15	Santa Clarita, CA	51%	32
16	Riverside, CA	48%	28
17	Bakersfield, CA	41%	19

* *Comparison against 100 most populous U.S. cities ranked in TPL ParkScore Index; 100 = highest in country and 1 = lowest in country*

A lack of green space has multiple consequences. Not only are communities at higher risk of extreme heat[1] and flood damage[2], they have fewer free or low-cost options for play, exercise, and nature exposure. It's no coincidence that these neighborhoods have high rates of poor mental health[3] and physical inactivity.[4]

ParkScore's amenities metric calculates the relative number of popular park features, such as playgrounds, sport courts, and athletic fields in a city's park system. Top-scoring cities offer residents myriad opportunities to play and exercise, and high amenities scores are associated with increased physical activity rates, which usually translate to better public health outcomes. Los Angeles, however, scores in the bottom quarter of all large cities nationally and the second worst in California (Table 2).

> "When fields are overcrowded, locked, or poorly maintained, it's not just about a game; it's about denying our residents, especially our youth, a safe place to connect, exercise, and thrive. They deserve abundant opportunities to play, be active, and build community. Improved recreation areas are vital for their well-being and our community's strength."
>
> — David Diaz, Los Angeles, CA

Los Angeles is one of only five of the 100 largest American cities without a parks plan updated in this century.

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF CALIFORNIA'S BIGGEST CITIES ON AVAILABILITY OF PARK AMENITIES

Numbers represent each city's national percentile on a given metric (100 = highest in country; 1 = lowest)
The Amenity Score is the average of each city's highest six amenities and comprises 20% of the ParkScore Index

CA Rank	City	Amenity Score	Basket-ball Hoops	Dog Parks	Play-grounds	Senior/ Recreation Centers	Rest-rooms	Splash pads	Sport Fields
1	Irvine, CA	85.2	100	13	100	100	100	19	92
2	San Francisco, CA	82.5	63	100	100	57	100	75	7
3	Sacramento, CA	79.3	43	100	100	40	48	100	85
4	Long Beach, CA	63.5	36	91	27	86	100	14	41
5	Oakland, CA	60.3	36	100	79	68	45	1	34
6	Bakersfield, CA	55.5	26	80	38	16	59	100	30
7	San Diego, CA	50.7	63	70	24	57	54	1	36
8	Chula Vista, CA	49.5	22	100	54	41	44	20	36
9	Fremont, CA	47.2	24	78	26	38	100	12	17
10	Riverside, CA	46.5	55	14	11	80	34	57	39
11	San Jose, CA	46.0	18	78	57	50	64	9	8
12	Santa Clarita, CA	43.7	38	42	34	64	61	1	23
13	Fresno, CA	42.0	23	88	11	47	29	43	22
14	Stockton, CA	36.7	68	27	26	11	37	42	20
15	Anaheim, CA	30.0	14	37	23	10	50	18	38
16	Los Angeles, CA	27.2	38	4	11	54	39	16	5
17	Santa Ana, CA	21.0	32	1	9	46	29	1	9

Los Angeles's history of development hasn't prioritized close-to-home green spaces. Perhaps the most incriminating evidence of this historical neglect: Los Angeles last updated its parks master plan—a shared set of long-term priorities and blueprint for achieving them—in 1973, more than 50 years ago. Master plans are developed by city leaders and community members, adopted by the city's legislative body, and are usually updated every five to ten years. Los Angeles is one of only five of the 100 largest American cities without a parks plan updated in this century.

