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Parks: How Far Is Too Far?

By Peter Harnik and Jeff Simms

How far is the nearest park from your home? Can you walk there?



What if you were pushing a stroller or using a cane? If there's a park near your office, is it close enough for a lunchtime visit? These questions may seem obvious, but surprisingly few cities ask them. Even fewer have the kind of answers that would help to develop an excellent park system. Last spring, the Trust for Public Land surveyed the 50 largest U.S. cities. The results were dismaying.

TPL found that only 18 of the cities had a goal for the maximum distance any resident should live from the nearest park — and among the 18, the standard ranged from as close as one-eighth of a mile to as far as a mile.

Distance from a park is an important measure. It may be more significant even than counting up the absolute amount of parkland in a city. Los Angeles is a case in point. L.A. ranks fifth among big cities with more than 30,000 acres of parkland, but more than half of that land is located in the mountainous — and relatively inaccessible — central section of the city. Meanwhile, poorer neighborhoods often lack any significant parks at all. Large segments of L.A.'s 3.7 million residents are too far from a park to use it easily, conveniently, or frequently.

The fact is, it's easier to count gross acreage than to figure out how far anyone is from a park, so the average person can't rate his or her city against a norm. What's worse, there's no standard for acceptable distance. A common maximum distance selected as a goal by Cleveland, Colorado Springs, Columbus, Nashville, Phoenix, and Portland is half a mile. But other cities — including Austin, Fresno, Indianapolis, Jacksonville, and Charlotte — allow a full mile. Yet the argument can be made that even a half a mile is too far.

The best of the bunch

The five top cities have selected standards that relate to the needs and capabilities of their

citizens. They are: Denver (three to six blocks, depending upon the neighborhood); Minneapolis (six blocks); Long Beach, California (a quarter mile in high-density neighborhoods); Seattle (an eighth of a mile in dense neighborhoods); and Chicago (a tenth of a mile to a pocket park).

The others seem to have set their standards based more on their perception of political realities — mostly the lack of funding and the difficulty in acquiring enough land.

Most successful of all is Minneapolis. According to Rachel Ramadhyani, a landscape architect with the Minneapolis Park Board, fully 99.4 percent of city residents live within six blocks of a park (although Minneapolis's blocks are so long that six of them can add up to more than half a mile). The city's six-block standard, which dates back more than 50 years, can be found in the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board policies document.

Susan Baird, the director of community outreach and partnership for Denver's parks and recreation department, says of her city's parkland goal: "We just thought about being able to walk for 10 or 15 minutes." To reach that goal, Denver set its maximum distance in most neighborhoods at six *walkable* blocks, meaning that parks cannot be counted if they are on the other side of such barriers as interstate highways, railroad tracks, or unbridged stream valleys.

City parks officials solicited resident input on parks during public meetings leading up to the adoption of Denver's most recent parks master plan in 2003. In focus groups, many parents, particularly those who spoke little English, indicated that they were uncomfortable when children had to walk more than six blocks to a park. Thus, Denver has set an even more ambitious goal for its newer, denser subdivisions: No house can be more than three blocks from a park.

"These newer homes have virtually no yards, so it kind of balances," Baird says, and closer parks help give more breathing room and play space. Today, she says, upwards of 90 percent of the city's 555,000 people live within the mandated six blocks of the city's 6,200 acres of parkland.

Denver officials are also "repurposing" land for parks. One approach is to convert sites for "learning landscapes." Using bond funding, more than 200 old, gravel-covered elementary and middle school grounds are being revamped with trees, gardens, artwork, and playground equipment. The new landscapes remain part of the school property but will be accessible to the public after school hours and on weekends.

With schoolyards located every half mile, the learning landscapes add green space to built-out neighborhoods that previously lacked adequate parks and open areas. "They really provide a large amenity in the neighborhoods," says Baird.

Seattle, while not quite at this point yet, is steadily approaching its two distinct goals: In

the single-family neighborhoods (which cover about 70 percent of the city), the half-mile standard is close to being met, says Kevin Stoops, the planning manager for Seattle's parks and recreation department.

In the denser, multifamily and commercial neighborhoods, designated "urban villages," the city's goal is to have a park or mini-park no more than an eighth of a mile from every resident. Stoops estimates that close to 60 percent of those areas will meet that goal within the next few years.

Walking vs. driving



Numerous recent studies show that Americans today are rarely willing to walk more than a block or two. Some are physically incapable of going farther; others may be afraid to cross neighborhood boundaries; many more simply do not have the time. For seniors and young children, time and capability factors become even more of an issue.

