

## Prioritize and Partner Up to Pay for Safe Routes to Parks Infrastructure



When it comes to creating safe, connected streets and sidewalks, having enough money to build safer facilities is one of the biggest barriers. If new sources of funding specifically for safety and access improvements are not in the cards, there are still options for moving existing funding toward equitable park access and safety projects as well as opportunities to partner with efforts that align with Safe Routes to Parks goals. Safe Routes to Parks is all about making it easy for people to walk and bike to local parks and green spaces. Both active transportation and parks and recreation advocates need to work together to make that happen, and it can align with the goals of other departments and movements as well, such as public health, environmental resilience, and equity.

With a collection of case studies, this factsheet offers strategies to move existing funding toward improving safe and equitable park access and the partnerships that can help facilitate both funding and implementation. Resources and examples primarily focus on walking and rolling, however, transit is included within the opportunities for collaboration.



Photo Credit: Cultiva La Salud

## Using Existing Funding

Sometimes it's not a matter of whether or not money is available, but rather, what it is available for. Existing funding streams and plans can align with community-identified goals to increase park access and equity because working on Safe Routes to Parks can help achieve larger goals such as climate resilience, improved health, or neighborhood revitalization. Look at established plans and goals and identify where Safe Routes to Parks goals can plug in to advance those goals. Perhaps there is an opportunity to prioritize stated goals more explicitly through a project selection process. In addition, reviewing plans from across the community can be helpful because aligning multiple plans and schedules across departments for maintenance and small infrastructure improvements can make project dollars stretch further than if they were implemented as separate projects. This is called "project bundling." Look at ways that current funding can be more equitably distributed as well as support or be supported by Safe Routes to Parks connections and goals

### Project Prioritization

Below are two examples of how cities built their priorities into their project selection process. In both, projects that align more closely with equity and infrastructure goals get boosted. If your community wants to prioritize specific neighborhoods that have a history of underinvestment or concentrate on making more connections to green space, that priority can be built into the standard decision-making process so that aligned projects get funded and built. Making this part of a standard process can help guide sustainable movement toward larger goals.

- Advancing equity goals on Milwaukee's playfields:** In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Milwaukee Recreation created a prioritized list of playfield projects based on [an equity prioritization model](#) that centers racial and economic equity. They hosted community engagement sessions to understand the needs of each neighborhood and supplemented that information with data on each neighborhood, population characteristics surrounding each playfield, and a rating for the condition of each site. Throughout the process, they have recognized the vital role of community engagement in informing and implementing projects.<sup>1</sup>
- Prioritizing equitable implementation in Oakland's capital improvement program:** The City of Oakland, California uses equity as one of nine factors to prioritize projects in their Capital Improvement Program. The City of Oakland's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) determines the city's investments in construction, repair, and/or replacement of assets such as parks, streets, bicycle paths, recreation centers, and libraries. Every two years, the city develops a new CIP budget that is then included in the overall city budget. The departments of transportation and public works do outreach to gather community input for potential projects and then prioritize which ones to fund based on the score from a prioritization model. Staff present the scores and recommendations to the city council as part of the budget development process which includes public meetings and opportunities for public comment.<sup>2</sup>



### Take Action in Your Community!

Incorporate a project prioritization and selection process that awards resources to projects that advance your community's equity, active transportation, and park access goals. This could look like a standard rubric, where each project is assessed and extra points awarded for priority goals.



## Project Bundling

If there are already plans for routine maintenance or other improvements on portions of the routes to a park, find ways to tack on low-cost improvements that align with the community's stated needs.

- **Aligning Safe Routes to Park improvements with city paving plans:** In Birmingham, Alabama, Memorial Park sits next to two neighborhoods with rich histories of Black residents, small business corridors, and churches. The park has great amenities, but there was virtually no bicycle infrastructure that allowed people to safely ride to the park. REV Birmingham, a non-profit community development organization, saw an opportunity to leverage the city's new Complete Streets policy to advocate for safer bike routes. They reviewed the paving plans and schedules to identify opportunities where bike improvements could connect these neighborhoods to the thriving park. Two years later, when the city repaved a portion of that corridor, they striped a bike lane and narrowed the travel lanes to slow car travel.