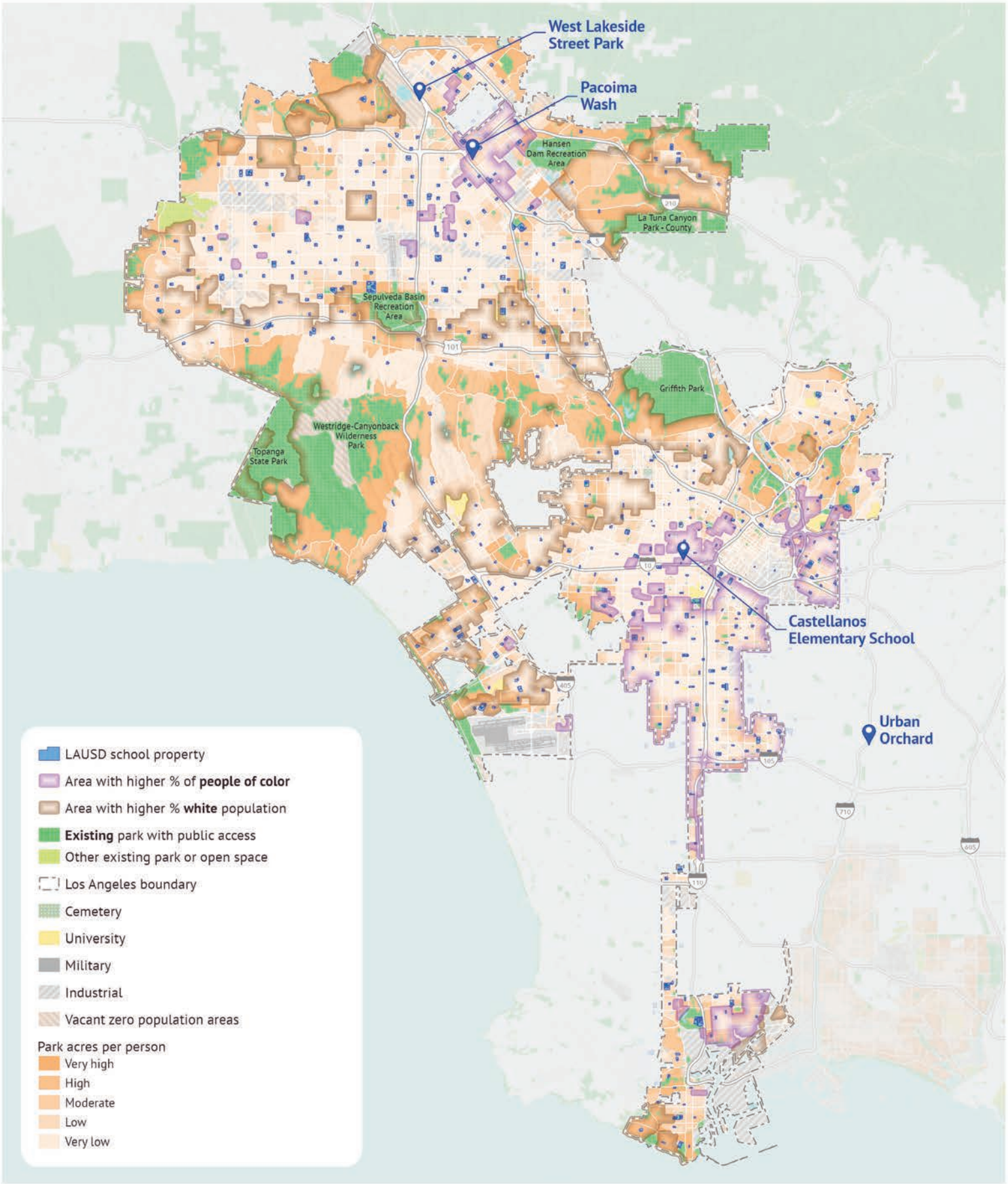


Figure 3. Los Angeles's large regional parks are concentrated in its whitest and wealthiest neighborhoods. A resident in one of L.A.'s neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of people of color (highlighted in purple above) has access to, on average, 78 percent less park space than somebody living in one of the city's predominantly white neighborhoods (highlighted in brown above).

Large Natural Areas Are Not Equitably Distributed

More than 13 percent of L.A.'s total land area is public park space. This puts it above the national mean and about average among its California peers (Table 3).

But dig into that metric, and two nuances emerge.

First, a hefty chunk of the city's total park acreage is comprised of a few large, natural and rustic recreation areas that are concentrated within or near the wealthiest and/or whitest neighborhoods of the city (Figure 3). Think: Topanga State Park, Griffith Park, and portions of the Angeles National Forest.

A resident living in a community of color, like Pacoima, has, on average, access to 78 percent less park space than a resident in one of the city's whitest neighborhoods, say, Bel Air. A similar trend holds when comparing low-income neighborhoods, which have an average of 79 percent less park space than wealthy areas.

Second, these regional parks are primarily managed by agencies other than the city's Recreation and Parks Department. Of the total public park space in the city, 59 percent is managed by these other agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, California State Parks, Los Angeles County, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, and the Port of Los Angeles.

The wealth of expertise and leadership across these agencies—as well other agencies managing less developed public lands such as Los Angeles Flood Control District and transportation agencies—is under-utilized in transforming L.A.'s park system (Table 3). By our count, these agencies only contribute 4 percent of the total park investment across the city.

A Lack of Park Investment

City parks systems—like most critical city infrastructure—require sufficient investment to avoid the infamous "death spiral," which begins when staffing levels fall too low to maintain existing facilities, let alone new ones that could address historical inequities. As a result, residents are left with no or inadequate close-to-home green spaces, the public begins losing faith in the system, and eventually public support for investment dwindles.