"Most people perceive parks as strong amenities, and more people will use them if they're within walking distance," says Richard Killingsworth, director of the Active Living by Design program at the University of North Carolina.

Officials in cities with walkable park distance standards say that pedestrian accessibility increases physical fitness and general good health. Moreover, accessible city parks allow neighbors to connect during morning playground sessions, lunchtime picnics, afternoon pick-up games, after-dinner strolls, or weekend festivals. It is relationships with people that make parks more than just fields, trees, and playground equipment.

On the other hand, a distance of over half a mile to a park almost guarantees that most people will either skip the trip or they will drive. Once a standard is downgraded so that it is based on driving, it loses the "community" portion of the benefit. At that point, it no longer matters how far away the park is. The park has become a formal destination, not a place to drop in.

Other issues also enter the equation. Those who must travel a greater distance to get to the park are less likely to know other park visitors. Younger children and teens will no longer be able to get to the park on their own. More drivers may make it necessary to devote part of the park itself to a parking lot.

Hard to meet

The health value also goes down. According to a study on obesity, community design, and physical activity soon to be published by Lawrence D. Frank of the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia, every additional hour spent in a car is associated with a six percent increase in the likelihood of obesity.

But even a city that recognizes the connection between fitness and walking can have trouble meeting the standard. In its 1983 parks master plan, officials in Austin set a goal of placing every resident within one mile of a park. But even that rather low goal has been hard to meet, says Stuart Strong, planning, design, and construction manager for the Department of Parks and Recreation. "We just couldn't keep up with a one-mile standard."

Austin has, in fact, acquired large tracts of open space in recent decades. But money has not always been available to buy smaller parcels for neighborhood parks, Strong says. As an alternative, the city has provided greenways to link existing parks. It also encourages residents to bike instead of drive to park facilities like the famous Barton Springs Pool.

Other places have similar problems. "We're not even close to meeting the one-mile goal," says Phil Bruce, the planning director of Jacksonville. A planner in Indianapolis estimates that, even with the city's one-mile standard, 30 percent of its residents do not have the mandated access to a park.

Geographic information systems have made calculating distance from parks far easier than in the past. In North Carolina, officials of the merged Charlotte-Mecklenburg County park and recreation department use GIS to plot a one-mile service radius on maps marked with population figures and existing parks. The computer can then determine how many people live inside each service circle; the maps make it obvious where new parkland should be acquired. Currently, only 49 percent of Mecklenburg County's residents live within a mile of the closest park, according to park planner John DeKemper.

Keeping up



But even with GIS and other tools, park planners often face an uphill battle when it comes to acquiring land. That's especially true in inner-city areas, according to DeKemper.

"We're competing with developers who want to build housing, and we have a very limited budget," he says. "A quarter mile or a half mile would be a nice goal, but I don't think it's

something we would be able to achieve here."

Michael Krosschell, principal planner for Indianapolis's Department of Parks and Recreation, faces the same problem. "We're running to try to keep up, but subdivisions are going up," he says, explaining the city's modest one-mile goal.

David Fisher has another view, based on his long experience as the superintendent of the Minneapolis park system. (He left in 1999 to become executive director of the newly created Great Rivers Greenway in St. Louis.)

Fisher thinks city park officials are too timid in their outreach. "We tell people, 'You need a park in your neighborhood just like everyone else.'" He adds, "Park systems suffer too quietly. Fire departments don't do that. You lose out when the money gets low because people don't think parks are a priority."

In Fisher's view, park officials must take a marketing-oriented approach if they are to overcome the resistance of mayors and city councils to buying land and developing parks in needy areas. That approach worked in greater St. Louis, where residents of six jurisdictions in two states voted to tax themselves to pay for parkland to create interconnecting greenways in the Mississippi River corridor.

Kathy Dickhut, assistant commissioner of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development, agrees that planners must take aggressive steps to add parkland. In rapidly developing areas, Dickhut recommends charging developers an open space impact fee, "based on clear open space goals and objectives." (Chicago's impact fee ranges from \$313 to \$1,253 per unit, depending on location, and the money goes toward buying parkland.)

With more than 500 parks occupying 7,000 acres, the Chicago Park District estimates that more than 90 percent of the city's 2.9 million residents have a park or play lot within a half mile of their home. Nineteen different park districts operated separately before being consolidated in 1934. "I think that helped get this distribution across the whole city," says Dickhut. "You had separate focuses on different parts of the town and everyone wanted to make sure they had their own parks."