Photo Credit: REV Birmingham

### Take Action in Your Community!

Look at your city's repaving and street maintenance schedule to identify if any of the streets slated for improvement could help improve access to parks or connected routes. If it is not posted online, call your city's public works or engineering department. They usually will have repaving schedules years in advance. Once you have that schedule, use your community's Complete Streets policy, Vision Zero commitment, or other mobility policies to advocate for why connectivity and safety improvements should be incorporated into routine maintenance.

## Planning for Future Funding

If a project is included in a larger plan, it is more likely to be included in future funding proposals. Research the timing for new plans and plan revisions in your jurisdiction so that you can get involved and advocate for specifically including safe and equitable access to everyday destinations such as parks. Look at your city's planning website or connect with them via phone to learn about upcoming plans. Check what plans are required by your state as well. For example, some states require that each city update a comprehensive plan every few years. Every community is different, but here are some plans that could be a good place to incorporate park access goals during plan writing and where Safe Routes to Parks work could help support implementation:

- Bike and Pedestrian Master Plan (Local)
- Community Health Improvement Plan (County/Region)
- Complete Streets Policy (Local/State)
- Comprehensive Plan (Local)
- Park Master Plan (Local)
- Regional Transportation Plan (Region)
- Safe Routes to School Master Plan (Local/County)
- State Transportation Plan (State)
- Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (State)
- Urban Trails Master Plan (Local)
- Vision Zero Action Plan (Local)



### Take Action in Your Community!

Identify what plans your city currently has and whether there are any updates or new plans coming in the next five years. Look on your city website for plans, investigate what plans are required by your state, and/or connect with the city planning office. Identify how Safe Routes to Parks goals could support the goals in these plans and potentially be incorporated into updates.



## Align Efforts to Creatively Use Funding

Public funding for parks and active transportation is limited. Consider working with other efforts with designated public funding that can also apply to park-related improvements. For example, stormwater, climate resiliency, affordable housing, and public health investments may be used in local parks to improve quality and access while also achieving the goals of those specific programs.<sup>3</sup>

### Stormwater

**Stormwater management infrastructure** can also double as safe street improvements. For example, a bioswale, a landscaping feature that helps collect and clean stormwater runoff, can do double duty as a bulb-out/ curb extension, which extends the sidewalk to narrow the roadway and slows traffic.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, permeable pavement can be installed for pedestrian improvements or landscaping for water management can pair well with a bench to create a pocket park. “Green streets” combine stormwater and complete streets. If you are curious about diving into details about designing safe streets with green infrastructure, explore the [Urban Street Stormwater Guide](#) from the National Association of City Transportation Officials.

- **Stormwater upgrades with a side of park access:** In Portland, Oregon, stormwater upgrades helped improve a pocket park and increase safety for a neighborhood bikeway. This project came together through a collaboration between several parties interested in complementary outcomes. The Portland Bureau of Transportation wanted to divert traffic at this block to enhance an existing bike boulevard, the neighborhood was interested in making park improvements, and the Bureau of Environmental Services wanted to decrease unnecessary impervious surfaces and enhance opportunities for stormwater management. To achieve all of these goals, they used funding from the EPA Innovative Wet Weather Program to narrow the travel lanes, decrease the impervious surface area, and improve the park as a neighborhood destination. Residents of the neighborhood participated in the design process and requested more seating areas and a kiosk.<sup>5</sup>



## Schools

**Schools** are invested in the safety and well-being of students and can be important partners in future development and well-being for communities.