With an annual park investment of $111 per person, Los Angeles ranks in the bottom third of the most populous cities—both nationally and in California (Table 4). Just five years ago, Los Angeles was above average, both nationally and statewide. What happened?

TABLE 3. COMPARISON OF PARK ACREAGE WITHIN CALIFORNIA'S BIGGEST CITIES

CA Rank	City	Total	% City Area for Parks	National Percentile*	% Managed by City Park/Rec	Significant park managers other than a city's parks and recreation department
1	Fremont, CA	17,751	43%	100	6%	East Bay Regional Parks & US Fish & Wildlife Service
2	Irvine, CA	11,052	27%	100	97%	
3	San Francisco, CA	6,398	21%	100	58%	Presidio Trust
4	San Diego, CA	43,216	21%	100	86%	
5	San Jose, CA	18,152	17%	90	24%	Santa Clara County, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, and US Fish & Wildlife Service
6	Anaheim, CA	4,618	15%	75	15%	Orange County Parks and California State Parks
7	Los Angeles, CA	39,748	13%	67	41%	US Forest Service, California State Parks, County of Los Angeles, Los Angeles Department of Water & Power, Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, and Port of Los Angeles
8	Santa Clarita, CA	5,864	12%	62	74%	
9	Oakland, CA	4,159	12%	61	100%	
10	Sacramento, CA	6,717	11%	51	71%	
11	Chula Vista, CA	2,702	9%	37	83%	
12	Riverside, CA	4,118	8%	34	76%	
13	Long Beach, CA	2,268	7%	29	94%	
14	Bakersfield, CA	5,837	6%	23	100%	
15	Santa Ana, CA	549	3%	5	62%	Orange County Parks
16	Stockton, CA	1,264	3%	4	100%	
17	Fresno, CA	1,763	3%	1	70%	

* *Comparison against 100 most populous U.S. cities ranked in TPL ParkScore Index; 100 = highest in country and 1 = lowest in country*

TABLE 4. COMPARISON OF AVERAGE ANNUAL PARK INVESTMENT IN CALIFORNIA'S BIGGEST CITIES

Reflects average of the three most recent fiscal years
Includes investment from all public and private organizations on publicly accessible parks

	City	Total Investment	Investment per person	National Percentile*
1	Irvine, CA	$219,746,616	$681	100
2	San Francisco, CA	$487,949,324	$561	100
3	San Diego, CA	$323,483,663	$232	85
4	Santa Clarita, CA	$41,899,716	$183	63
5	Oakland, CA	$71,593,667	$162	53
6	Santa Ana, CA	$48,956,682	$159	52
7	Long Beach, CA	$72,391,130	$158	51
8	Fremont, CA	$36,027,472	$153	49
9	Sacramento, CA	$67,340,747	$126	37
10	San Jose, CA	$126,215,927	$125	37
11	Bakersfield, CA	$49,579,471	$120	34
12	Los Angeles, CA	$428,838,601	$111	30
13	Riverside, CA	$32,389,145	$102	26
14	Fresno, CA	$52,974,472	$99	25
15	Anaheim, CA	$30,789,711	$89	21
16	Stockton, CA	$16,579,997	$52	4
17	Chula Vista, CA	$12,239,519	$44	1

* *Comparison against 100 most populous U.S. cities ranked in TPL ParkScore Index; 100 = highest in country and 1 = lowest in country*

