

# **Governing Urban Park Conservancies**

## **A Review of Board Structure and Roles at Six Major City Park Conservancies**

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Balboa Park, one of the nation's premier urban parks, is at a crossroad. With 26 museums and over 12 million annual visitors, the park plays an incredibly important role in the cultural and economic life of the San Diego region. At the same time, the city is the sole manager of this 1,200-acre swath of land and has limited ability to give the park the attention it needs. While basic maintenance and trash collection can continue to be accomplished, a long-term vision that restores and upgrades the park and makes it a treasure for generations to come is another matter, requiring focused leadership and additional resources. This situation is similar to many other iconic parks from Forest Park in St. Louis to Central Park in New York to Piedmont Park in Atlanta, for all of which dynamic conservancies have been established.

The Center for City Park Excellence at The Trust for Public Land was asked to review the governance structures of some of the leading urban park conservancies. From two dozen or so Conservancies working with signature parks in major cities across the country, six were chosen for study here: the Central Park Conservancy and Prospect Park Alliance in New York, Forest Park Forever in St. Louis, Piedmont Park Conservancy in Atlanta, Hermann Park Conservancy in Houston and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. These six well-established entities seem to offer the best source of data, ideas and comparisons; they are the most likely comparable institutions for anyone seeking to establish such an institution for Balboa Park.

## **Summary Findings**

Conservancies are private, non-profit, park-benefit organizations that raise money independent of the city and spend it under a plan of action that is mutually agreed upon with the city. Conservancies do not own any parkland nor do they hold easements on it; the land continues to remain in the ownership of the city, and the city retains ultimate authority over everything that happens there.

All the conservancies studied are independently governed with formalized input from the city. All the groups are registered as tax-exempt "501(c)3" organizations and have boards of directors with fiduciary responsibilities. These boards are large: the six groups studied average 47 board members. All have executive committees made up of board officers, varying in size from four to 15, that are more directly involved in day-to-day operations.

All the organizations have city representation on their boards through appointed or ex-officio positions (i.e. serving by way of their position or office held). City control is very limited as far as voting power and membership; however, they are represented. This generally includes one or more of the following: the mayor, a city council member, the park agency director, a park chief superintendent, a county executive, a state legislator or a borough president (in New York City). However, of the six only the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy allows the government representatives to vote on matters under consideration. In the others, the ex-officio members are advisory only and do not have the vote. In two of the cases (Pittsburgh and Prospect Park), the chief executive officer has a vote on the board; in the other four, he or she does not have a vote.

In every instance the conservancies are involved with the whole suite of parkland activities, from planning through capital construction to maintenance. In all cases there is a memorandum of understanding or a contract that defines the roles and responsibilities between the city and the conservancy. (Several agreements are attached.) In every case, the conservancies have their own bank accounts into which they deposit all their donations and from which they pay expenses. City and conservancy funds are not commingled.

While the cities have little or no formal power on the conservancies' boards, they all retain ultimate ownership and authority of the parks themselves. This means they retain the ability to essentially sign off on the activities of the private support organizations. At five of the six parks, the negotiations are carried out with the parks department and its director. In the case of Forest Park in St. Louis, a 25-member Forest Park Advisory Board, appointed by the mayor, oversees park policies and implementation of the master plan.

### Major Park Conservancy Governance

Organization	Year Founded	Expenses, 2008	Board Size	Board Structure	Ex-Officios
Forest Park Forever, St. Louis	1993	\$6,765,877	56	8 member executive committee, 48 directors	
Piedmont Park Conservancy, Atlanta	1989	\$4,414,774	48	9 officers, 6 at- large, 28 general directors, 5 ex- officio appointed	Mayor, Parks Director, Council President
Hermann Park Conservancy, Houston	1992	\$3,203,651	45	Board Chair, 15- member executive committee, 29 other board members	Parks Director, Hermann Park Supervisor
Prospect Park Alliance, Brooklyn	1980	\$9,524,270	33	Chairman, President (employee), Secretary, Treasurer, 29 directors, 3 ex- officio	Parks Director, Council Member, Brooklyn Borough President
Central Park Conservancy, New York City	1980	\$40,090,345	60	Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary-General Counsel, 57 trustees	Parks Commissioner, Conservancy President, Manhattan Borough President
Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, Pittsburgh	1996	\$3,267,008	41	4 officers, Executive Committee, 31 directors, 6 ex- officios with voting power	Mayor, Allegheny County Chief Executive, State Legislator, 3 City Dept. Directors
<i>Average</i>	<i>1987</i>	<i>\$11,210,988</i>	<i>47</i>		

