

Equal Justice, Democracy & Livability: Lessons from the Urban Park Movement

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Overview

The Center for Law in the Public Interest is empowering communities through a collective vision for a comprehensive and coherent web of parks, schools, beaches, forests, and transportation that promotes human health, a better environment, and economic vitality for all, and reflects the cultural diversity of Los Angeles. The Center is getting people active in parks and schools, and giving them the places and means to do it. Our goal is equal access to public resources, with equal justice, democracy, and livability for all.

Los Angeles is park poor, and there are unfair park, school, and health disparities. Children of color disproportionately live in communities of concentrated poverty without places to play in parks and schools, with no cars or an adequate transit system to reach those places. The human health implications of the lack of places to play and recreate are profound. These children disproportionately suffer from obesity, diabetes, and other diseases related to inactivity. This is the first generation in the history of the country in which children will have a lower life expectancy than their parents if present trends in obesity and inactivity continue.

There is an extraordinary opportunity to provide places and policies for physical activity in parks and schools. Recently elected Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa – the first Hispanic Mayor in Los Angeles in 130 years -- has vowed to make Los Angeles the greenest big city in the country. City Controller Laura Chick recently published an audit documenting systemic management failures in the Department of Recreation and Parks, and providing a blue print for reform. Necessary reforms include: a strategic plan to improve park services in every neighborhood, and alleviate unfair disparities; standards to measure equity and progress in achieving reform; a fair system of financing and fees; a community needs assessment that measures the needs of how diverse users use parks differently; shared use of parks and schools to make optimal use of scarce land and public resources; and safer parks. The City of Los Angeles is engaged in a master plan process for the revitalization of the Los Angeles River, providing region wide opportunities for park, school, and community revitalization. State resource bonds provide billions of dollars for urban parks and schools.

¹ Robert García is Executive Director and Counsel at the Center for Law in the Public Interest in Los Angeles, CA. The Center's work on urban parks is made possible in part by the generous support of the Ford, Surdna, Resources Legacy Fund, Packard, and Haynes Foundations. Information on the Center can be found at www.clipi.org.

The Center has worked and published extensively on healthy parks, schools, and communities. Robert García and Erica S. Flores, *Anatomy of the Urban Park Movement: Equal Justice, Democracy and Livability in Los Angeles*, chapter in Robert Bullard, ed., *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution* (2005); Robert García and Erica Flores Baltodano, *Free the Beach! Public Access, Equal Justice, and the California Coast*, 2 *Stanford Journal Civil Rights and Civil Liberties* 143 (2006); Robert García and Erica Flores, *We Shall Be Moved: Community Activism as a Tool for Reversing the Rollback*, in Denise C. Morgan et al., eds., *Awakening From The Dream: Pursuing Civil Rights in a Conservative Era* (2005); Robert García and Thomas A. Rubin, *Crossroad Blues: The MTA Consent Decree and Just Transportation*, in Karen Lucas, ed., *Running on Empty: Transport, Social Exclusion, and Environmental Justice* (2004); Robert García et al., *Healthy Children, Healthy Communities: Schools, Parks, Recreation, and Sustainable Regional Planning*, *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, Symposium on Urban Equity (2004); Policy Report, *Healthy Parks, Schools, and Communities: Mapping Green Access and Equity for the Los Angeles Region* (2006).

The Vision

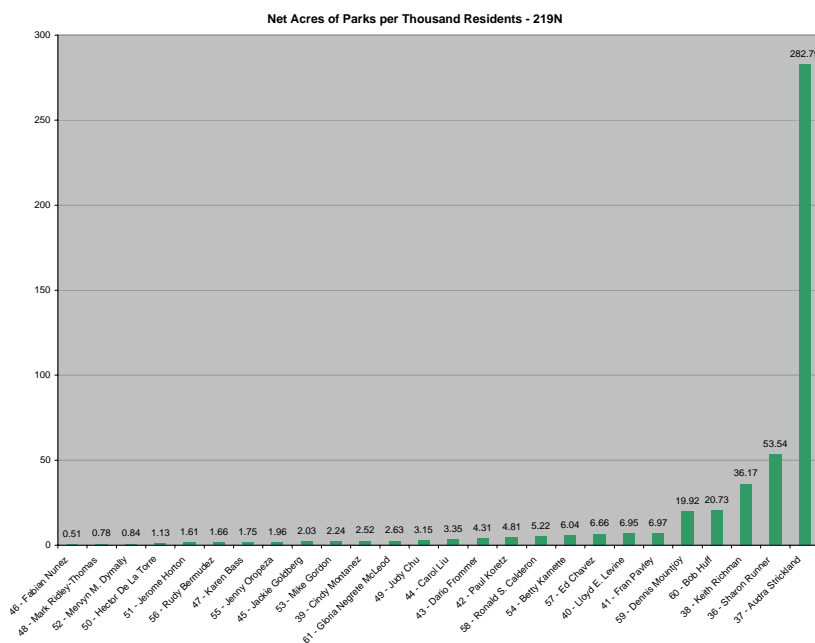
The people of Los Angeles can look to a classic report for regional planning. The 1930 report Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches for the Los Angeles Regions was prepared by the firm started by the sons of Frederick Law Olmsted, the man who designed Central Park in New York City and started the field of landscape architecture (maps 101 and 104). (Sample maps and Charts are available at www.clipi.org.) Implementing the Olmsted plan would have made Los Angeles one of the most beautiful and livable regions in the world. Powerful private interests and civic leaders demonstrated a tragic lack of vision and judgment when they killed the report. Politics, bureaucracy, and greed overwhelmed the public interest in a triumph of private power over public space and social justice.