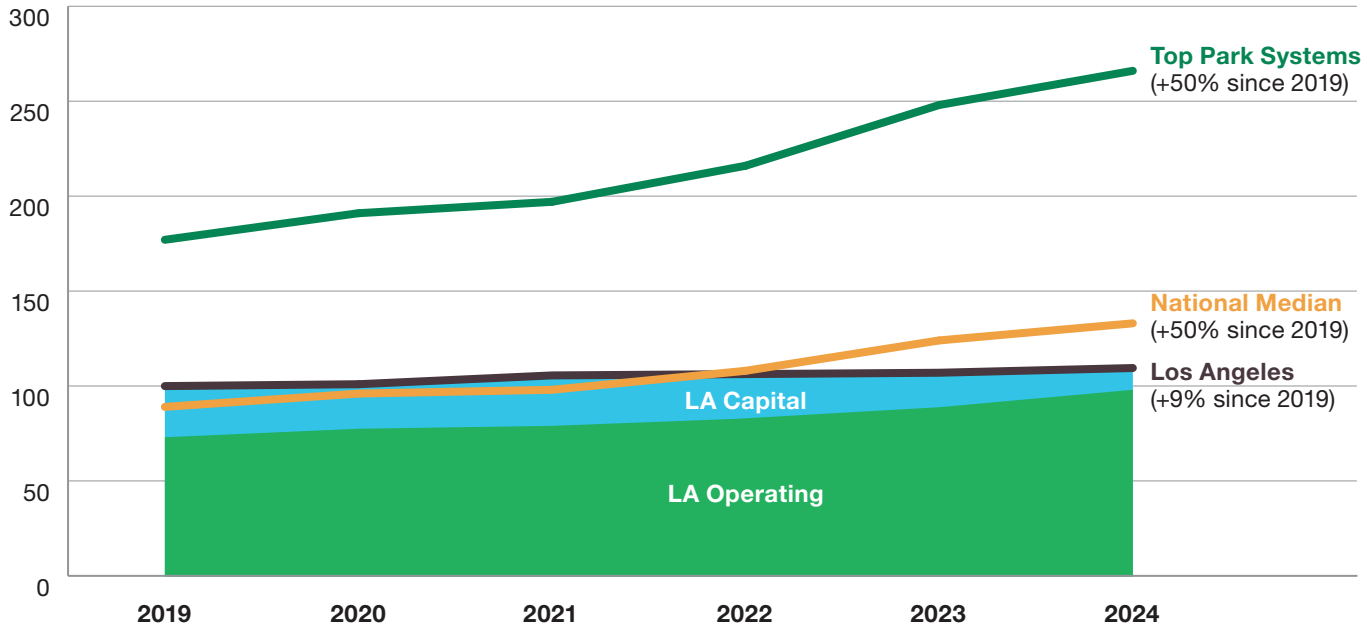
Los Angeles's park investment has stayed relatively flat over the past five years, while its peers have increased investment by an average of 50 percent (Figure 4). A deeper look illuminates three underlying drivers.

First, the parks department's capital expenditures—used to acquire and expand new parks, fix broken equipment, and refresh existing spaces—are about half what they were five years ago. This decrease is poised to worsen with the pending expiration of Proposition K, a voter-approved measure from 1996 that dedicated $25 million per year in property tax revenue to the construction and renovation of city parks. For a park system with a significant backlog of deferred maintenance and a need for new parks and park amenities, this is a major hindrance.

Second, even though the city's operating budget has increased about five percent annually over the past five years to keep pace with inflation, a big portion of the spending went to administrative costs, such as utility and pension payments, rather than staffing. In fact, staffing levels have never recovered from the 2007–2008 great recession. Although Proposition K included a component for maintenance of its funded projects, it has been woefully insufficient. In its adopted 2024–2025 budget, Proposition K funds only covered about a quarter of the requested maintenance needs across its 100 completed projects.

FIGURE 4. LOS ANGELES PARK INVESTMENT IS FALLING BEHIND

Three-year average of investment across all public and private park organizations



Data Source: 2020–2025 Trust for Public Land ParkScore Indices. Expenditures reflect a rolling average of the three preceding fiscal years (e.g., 2025 reflects average of 2022, 2023, and 2024 fiscal years)

Third, there is significant untapped leadership and investment from other public land managers and the philanthropic sector in Los Angeles. A paltry six percent of the city's total park investment comes from philanthropic organizations or other public agencies. (That is half the national average of 12 percent.)

In many of the country's top park systems, citywide conservancies have emerged to shoulder a significant share of the cost burden and to provide support for "friends of" groups that help create programming and maintain the spaces.

The Austin Park Foundation, for example, runs an Adopt-A-Park Program to facilitate the adoption of a quarter of the city's parks by a community-based volunteer group, funded in part by its partnership with the annual Austin City Limits music festival. In Atlanta, Park Pride recently raised $12 million in public and private funds to provide grants to community groups to improve their parks. About 60 percent of Park Pride grants go to neighborhoods that are historically under-resourced. Park Pride launched a tandem park stewardship academy to provide leadership development support to the grant recipients.

Opportunities

Kenneth Hahn State Park in Los Angeles, CA. © TPL Archives

None of these challenges are new. Indeed, L.A. is, perhaps, the most studied park system in the country. And, to its credit, the city has begun a massive community-wide parks needs assessment—often a precursor to a citywide parks master plan or successful funding measures.

The needs assessment can help L.A. identify communities that lack equitable park space and the positive health, climate, and economic outcomes quality green spaces yield.

What would it take for L.A. to have a world-class park system? Over the past two decades, TPL has tracked data and observed national trends. We've identified three strategic opportunities for L.A. to consider.