## **Detailed Review of Organizations**

### **Forest Park, St. Louis: Forest Park Forever**

Like Balboa Park, this 1350-acre park is home to the region's major cultural institutions – the zoo, art museum, history museum, science center and a large outdoor theatre. After years of watching the beloved park deteriorate, community leaders formed the non-profit Forest Park Forever (FPF) to work in partnership with the St. Louis Department of Park, Recreation and Forestry. Forest Park Forever is governed by a 56-member board that includes the executive directors of the institutions within Forest Park, a local alderman, and a broad cross-section of prominent community members. A full time executive director and staff are employed by the organization. The city does not have voting power on the board.

Although the city retains ultimate authority over the park, responsibilities are divided. Carrying out the park master plan is overseen by a 25-member Forest Park Advisory Board, appointed by the Mayor, which reports to the director of the Department Parks, Recreation and Forestry. Initially, under an agreement signed in 1997, responsibility for raising funds was given to Forest Park Forever while the city oversaw the implementation of capital projects. However, when the renovation effort fell behind schedule in 2002, an amended agreement transferred construction management to FPF. Park maintenance has gradually followed a similar path. While day-to-day management of the park is still under the purview of the Forest Park Executive (an employee of the city), FPF is becoming increasingly involved in the operations.

### **Piedmont Park, Atlanta: Piedmont Park Conservancy**

Piedmont Park, in Atlanta's Midtown, is the city's most visited park. In 1986 the Friends of Piedmont Park was formed to address deterioration of the 180-acre park. Three years later that group was superseded by the Piedmont Park Conservancy (PPC). Structurally, the Conservancy has 48 board members, three of whom are appointed by Mayor and two by the city council. These five, however, do not have voting privileges. The Board is divided into three categories of directorship: Class I members (who serve one year), Class II members (two years) and Class III members (three years). An Executive Committee, composed of Board Officers and the chairs of seven major committees, meets bi-monthly. The issues of Board size, committee structure and vacancies are handled on an annual basis by the Board Development Committee. The Board chair, who serves a two-year term, is recruited by a Board Development Committee one year in advance and serves as Chair-Elect for two months.

In 1992, after some members of the public expressed concerns about potential “privatization of the park,” the the city of Atlanta and the Piedmont Park Conservancy negotiated a memorandum of understanding about their respective roles. Under the agreement, the city took responsibility for basic maintenance (as well as water and

electrical utilities) while PPC was tasked with providing “above and beyond” additional maintenance if it was deemed appropriate. Over time PPC has taken on more daily duties, now providing nearly 85 percent of Piedmont Park’s day-to-day operations. While the city retains ultimate authority on policy and infrastructure decisions, PPC is responsible for master planning and implementing that plan. This has included planning and paying for a new community center; renovating the historic boathouse; refurbishing the 3,200-square-foot Magnolia Hall; and replacing the park's wrought-iron entrance gates. PPC, the city and the neighboring Atlanta Botanical Garden also worked out a complex agreement to build a hillside parking garage and to concomitantly remove a surface parking lot. Under the memorandum, the Piedmont Park Conservancy has the authority to operate concessions and to use any profits (i.e., any revenue in excess of expenses) for maintenance of the park.

### **Hermann Park, Houston: Hermann Park Conservancy**

Hermann Park, at 445 acres, is home to the Houston Zoo, the Houston Museum of Natural Science, an outdoor theatre, a public golf course, a lake and a botanical garden. In 1980, after the park that had fallen into disrepair, the Friends of Hermann Park was formed to rejuvenate it. Later renamed the Hermann Park Conservancy, the group currently has 45 board members, with ex-officio membership from the city's parks director and the Hermann Park supervisor.