The urban park movement has the opportunity to restore a part of that vision and the lost beauty of Los Angeles. The stark reality today is very different.

Unfair Park, School, and Health Disparities

Today, children of color living in poverty with no access to cars have the worst access to parks and recreation (map 218). Many people live more than half a mile from the nearest park throughout the Los Angeles region (map 202). Children of color disproportionately live in the state assembly districts with the highest levels of child obesity and the worst access to parks, and to schools with five acres or more of playing fields. The levels of obesity are intolerably high for all children throughout the region — ranging from 23% to 40% (map 601). Fully 87% of the children in Los Angeles public schools are not physically fit.

There are unfair disparities in access to parks and recreation. Thus, for example, State Assembly District 46 in the inner city has only .51 net acres of urban parks per thousand residents, compared to 283 net acres in District 37 in the disproportionately white and relatively wealthy West Side of Los Angeles. The disparities are even more dramatic if total acres of parks including forests and other large natural open spaces are included, as illustrated by the charts and graphs. For example, inner city District 46 has only .51 total acres of parks per thousand residents, compared to 3,348.72 in District 37 (Chart 219N).



The shared use of parks and schools can alleviate the lack of places to play and recreate, while making optimal use of scarce land, taxpayers' dollars, and public resources (map 502). Unfortunately, schools with five acres or more of playing fields tend to be located in communities that are disproportionately white and wealthy and have greater access to parks (map 502, chart 225C).

The same children who do not have access to parks and school fields in their own neighborhoods lack access to cars and a decent transit system to reach parks and school fields in other neighborhoods. The Angeles National Forest, the most urban influenced forest in the country, lies within an hour's drive of Los Angeles, but the forest is virtually inaccessible for the working poor with limited or no access to a car. There is virtually no public transit to reach the four forests of Southern California from Union Station in downtown Los Angeles. Only 1% of the visitors to the Angeles National Forest are African-Americans, in a region where 10% of the population is African-American. The Center is focusing on this concern through Transit to Trails for the Southern California region to diversify access to and support for the forests.

For years, there have been unfair disparities in regional planning in different parts of Los Angeles. Wealthy homeowners on hilltops and in canyons commanded the attention of city planners and elected officials on the wealthy West Side. Together they crafted and approved specific plans to balance competing property interests while preserving some amenities of an L.A. lifestyle: a woody feel in the midst of the city, open space and priceless views. In East L.A., on the other hand, which is disproportionately Hispanic and lower income, developers and builders could build unimpeded by land use plans that dictate setbacks, restrict tree removal and govern grading. Hillsides remained open because fewer people wanted to live there, not because development was heavily regulated. Now that the real estate market is hot, development threatens remaining open space, without the same planning standards that apply on the other side of town.

Wealthy property owners who live near public lands, trails, and beaches, are now trying to cut off public access and privatize those public goods. The Center is fighting to keep public lands open for all from the mountain summits to the sea.

According to a survey by the Public Policy Institute of California, 64% of Californians believe that poorer communities have less than their fair share of well-maintained parks and recreational facilities.²

Unfair park, school, and health disparities are not an accident of unplanned growth, but the continuing legacy of a pattern and history of discriminatory land use, housing, and economic policies.³

The lack of places to play and recreate in parks and schools is not just an issue for low-income communities of color, but indeed for all the people throughout Los Angeles. Los Angeles faces an historic opportunity to improve the quality of life enjoyed by all residents for generations to come by improving access to parks and recreation for all.