- Sharing space:** One way to simultaneously increase park access and improve schoolyards is through **shared use**, also known as **joint use**. In general, this occurs when one entity agrees to open or broaden access to their property and/or facilities for community use, such as recreational activities. The partnerships can be formalized through agreements or informally based on historical practices. Regardless, successful partnerships generally rely on pooling resources to expand community access and use public space more efficiently. These agreements can meaningfully expand play and recreation opportunities, particularly for areas with low park access. Parks and recreation departments may take on shared responsibility for maintenance of existing facilities on school grounds, which is far less expensive than building new facilities in areas with limited park access. For more detailed tools and resources for shared use agreements, [read this factsheet](#) on shared use that also includes common challenges and keys to success. For more details on the potential forms of shared use policies, read [this factsheet](#) on the spectrum of shared use policies and agreements.
- Schoolyards as park space:** In Houston, Texas, the SPARK School Park Program expands park access by helping public schools improve their outdoor spaces with the condition that the space remain open to the public outside of school hours. Schools apply to the program and commit to fundraising \$5,000 which is then supplemented by SPARK. SPARK then works with a landscape architect to help students, caregivers, teachers, and community members collaboratively design the space for their community's unique needs. SPARK used funds from the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program (a federal program funding community development) to develop community parks on school grounds in predominantly low-income and has worked with over 200 schools in 17 school districts.<sup>6</sup>
- Built-in coordination:** In Beaverton, Oregon, the Safe Routes to School coordination team includes a representative from Tualatin Hills Parks and Recreation as well as other city and county departments. The team meets monthly to coordinate and support each other's projects and programming. They worked together to install a temporary, "pop-up" traffic safety playground (also known as a "traffic garden") on an unused basketball play pad. The Safe Routes to School shared photos of a similar concept in Portland, explained the rationale and benefits, and explained that they were seeking a location for installation. The parks and recreation department followed up the next week to offer potential locations. Implement a traffic playground to engage students and families, and support educational programming at your park using [Oregon Metro's Safe Routes to School step-by-step guide](#).<sup>7</sup>



Photo Credit: Tom Callins



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## Friends of the Park Groups

**Local “friends of the park” groups** are volunteer groups that can be strong partners. Giving these groups the ability to clean and manage the city-owned land can both save on costs and help build community ownership of the park space.

- **Stretch Public Dollars:** In Brownsville, Texas, Keep Brownsville Beautiful helped funds go further by using \$75,000 in city general funds and \$67,000 in grants and awards to coordinate volunteer hours estimated to be worth over \$3 million.<sup>8</sup>



Photo Credit: Salem Leadership Foundation

## Transit

**Transit:** Communities of color, low-income communities, older adults, and people with disabilities are statistically less likely to have access to high-quality, accessible outdoor spaces and more likely to not have access to personal vehicles. While this factsheet has primarily focused on financing the improvements within walking and biking distance, there is also significant value to increasing the range of natural areas and parks that people can access via public transportation. From the perspective of park agencies, adding transit options can help manage traffic and get around limited parking at popular destinations.<sup>9</sup>

- **Providing transit passes:** In Little Rock, Arkansas, dependable, affordable transportation is a challenge, but for the most vulnerable it can mean the difference between getting to work, accessing enough food, and seeing the doctor. In the summer of 2019, the Central Arkansas Library System (CALs), Rock Region METRO, and the Little Rock Parks and Recreation Department launched a program to provide bus passes to vulnerable youth and families to support their transportation needs throughout the summer. The Be Mighty METRO program was primarily intended to boost the number of kids accessing the city’s summer meal sites and enrichment activities at libraries, parks, and community centers, but it also allowed caregivers more freedom to move throughout the city for daily tasks and community events. Throughout the summer, 1,200 metro passes were distributed to kids, teens, and caregivers, which resulted in 16,792 total rides. At just the library locations, 2,226 more summer meals were served (a 49% increase over the previous summer). This successful program has motivated the partners to continue educating the community about public transportation to grow ridership as well as continue working together to find solutions for the community’s transportation needs.
- **Filling transit gaps:** In Los Angeles County, California, the Topanga Beach Bus connects from Woodland Hills (about 30 minutes from the coast) through Topanga Canyon to local beaches and links up with two Metro lines along the way. The service began as a summer initiative from County Board Supervisor Sheila Kuehl’s office and became a project of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works. This low-cost connection to public beaches now operates 7 days a week all year. It is still funded through Supervisor Kuehl’s office.<sup>10</sup> The general fare is \$1 per trip. Senior citizens and people with disabilities get a 50% discount.<sup>11</sup>