Open Schoolyards to the Public

One way cities are closing park access gaps is by transforming asphalt schoolyards into park-like facilities and opening them for community use after school hours. Such renovations accommodate play and outdoor learning in a nature-rich environment that can be made available to the broader community to enjoy outside of school hours. Nationally, about 20 million people without close-to-home park access, including children and their families, live within a 10-minute walk of a public school that has potential to feature a community schoolyard.

Trust for Public Land's approach to renovating schoolyards into vibrant, climate-smart green spaces is the national gold standard. We hope to transform 28 schoolyards in partnership with the Los Angeles Unified School District by 2028. The first renovation was completed last year at Castellanos Elementary School. Situated in the Pico-Union neighborhood, the schoolyard's bare asphalt surface, which radiated heat in the sun, now features grass, two dozen native trees, and hundreds of shrubs.

With rising temperatures shattering records year after year, extreme heat is a rising concern in southern California, as elsewhere. As Castellanos' tree canopies leaf out, they'll create pools of cooling shade. The result will be a more comfortable environment, with protection from sun and an uptick in physical activity.

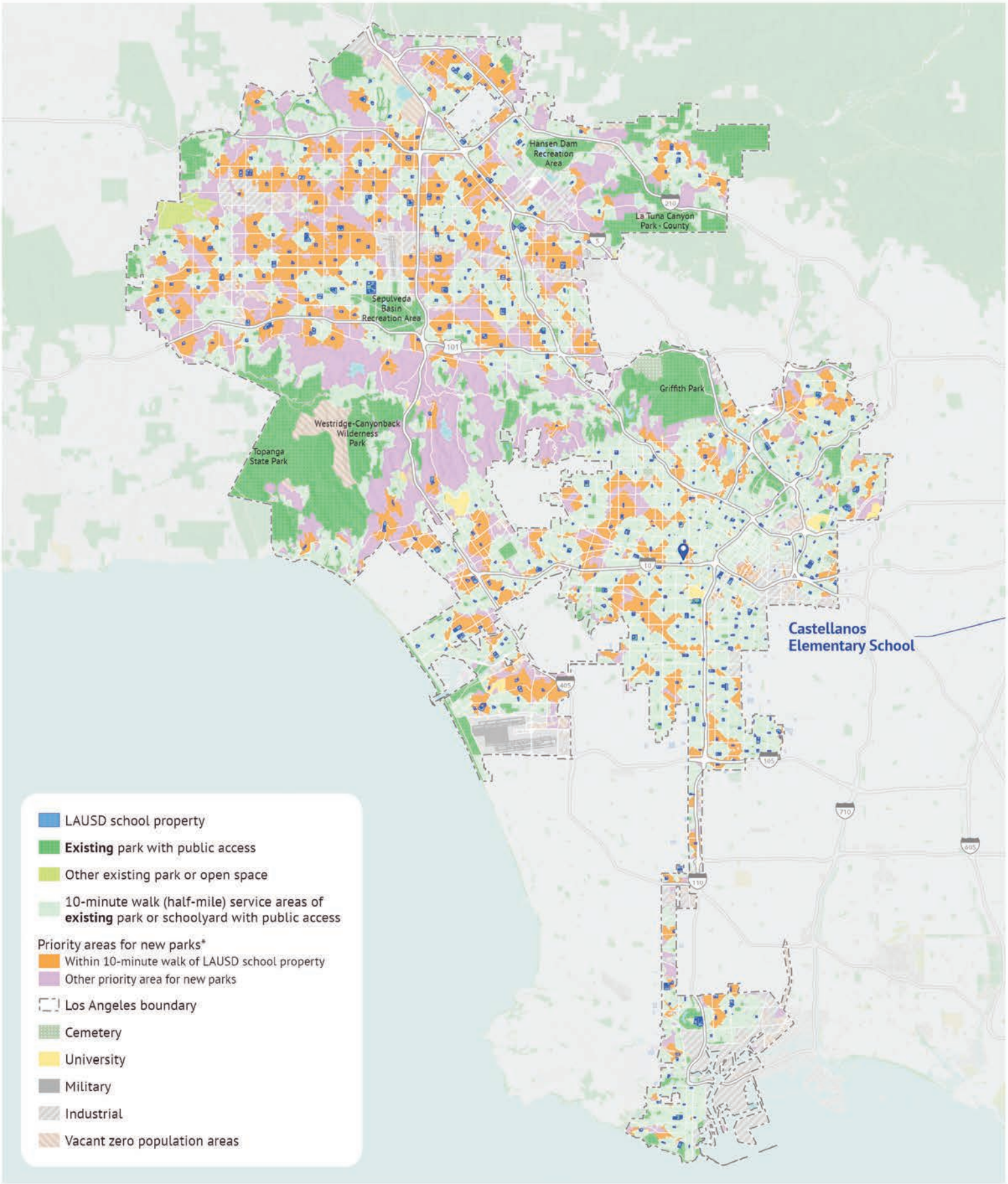


Figure 5. Opening around 600 of LAUSD schoolyards for community use after school hours and on weekends would provide 1 million Angelenos with their only 'park' within a 10-minute walk of their home (highlighted in orange above). This would increase the city's overall percentage of residents with a nearby 'park' from 62 percent to 85 percent.