The Cornfield Case Study

² Mark Baldasare, Public Policy Institute of California Statewide Survey: Special Survey on Californians and the Environment vi (June 2002).

³ Lawrence Culver, *The Garden and the Grid: Race, Recreation, and Parks in the City and County of Los Angeles* (forthcoming 2006).

The example of the new 32 acre Los Angeles State Historic Park at the Cornfield in downtown Los Angeles provides a backdrop for exploring the urban parks movement—a movement that is making Los Angeles a greener, more just, and more democratic community for all. This is the story of grassroots struggles by people of color partnering with public interest lawyers to gain access to parks, school fields, and, ultimately, the good life. The Los Angeles Times called the victory in the Cornfield “a heroic monument” and “a symbol of hope.”

“On a deserted railroad yard north of Chinatown, one of Los Angeles’s most powerful and tenacious real estate developers, Ed Roski, Jr., of Majestic Realty Co., met his match,” as reported in a front page article in the *Los Angeles Times*.⁴ Advocates stopped federal subsidies for an \$80 million warehouse project, and secured state funding to create the new park in the Cornfield. Advocates secured the support of the community, a Cardinal of the Catholic Church, Guatemalan Nobel Peace Laureate Rigoberta Menchú, a Cabinet member in the Clinton administration, Governor Gray Davis, and the state legislative leadership to make the dream of a park come true.

Advocates for the park in the Cornfield relied on a multiple strategies that included a collective vision to affirmatively create something good in the community (a park), and not just stop bad things from happening (warehouses); community empowerment and coalition building; a strategic media campaign to focus attention on the need for a park; multidisciplinary research and analyses (including the history of discriminatory land use planning in Los Angeles; financial analyses of unfair park funding; demographic analyses based on race, ethnicity, and income; and legal analyses creatively combining civil rights with environmental and historic preservation laws); legal and policy advocacy outside the courts; and litigation as a last resort within the context of a broader campaign. Advocates filed a successful administrative complaint that resulted in the cutting off of federal subsidies for the warehouse project. Attorneys also filed a law suit challenging the warehouse project without a full environmental impact report.

Many experts advised the Alliance that their fight against City Hall and Majestic was hopeless. But the Alliance pressed ahead with a “sophisticated political, legal and media blitz” that put legal and political obstacles in the path of the warehouses and secured support for a park.⁵ “They tried to present it as a done deal from the beginning,” said Lewis MacAdams, founder of Friends of the Los Angeles River, a key organizer of the Chinatown Yard Alliance, and a poet. “We said, ‘No, it’s not a done deal.’ We were good at presenting options.”⁶

One of the central lessons of the Cornfield is the importance of building a diverse coalition that appeals to a variety of interests while staying focused on unifying goals – here, to create the park and stop the warehouse project. Advocates offered a vision for a positive alternative use of the land, in addition to opposing the warehouse project, and secured the resources to make that dream a reality. The Alliance brought together an unprecedented group of over 35 community, civil rights, traditional environmental, environmental justice, religious, business, and civic organizations and leaders.

Emphasizing the different values at stake brought together different stakeholders to support the creation of the park in the Cornfield. Parks provide children the simple joys of playing in the park, and promote academics, leadership, and youth development through sports. Places for physical activity improve health and reduce obesity. Trees and greenery clean air, water, and brownfields. Parks improve economic vitality through increased property values, tourism, and taxes. Spiritual values of stewardship of the earth

⁴ Jesus Sanchez, “L.A.’s Cornfield Row: How Activists Prevailed,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 17, 2001, A1.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

and its people motivate the faith based community. Equal access to public resources and democratic decision making unite political progressives.

"Nothing like this has ever happened in Chinatown before," according to Chinatown activist Chi Mui. "We've never had such a victory. And now, every time people walk with their children down to that park, they'll see that great things can happen when folks come together and speak up. We can renew our community one dream at a time." People who have not participated in government before are fighting city hall and wealthy developers—and winning.

Conclusion

Parks are important in themselves. Parks are also an important organizing tool to bring people together to create the kind of community where they want to live and raise children.

The Center is committed to reform of recreation and parks through a democratic process that includes full and fair public information and public participation in deciding the future of the region. The Center is focusing on several avenues: places and policies for physical activity to improve health in parks and schools; increased funding for urban parks and school fields in infrastructure bonds; implementing a blueprint for reform of parks and recreation; shared use of parks and schools; keeping public lands open for all; and diversifying access to forests, beaches, parks, and open space through Transit to Trails. The greening of Los Angeles offers an historic opportunity to revitalize urban communities with improved economic, environmental, and equitable development and human health for all.