Still, there were charges of discrimination in predominantly African American neighborhoods. In the 1990s, the city undertook the highly detailed study that led to its "City Space" plan, which identified gaps in parkland. Based on those findings, the planning department and the park district now earmark impact fees paid by developers of new housing units. Since 1998, says Dickhut, over \$23 million in impact fees has been collected — enough to buy land for 21 parks, totaling 17 acres.

Peter Harnik is the author of Inside City Parks (Urban Land Institute, 2000) and the director of the Center for City Park Excellence, a division of the Trust for Public Land, located in Washington, D.C. Jeff Simms is an intern at the center.

When Standards Fall Short

By Mary Eysenbach

In doing research for APA's City Parks Forum, I reviewed countless park and open space plans. According to many of the plans, the park standards set by the National Recreation and Park Association ranged from as low as four acres for every 1,000 people to 17 acres per 1,000 people. Why such a spread? Apparently, the original 1979 standards calling for a certain number of acres for certain types of parks had been misinterpreted, miscalculated, or both.

Some plans took a different approach, based on the 1996 edition of NRPA's *Park, Recreation, Open Space and Greenway Guidelines*. This edition (the latest) calls for local park standards to be based on a level-of-service analysis, an improvement over the cookie-cutter method, but still not a perfect solution.

The problem with both approaches is that they consider parks only as recreational facilities. Even the more up-to-date, LOS version is based upon resident demand garnered from use and survey data fed into a formula that determines the amount of space needed for ballfields, sports courts, and other facilities. The demand for unstructured park space such as open lawns or wooded areas is not addressed. How many surveys include questions about those kinds of spaces?

The fact is that parks play multiple roles in our communities. Parks are integral parts of our physical, social, emotional, and in some cases, spiritual landscapes. They provide public gathering places. Parks and open spaces are a critical tool for protecting natural resources. Exposure to green spaces helps reduce our stress levels. Parks as open space have a key urban design role in development patterns.

None of those functions is captured by the recreational facility standards we use today. Standards that take into account proximity, service areas, and percentage of land cover, are an improvement but they still fall short.

What we need is a set of indicators that relates to park function in a more holistic way. That might mean looking at the amount of pervious land cover, percentage of tree canopy, or public triangulation points. This kind of multivariable analysis, while made easier by geographic information systems, is still sure to be uncomfortably messy. But as the great landscape planner Jens Jensen said, "A little inconvenience for the sake of a better environment is well worth the cost."

Mary Eysenbach is the former director of APA's City Parks Forum.

Standards for Maximum Allowable Distance from a Park

City	Distance (in feet)	Approximate % of Residents Meeting the Distance Standard	Year Standard Adopted
Austin	5,280	60	early 1980s
Charlotte	5,280	50	1989
Chicago	2,640	90	unknown
Cleveland	2,640	unknown	1988
Columbus	2,640	unknown	unknown
Colorado Springs	2,640	unknown	unknown
Denver (new development)	1,050	unknown	unknown
Denver (older development)	2,100	90+	2003
Fresno	1,320	unknown	unknown
Indianapolis	5,280	70	"last 5-10 years"
Jacksonville	5,280	unknown	2003
Long Beach (high density neighborhoods)	1,320	unknown	unknown
Long Beach: low density neighborhoods)	2,640	unknown	unknown
Minneapolis	3,200	99+	unknown
Nashville	2,640	unknown	2002
Phoenix	2,640	unknown	unknown
Portland	2,640	unknown	unknown
San Jose	3,960	unknown	unknown
Seattle (urban villages)	660	unknown	1993

Seattle (single family neighborhoods)	2,640	90+	1993
Average Distance	2,925	.	.

Source: Trust for Public Land

Resources

Images: Top — Austin's Barton Springs Pool. Photo courtesy Austin Parks and Recreation Department. Middle — The new bicycle parking facility in Chicago's Millennium Park. Photo by Sylvia Lewis. Bottom — Denver is converting schoolyards into parklike "learning landscapes" open to the public after school hours. Photo courtesy Lois Brink, Denver Parks and Recreation Department.

TPL. The Trust for Public Land is based in San Francisco and has offices in 40 cities. Since 1972, TPL has completed more than 2,500 land-conservation projects on some 1.5 million acres. Its urban program has acquired parkland in park-poor communities in more than 400 cities. TPL's most recent report, *No Place to Play*, compares park access in almost two dozen cities is scheduled for release early next year. For more information, go to www.tpl.org.