Transforming about 600 of Los Angeles Unified School District's outdoor spaces into community schoolyards like Castellanos won't happen overnight However, in the meantime, opening existing school playgrounds and ballfields to their broader communities after school hours and on weekends would go a long way, and it would put L.A. in good company. Seventy-five of the 100 most populous cities have adopted this strategy, up from 44 in 2018. It would give a whopping 1 million more Angelenos an open space within a 10-minute walk of home, increasing the city's overall percentage of residents with a nearby green space from 62 percent to 85 percent and potentially doubling the number of playgrounds and basketball hoops available city-wide (Figure 5). This type of initiative would have dramatically improved the city's 2025 park system rank from its historic low of 90th to 55th.

Dedicated Funding

Some park systems, like the one in Minneapolis, have had dedicated park funding since their founding over a century ago. Most, however, have had to develop the political support to create a dedicated park funding source in recent years. Of the top 10 big-city park systems in the United States, seven have implemented policies to set aside a portion of tax revenue each year specifically for parks (Table 5). Voters are more likely to approve park funding when a proposal is accompanied by a well-researched, comprehensive needs assessment like the one L.A. is currently pursuing.

The Seattle Parks Foundation, for example, developed an 18-month strategic plan and a 6-year spending plan before asking voters to dedicate a portion of the annual property tax levy toward the Seattle Park District. Similarly, following a county-level parks needs assessment, voters in Los Angeles County approved Measure A, which authorized dedicated local funding for parks, recreation and open space.

TABLE 5. SEVEN OF TOP 10 PARK SYSTEMS HAVE DEDICATED FUNDING FOR PARK RENOVATIONS AND STAFFING

	City	Dedicated funding source	Amount
1	Washington, DC		
2	Irvine, CA		
3	Minneapolis, MN	Minneapolis Park Board	Property tax (~$.13 per $100 assessed value)
4	Cincinnati, OH		
5	St. Paul, MN	Common Cent*	Sales tax (~.25% or $.25 per $100 purchase)
6	San Francisco, CA	Park, Recreation, and Open Space Fund	Property tax ($.025 per $100 assessed value)
7	Arlington, VA	General Obligation Bonds*	Varies
8	Seattle, WA	Seattle Park District	Property tax (~$.041 per $100 assessed value)
9	Portland, OR	2020 Parks Local Option Levy	Property tax ($.08 per $100 assessed value)
10	Denver, CO	Parks Legacy Fund	Sales tax (0.25% or $.25 per $100 purchase)

* *Only can be used to finance capital projects (others can be used for staffing and capital projects)*

Nationally, park and recreation ballot measures are victorious across political divides. In the most recent 2024 election cycle, conservation ballot measures championed by Trust for Public Land went 23 for 23 across the country, generating over $16 billion in funding for parks, climate resilience, water quality, wildlife habitat, and land conservation. This included two statewide California propositions—Proposition 2 and Proposition 4—and a bond measure

for the Los Angeles Unified School District that included a $1.25 billion allocation for green schoolyards. Voters are willing to incur modest tax increases to improve their shared public spaces.

As the City of Los Angeles undertakes its park needs assessment, community leaders have the opportunity to build a case for a dedicated funding source to address the tremendous backlog of improvements needed across the city. Merely keeping pace with inflation won't meet the city's current, let alone future, needs. Most notably, the current annual capital investment is about half of its pre-pandemic levels. That's simply not enough to cover the cost of renovating dilapidated parks and building new ones. And while bonds can help fund capital projects, developing the next generation of park and recreation professionals—maintenance workers, fitness instructors, community engagement staff, landscaping crews—requires an increase in operating funding. It's best generated with a dedicated source, such as a modest sales or property tax.

Transformation & Collaboration

When land and budgets are tight, city leaders across the country must use limited resources to address multiple needs through high-value projects. Local parks, which yield improved health, climate resilience, strong communities, and economic growth, provide city agencies an opportunity to stack funding sources and achieve shared goals. The story of West Lakeside Street Park in the San Fernando Valley—near Pacoima—offers a hopeful case study for this type of collaboration.

