



“Healthy cities need parks, and parks need management.”—Central Park Conservancy

A well-maintained, well-run park system provides health, educational, environmental, and economic benefits to a city and encourages civic engagement by providing public spaces for residents to gather, interact, and build a sense of community. Although 81% of respondents to a Worcester Parks Division survey in 2013 indicated that “parks, open space, and recreation” are “very important” to them, 52% responded that they rarely use Worcester’s parks because of poor conditions. Parks often lack reliable sources of funding for maintenance, programming, and capital projects because they compete for funding against other public needs — police, fire, education, and economic development. With tight budgets, municipalities across the country have begun to rely more on public-private partnerships, like conservancies, to maintain parks and provide programming.

In 2008, The Research Bureau published *Maintaining Municipal Parks: Thinking Outside the Picnic Basket*, which highlighted declining public resources for parkland and the need for new funding models based on partnerships and revised fee structures for private activity on public land. The establishment of a park conservancy—a privately led non-profit with park management responsibility, was among the alternatives highlighted. The Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national non-profit organization that advocates and provides funds for the creation of open space, said conservancies in the United States are “small in acreage, substantial in financial clout and number of people served, and growing rapidly.”

The Conservancy Model

Many cities are turning to a conservancy model to provide the financial and programming stability that parks need to serve as an important element in the quality of life for residents. Conservancies are nonprofit entities and although they assume significant responsibility for a park, often in perpetuity, they do not own the park; the public retains ultimate control. Conservancies can be responsible for a park as small as five acres (Woodall Rogers Park Foundation, Dallas) or as large as 10,550 acres (Fairmont Park Conservancy, Philadelphia). A conservancy is led by a board comprised of both private individuals and public officials. Funds raised, often a combination of private and public dollars, are held separate from municipal funds and are used for maintenance, programming, and capital projects. Conservancies are often associated with signature parks that have high visibility and command public support and private donations. Some examples of conservancies are:

- The Central Park Conservancy (CPC), founded in 1980, manages 843-acre Central Park in New York City at the direction of a 53-member board, which includes the city’s parks commissioner and local borough president as *ex officio* members. The CPC oversees the park under a 10-year base contract with the City. The CPC provides 75% of Central Park’s \$57 million annual operating budget, with the conservancy responsible for all aspects of the park’s maintenance as well as capital investments and restorations.
- The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy (PPC), founded in 1996, manages four of the city’s parks, totaling 1,700 acres. It has a 31-member board, five (5) of which are *ex officio* including the mayor and parks, public works, and planning directors. The PPC has raised over \$84 million for park improvements, completing 14 major capital projects, and works with thousands of volunteers annually.
- The Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy (RKG), created by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts working with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and City of Boston, oversees the 15-acre Rose Kennedy Greenway, public park space created by the removal of Boston’s elevated Central Artery highway. The RKG is led by a 21-member board which includes five government officials representing the City of Boston, Commonwealth of Massachusetts and MassDOT, and Massachusetts Convention Center Authority. The RKG is responsible for 60% of the Greenway’s operating budget and provides all maintenance and programming in the park. The RKG’s revenues come from annual donations including significant contributions from the MassDOT, its endowment (formed by public and private partners), fees from food trucks and concessions, admission fees to the park’s carousel, and contracted fees charged for maintenance of adjacent properties.

In February 2015, TPL completed case studies of 41 park conservancies across the nation, nearly half of which came into existence after 2000. TPL concluded that successful conservancies are representative of the community, professional, transparent, engaging with the public, and well-versed in communication—from press releases to park signage.

An important difference between a conservancy and many other parks-related groups is dedicated staffing. Conservancies often employ experts in the following fields: operations & management; horticulture; visitor services & public programming; communications & community outreach; security; finance & administration; and development/fundraising.

Worcester and the Potential of Park Conservancies

Worcester's Parks, Recreation & Cemetery Division is responsible for maintaining approximately 1,200 acres of municipally owned parkland, which includes a golf course, numerous tennis and basketball courts, soccer and baseball fields, a beach, spray parks, and open space. While the parkland maintained by the City has increased by 30 acres in the past decade, funding and staffing have remained essentially stagnant.

In Worcester, there are many examples of public-private partnership models such as neighborhood volunteer groups that host clean-up days (e.g., Friends of Newton Hill); organizations with staff and 501(c)(3) designation that advocate, raise money, and sponsor programming (e.g., Park Spirit) or are stewards of open space (e.g., Greater Worcester Land Trust); and large non-profits and for-profit entities that work with the city to help maintain and manage parks or donate money for a specific project or program (e.g., Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) and Institute Park). Volunteers and individual and corporate donors are great advocates, but to sustain public appeal municipal parks need reliable sources of funding for maintenance, programming, and capital investment.

Worcester has five parks that due to size, history, location, visibility, and/or usage may have the potential to be managed by a conservancy:

- **Worcester Common**, Worcester's oldest park established in 1669, is four acres and is situated in a high visibility area in downtown Worcester. The park has an outdoor seating area in warm weather months and an ice skating rink in the winter. Many citywide festivals and events, including the holiday tree lighting ceremony, occur there.
- **Elm Park**, established in 1854, is 60 acres and is known for its scenic bridges and walking paths. It has a playground and is the site of numerous concerts, festivals, and public art exhibits.
- **Institute Park**, established in 1887, is 24 acres and is located on a busy arterial roadway adjacent to WPI. It has walking trails, tennis courts, and an outdoor amphitheater for concerts and other events. WPI provides financial support for the park and there is an active 501(c)(3) friends group — Friends of Institute Park, Inc.
- **University Park (Crystal Park)**, established in 1887, is 13 acres and adjacent to Clark University. The park has many recreational amenities including basketball courts and a playground. Clark has partnered with the City to fund restoration and maintenance efforts.
- **Green Hill Park**, established in the early 1900s, is Worcester's largest park at 480 acres and is home to an 18-hole golf course, petting zoo, baseball fields, and the Commonwealth's Vietnam War Memorial. The City is planning the addition of a driving range at the site.

To ensure success, a conservancy in Worcester would require an initial commitment of public money to establish an endowment and provide early operating revenues. On a defined schedule, the conservancy should transition to private donations, new revenue sources (e.g., endowment earnings, fees, concessions, institutional commitments, etc.), and government grants for ongoing operating, maintenance, and capital needs. Ultimately, the success of a conservancy depends on the success of public and private partners supporting and promoting for public enjoyment the unique assets of an urban park and year-round outdoor programming.

Questions to Consider

- Is a conservancy a workable model for Worcester parks?
- What parks should be included in one or more local conservancies?
- What is the role of the City, the public, and the business community in establishing a conservancy?
- What safeguards should the City put in place to protect the public interest in a conservancy-managed park?
- What public and private funding mechanisms are appropriate for conservancies in Worcester?

For more information, see Peter Harnik and Abby Martin, "Public Spaces/Private Money: The Triumphs and Pitfalls of Urban Park Conservancies," The Trust for Public Land, February 2015.

Bureau Brief

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