

# APPENDIX L - OPEN SPACE PILOT PROGRAM - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PLANNING PHILADELPHIA'S



Pilot Study Findings and Recommendations for a Citywide Open Space Plan



## Executive Summary

Philadelphia is the only county in the region's nine-county area that does not have a comprehensive open space plan. Still, Philadelphia is home to some of the region's most treasured open space resources such as Fairmount Park's expansive and diverse river parks, lively Rittenhouse Square, and the National Park Service's Independence Mall.

Then, of course, there are the lesser-known parks, like the city's many neighborhood parks, gardens, and playgrounds all of which provide residents the opportunity to play, relax, and interact with one another. A comprehensive open space plan is essential if the city is going to enhance and maintain our existing parks as well as acquire new parks and open space in the places that need them most. It will also need to address the diverse open space needs of our city from improved and enhanced play areas for our children to more greenways for exercising and commuting and from reclaiming our waterfronts for leisure to managing stormwater and improving air quality to make a healthy city.

Fortunately, we are not starting from scratch. The city is currently working on a number of fronts to improve the city's open space network including the efforts of the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, the New River City Initiative, the Water Department's stormwater management pilot projects, and the School District's Campus Park Program. A comprehensive citywide open space plan will knit together these various efforts and help to build the successful open space system which is essential to maintaining and attracting businesses, residents, and visitors alike.

This pilot study, funded by the Pennsylvania Urban and Community Forestry Council, allowed the Philadelphia City Planning Commission (PCPC) to begin laying the groundwork for a citywide open space plan. To do so, PCPC set out to accomplish three things:

- assemble all the open space data available to date, assess its accuracy, and determine what is missing;
- more closely examine the available data in two pilot study areas (Southwest of Center City and Frankford) to test some of our assumptions about how the available data can be used to determine where open space is needed and how to address deficiencies; and
- hear from local and national experts on the state-of-the-art in big-city open space planning and, ultimately, weigh the lessons learned in our pilot study with lessons learned in other places to make recommendations for developing Philadelphia's citywide open space plan.

Over the course of this study, PCPC learned a great deal about where we are now and where we need to go to protect and enhance the city's open space system. While Philadelphia has a great deal of data about open space, vacant land, and the city's population, it is deficient in a myriad of ways. Often, we found it to be out-of-date or incomplete, as is the case with data on open space ownership and usage. In some very important areas it is non-existent; for instance, there is no data about what citizens want and need out of the park system. How do people use parks, or perhaps even more important, why do some people not use them?

When we examined the available data in the two study areas we found, among other things, that Philadelphia's communities have unique constraints and opportunities and that a citywide open space plan will need to be flexible enough to respond to city's diverse neighborhood conditions. We also learned, that our abundance of vacant land, while certainly a resource for providing open space where it is needed, cannot alone meet the city's open space needs. Nor is all vacant land appropriate for open space development. Therefore, the plan should provide criteria for evaluating the potential and appropriateness of land to be incorporated into the open space system.

Three visiting experts confirmed many of our findings and offered many new insights. Peter Harnik, Director of the Trust for Public Land's Center for City Parks Excellence, urged that we not use other cities' standards for maintaining and creating open space but instead be ambitious, set new standards, and establish Philadelphia as the national model for

open space planning and development. Harnik also said that leadership was the most essential ingredient to a successful park system. He recommended looking for leadership in a number of places from the Mayor to park "friends" groups.

Patricia Gallagher, Executive Director of the National Capital Planning Commission in Washington and former Director of Chicago's CitySpace plan, said to look for opportunities where you can get "the biggest bang for your buck." In Chicago, it was the public schools. The city's many dilapidated schoolyards were ideal opportunities not only to improve the school but their surrounding neighborhoods. It was this type of "on-the-ground" improvement that CitySpace's "model projects" program was based on, allowing the Mayor and other elected officials to demonstrate real progress throughout the planning process. Later, during informal discussions, Gallagher impressed upon PCPC staff the importance of developing a clear and catchy public message - one that makes the plan, its process, and its implementation engaging and exciting.

Carol Franklin, a principal of Andropogon Associates, Ltd., Philadelphia-based planning and design firm, said that the city's open space plan should build on our strengths and our individuality. She cited the successes of city programs, in particular, the Water Department's innovative stormwater management projects like Summerton Tank Farms and Fairmount Park's extensive volunteer program. These efforts, along with those of Philadelphia's many private citizens and park "friends" groups and

our unique tributary park system needs to be used as the backbone of the citywide open space plan. She attributed the success of Wissahickon Park to its "finger"-like pattern that reaches into the fabric of the surrounding neighborhoods. Similarly, she said that a healthy relationship between park and neighborhood is vital to the success of both. She also recommended looking in unexpected places for opportunities to enhance our open space network from streets and rooftops to forgotten places like covered streams and derelict waterfronts.

In the following pages you will read in more detail about the many initiatives going on in Philadelphia to improve and expand the open space system by the city and others; how Philadelphia compares to other cities around the country; what data we have; what data we do not have; what the pilot study areas taught us; what the visiting experts taught us; and finally, what PCPC recommends for moving ahead with a citywide open space plan.