Before it was West Lakeside Street Park, it was 6.16 acres of undeveloped land within the Lakeside Debris Basin. The property was managed by the L.A. City Department of Water and Power (LADWP).

With limited city funds for new park development or acquisition, the recreation and parks department had to get creative and collaborative. First, they worked with the community to develop a plan for the new park. Then, they partnered with the state to secure nearly $5 million in Proposition 84 funds. Finally, they negotiated a 30-year lease with LADWP, allowing L.A. Recreation and Parks to manage the six-acre space. Today, the community is able to enjoy a new landscaped open space featuring a multi-sport field, restrooms, walking/jogging trails, a picnic area, shade structures, and an amphitheater.

The city of South Gate, next to Los Angeles, offers a similar blueprint for how community leaders are stepping up to coordinate and combine funding streams to transform a community park.

Fabiola Inzunza grew up in South Gate before heading east to earn a graduate degree in community development. She recently returned with her husband, bringing her city planning skills and civic pride back to her hometown. "We are an environmental justice community, and there's been a lack of investment over time and degrading public facilities," she points out. "But the city has made a huge effort around the parks conversation."

Lately, that conversation has centered on Urban Orchard, a vibrant park that Trust for Public Land is developing in partnership with the city, as well as local residents like Inzunza. Residents envisioned a green oasis, with walking paths, an education garden, and a nature-based playground. As its name suggests, the 7-acre park will teem with more than 200 fruit trees, including avocado, guava, lemon, and lime. The $24 million project—requiring funds from at least eight different organizations and agencies—will also feature a newly constructed wetland, engineered to capture and filter runoff during rainstorms.

Inzunza, who lives a mile from Urban Orchard, joined other residents in offering ideas during design workshops for the new park. She says she looks forward to walking and picnicking in the park when it opens later this year. "Those

are two things that will be perfect to do at an urban orchard," she says. More broadly, she's gratified to see South Gate finally getting some love: "People are excited that there is investment coming into the city to meet a really big need."

Projects like Urban Orchard and West Lakeside Street Park offer hope for what can be achieved through collaboration and the identification of shared benefits, especially when budgets are tight and land is expensive. Across L.A., there are many agencies, including LADWP, LAUSD, L.A. County Flood Control District, L.A. Housing Authority, Metro, and Caltrans, managing thousands of acres of public land. When these agencies team up, the city benefits from more green space, increased climate resilience, improved quality of life and more.

Planting pansies at Yamakazi Gardens in Los Angeles, CA. © TPL Archives

Conclusion

In the late 1990s, five mothers started Pacoima Beautiful, a group committed to removing trash, planting trees, and advocating for the city's 311 complaint hotline. "We felt the city wasn't really responsive to the valley," the group's executive director, Veronica Padilla-Campos, recalls of the group's early days. Today, Pacoima Beautiful has grown to 30 staff members.

A main focus now is on green space. In recent years, TPL has partnered with the community to convert a street into a pedestrian open space called Bradley Plaza and Green Alley, with new trees and a giant shade structure. We then transformed an adjacent alley into an attractive thoroughfare, with planting beds engineered to absorb and filter stormwater before it flows to the aquifer below. With help from the state's Transformative Climate Communities grant program, TPL also helped install solar-powered chargers at several locations in Pacoima.

Next up is the Pacoima Wash Natural Park, a planned linear green space that will extend nearly five miles along a channeled sluice that carries stormwater through the San Fernando Valley. The greenway will have several entrances, with pocket parks along its length, and will accommodate both walkers and bicyclists, says Padilla-Campos. TPL helped the nonprofit secure a grant from the Bezos Earth Fund to conduct a feasibility study for the future park.

Los Angeles is filled with incredible community leaders like Veronica Padilla-Campos and others itching to reconnect with one another and to have a place to play. The city's park needs assessment offers a generational opportunity for community members and city leaders to reimagine and reinvigorate its beleaguered parks system.

This report offers three strategies that could help Los Angeles reverse the decades-long trend of disinvestment in the city's green spaces. Visionary leadership and strong community advocates can turn the strategies into reality.

Identifying shared needs is a critical first step. Los Angeles's current comprehensive assessment will inform the best type of dedicated funding mechanism and could help make a strong case to voters about the benefits of building new parks and renovating existing ones.