In 1993 the group commissioned a master plan for Hermann Park. Adopted in 1997 by the Houston City Council, the plan has guided the conservancy and the city in together spending over \$32 million on park improvements. A memorandum of understanding signed in that same year, 1997, stipulates that the city retains ultimate authority over the park but that the conservancy manages the design phase and pays all the design costs. Construction costs are split evenly by the city and the non-profit. The Hermann Park Conservancy has also expanded its maintenance activities through cultivation of volunteers, although this has occurred so far without a formal agreement.

### **Central Park, New York: The Central Park Conservancy**

The best-known private city park partner in the country is the Central Park Conservancy, founded in 1980. Beginning primarily as a fundraising mechanism, in 1998 the Conservancy entered into an agreement with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to fully manage the daily operations of Central Park. The Conservancy is responsible for all basic care of the park as well as its capital improvements. It pays the salaries of approximately 100 of a total 125 maintenance and operations personnel in Central Park. (The remaining 25 are paid by the city.) City staff assigned to Central Park work side-by-side with Conservancy employees and are overseen by a supervisor with dual reporting responsibility to the Conservancy and the Parks Department.

The City’s Department of Parks and Recreation retains policy control over the park. Capital improvements are subject to public review at each stage of development with advice and consent from the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation, and the

Department has ultimate discretion on user permits and events in the Park. The Conservancy has a 60-member board, with non-voting ex-officio membership of the city parks commissioner and the Manhattan Borough President (a city elected position). The Conservancy president is a member of the board.

### **Prospect Park, Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Prospect Park Alliance**

By 1980, Prospect Park, the century-old, 526-acre park built by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in the heart of Brooklyn, was underused and severely deteriorated. In that year, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation created an administrator position specifically for the park. In 1987 the Prospect Park Alliance (PPA) was incorporated with a 32-member board of directors, including five members appointed by the mayor and the Brooklyn borough president. Three members have ex-officio status: the city parks commissioner, the Brooklyn borough president and the city council member from the the area. In a highly unusual situation (basically nonexistent outside of New York City) a single person wears two hats, serving as both park administrator and Alliance president. As administrator she is a civil servant who manages the park, carries out policies and reports to the parks commissioner. As president, she directs special-project fundraising, leads a publicity and outreach campaign, oversees non-union Alliance employees and reports to the Alliance chairman (and board).

In an unusual reversal from the norm in most places, capital projects in Prospect Park are paid for largely with public dollars (80 percent agency, 20 percent Alliance), while on-going maintenance is covered mostly by private gifts. After the public funds were appropriated to renovate and maintain Prospect Park's historic boathouse, the Alliance then contracted with the Audubon Society to handle programming from the building. The Alliance has concession contracts to run numerous facilities in the Park -- the carousel, paddle boat rental, historic Lefferts House, the tennis center and the parade ground (for sports leagues). PPA also raised \$9.5 million in public and private funds to restore the 250-acre woodlands and ravine, which it maintains. In an another unusual twist, the Alliance has no overarching agreement with the city stipulating capital improvements, maintenance and how concession revenues will be spent.

### **Four Parks in Pittsburgh: The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy**

Unlike the other conservancies, which work on only a single park, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy was formed in 1996 to restore the legacy of all four of Pittsburgh's large parks. (It accepted this larger mandate at the request of the mayor.) In 1998, it worked with the city to create a Regional Parks Master Plan that called for a \$118-million capital improvement campaign over 20 years. Thus far the Conservancy has raised more than \$40 million to create a new plaza, renovate several historic structures and fountain, and develop new gardens.

The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy has a board of 41. It contains six ex-officio members consisting of the Mayor of Pittsburgh, the Allegheny County Executive, a state legislator and three city department directors, all of whom have voting ability. Board chairs are elected for one-year terms, which are renewable. Candidates to the board are presented by a Nominating and Governance Committee. In addition, the Board contains three more committees: Audit, Development and Community Engagement, and Finance and Operations. An executive committee, which is closely involved in the group's operations, meets more frequently.