- Connecting youth to recreation:** In Clark County, Washington, the regional transit provider (C-TRAN), county parks and recreation department, and two school districts collaborate to provide the Youth Opportunity Pass (YOP). YOP provides free, unlimited access to C-TRAN and two community centers for all middle and high school students from participating school districts.<sup>12</sup> This program began in 2015 as a pilot program and is still popular among students. The community centers provide recreational opportunities with basketball courts, fitness centers, and game rooms. C-TRAN busses connect to a variety of parks. The passes, which are valued at more than \$300 annually, are paid for through C-TRAN's general fund. Although it is available to all students in the two school districts, students must apply for the pass. This process ensures that pass-holders are interested and likely to use the program. The program not only increases the accessibility of recreational spaces, but it supports access to both indoor and outdoor options for any season. This program also introduces kids to transit at a young age, potentially instilling a life-long practice, while also increasing choice ridership.<sup>13</sup>
- Using transportation right of way:** Look into opportunities to add small park spaces or linear parks in the right of way owned by transit agencies.
  - In Lynwood, California, 5.25 acres of vacant lots owned by Caltrans along the I-105 freeway were transformed into a linear park with a walking trail, exercise stations, a playground, and a community garden.<sup>14</sup> It also filters significant stormwater runoff and connects LARIO Trail, a 28-mile regional bike and equestrian trail.<sup>15</sup>
  - In Detroit, Michigan, NW Goldberg Cares, a community development corporation, transformed a vacant lot with a bus stop into a pocket park called REST & RIDE PARK. Their vision was to provide a safe and enjoyable space for residents and visitors to wait for the bus that runs through their neighborhood.<sup>16</sup> They raised \$12,500 to win a matching grant through the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's Public Spaces Community Places initiative.<sup>17</sup> They used that funding to add a sheltered bus stop, plants and flowers, rubber mulch pathways, and a mural by a local artist that shows residents waiting at the bus stop.<sup>18</sup>

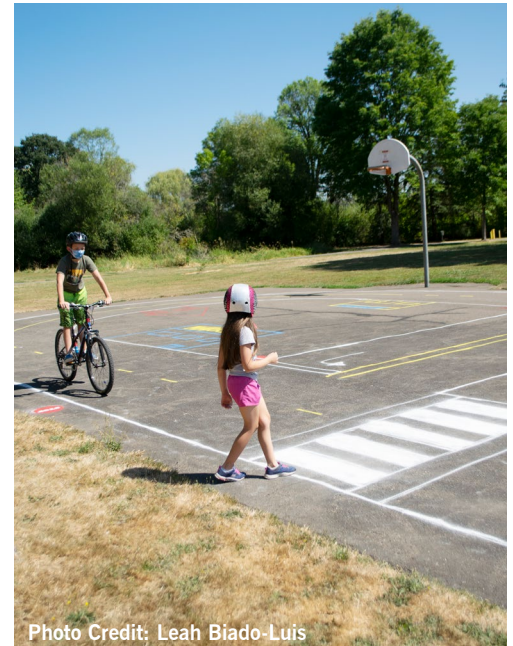


Photo Credit: Leah Biado-Luis

## Conclusion

The connections that get people to their local park or greenspace enable them to benefit from the multitude of health and safety benefits that come with safe and equitable access to nature. With creativity and collaboration, there are many ways to fund Safe Routes to Parks improvements. Whether it is a matter of innovatively using existing resources or cultivating partnerships to reach shared goals, making those connections is the key to success.



Photo Credit: NW Golberg Cares



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