Unlocking a partnership between the school district and city leaders to transform asphalt schoolyards into community green spaces is a cost-effective, long-term way to put nature and its many benefits within a 10-minute walk of more Angelenos. Opening existing school playgrounds to their communities on evenings and weekends is an interim step that will help narrow the city's park equity gap in the short term.

Empowering agency directors to collaborate across silos and jurisdictions offers more opportunities to transform underutilized public spaces, such as alleys, flood control lands, or defunct transportation corridors into new parks and trails.

As the city finalizes its parks needs assessment—a process that includes active listening and deep data analysis—the recommendations in this report can help L.A. rise to its great potential to deliver community green spaces where everyone can play, connect with nature and neighbors, and reap the myriad benefits of a world-class park system.

Appendix

Impact analysis of improved schoolyard access: Methodology

Schoolyard Locations

The location of outdoor schoolyards for Los Angeles Unified School District elementary and secondary schools were estimated by Trust for Public Land data scientists from the following data sources:

1. Point locations (latitude and longitude coordinates) of 785 Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) elementary and secondary schools were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics 2023–2024 Public School File[1]. Los Angeles Unified School District is NCES ID 0622710. These 785 schools were first filtered to 691 unique sites (for example, an elementary and middle school share the same lot) and then filtered to the 597 sites within a half-mile of city limits. This dataset does not include the 200 or so public charter schools.
2. These point locations were then converted to outdoor schoolyard polygons by spatially joining the coordinates to a corresponding city parcel. The city parcel data were obtained from the 2024 ReGrid's[2] parcel database containing standardized property boundary geometries and ownership information. Building footprints were then erased using City of Los Angeles Building Footprints layer[3] (Updated February 7, 2025).

10-Minute Walk Analysis

A half-mile walkable service area was generated for each of the 597 LAUSD schoolyards using Esri's Street Map Premium network dataset, which allows us to account for physical barriers such as highways, train tracks, or rivers without bridges. Due to data limitations, the service areas assume the entire perimeter of the schoolyard is publicly accessible.

To calculate the percentage of Los Angeles residents within a 10-minute walk of a park, Trust for Public Land estimates the number of residents that are within a service area of any park (or schoolyard) and divides that by the city's total population. Population projections are based on 2024 US Census Block Groups provided by Esri. More information can be found at https://www.tpl.org/parkserve/about.

ParkScore Index Analysis

Opening all schoolyards for community use after school hours would improve the city's park system beyond park access. Specifically, it also increases the acreage, equity, and amenity metrics in the ParkScore index.

- The acreage of the estimated outdoor portions of all schoolyards was calculated in GIS and clipped to the city boundary.

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1 https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/SchoolLocations.

2 Loveland Technologies.

3 https://geohub.lacity.org/datasets/lahub::building-footprints/explore.

Valley Vista property adjacent to the Gateway Ranch property in Santa Clarita, CA. These properties will be a link between the Santa Clarita Woodlands and Angeles National Forest, San Gabriel Mountains, Los Angeles, CA. © Darcy Kiefel

- The equity category is comprised of two sets of metrics: 1) 10-minute walk for people of color and low-income households and 2) a comparison of park space by race and income. The 10-minute walk calculations are done following the same approach as described above. The park space comparisons are further described: tpl.org/parkscore/about.
- For the amenity category, we include two amenities commonly found in community schoolyards: basketball hoops and playgrounds. For the LAUSD school sites, we estimated amenity counts using national averages from ParkScore cities:

  597 schools x .72 playgrounds per school = 430 playgrounds

  597 schools x 1.70 hoops per school = 1,015 basketball hoops

Los Angeles's 2025 ParkScore index rating was then re-scored as if its 2025 totals had included the above benefits. This estimation can only be done retrospectively as each year's score is dependent on how a city compares against other cities in that given year. Because of this, the estimated ranking improvement is best interpreted as an estimate of the magnitude of improvement one could expect if it were to otherwise continue to improve at the national average pace.

Citations

1 Ziter, C. D., Pedersen, E. J., Kucharik, C. J., & Turner, M. G. (2019). Scale-dependent interactions between tree canopy cover and impervious surfaces reduce daytime urban heat during summer. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116(15), 7575–7580.

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3 Barton, J., & Rogerson, M. (2017). The importance of greenspace for mental health. BJPsych international, 14(4), 79–81.

4 Cohen, D. A., Han, B., Nagel, C. J., Harnik, P., McKenzie, T. L., Evenson, K. R., ... & Katta, S. (2016). The first national study of neighborhood parks: Implications for physical activity. American journal of preventive medicine, 51(4), 419–426.

Trust for Public Land is a national nonprofit that works to connect everyone to the benefits and joys of the outdoors.

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