



Sumner M. Redstone
Global Center for
Prevention & Wellness



Neighborhood Park Service:

Strategies to create an equitable
and activated park system for the
District of Columbia

Authors and Acknowledgements

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Land Acknowledgement

The parks, lands, and institutions detailed in this report are located on the unceded ancestral lands of the Nacotchtank (Anacostan), Piscataway, and Pamunkey peoples.

Suggested Citation

Clark, R., Whittier, K., Summa, C., & Moskowitz, D. (2023). (rep.). *Neighborhood Park Service: Strategies to create an equitable and activated park system for the District of Columbia*. Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness. <https://redstone.publichealth.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5276/files/2023-05/a-redstone-center-report-neighborhood-park-service.pdf>

About the Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness

Located within the Milken Institute School of Public Health at The George Washington University, the Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness recognizes that chronic disease, health inequities, and climate change are all interconnected and share common drivers. The Redstone Center works within the University and with community partners to support research, share expertise, and advance evidence-based policy solutions to address these interlinked public health threats.

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Executive Summary

Ranked the [#1 park system](#) in the United States three times by the Trust for Public Land, the District of Columbia has a nationally renowned park system. On paper, the District boasts a park system that is (1) highly accessible, with 98% of residents living within a 10-minute walk of a park; (2) equitable, with parks evenly distributed across the city based on race and income demographics of neighborhoods; and (3) high in total acreage of parkland, with 23.9% of the District's land categorized as greenspace. In reality, however, these figures fail to fully capture a park system that many residents would say does not live up to its full potential or reputation. Inconsistently managed and inequitably maintained, the District's park system does not meet the needs of the people who both live near and experience the park system as part of their daily lives.

The District of Columbia faces a unique barrier when trying to improve its park system: it does not own most of its parkland. Due to DC's status as a federal district and despite its broad functionality as a state, the vast majority of the District's parkland is owned by the National Park Service (NPS), a federal agency that is primarily focused on wilderness preservation at large uninhabited national parks across the country.

Most national parks serve as destinations for tourists and adventurers, but most NPS properties in DC function as small neighborhood parks bordered by homes and local businesses in the center of urban communities. This disconnect creates many challenges for the District when it sets out to activate, maintain, or improve the safety of its urban greenspaces.

Inconsistently managed and inequitably maintained, the District's park system does not meet the needs of the people who both live near and experience the park system as part of their daily lives

Challenges

In preparing this report, we interviewed dozens of local residents, decisionmakers, and organizations about their experience trying to activate and/or improve their local greenspace. Several key challenges emerged:

1 Mission Conflict

NPS's mission to preserve spaces in the District of Columbia for the enjoyment of future generations is a poor fit for managing its large portfolio of hundreds of urban parks. Because NPS is charged with preserving spaces, not activating them, its priorities often conflict with the priorities of the District government. Also as a result of its mission and history, NPS is not oriented toward local residents; it does not prioritize the needs and preferences of District residents in its decision making and is ill equipped to manage an urban park system.

2 Jurisdictional Confusion

Control of the District's greenspace is divided between NPS, several District agencies, other federal agencies, and private entities. These boundaries are unclear, which creates jurisdictional confusion for policymakers and residents alike. Furthermore, NPS's lands are divided among several administrative units, each with their own policies and priorities, which further confuses residents and impedes progress on the overall park system. Compounding these matters further, there is no straightforward way to access information about jurisdictional boundaries.

3 Funding Constraints

NPS's limited funding is a major challenge that underpins many of the other issues identified. NPS does not currently have adequate funding to manage its assets in the District of Columbia, with billions of dollars in deferred maintenance costs. These funding gaps hinder maintenance, activation, and, consequently, park use. Funding gaps also drive inequities across the park system because parks in better-resourced neighborhoods can provide supplemental funding through fundraising and community support. Despite the strong need for additional equitable funding streams, NPS's current policies make external investment difficult.

4 Coordination & Vision

Because the District and NPS share control over the District's greenspace, there is no central leadership and vision for the overall park system. At the same time, despite this overlapping jurisdiction, there is no current structure in place for regular coordination between NPS and the District government regarding parks management. This lack of ongoing coordination results in many missed opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing. In the instances when NPS and the District *do* coordinate, the process is burdensome and time consuming.

5 Accountability & Communication

NPS is not positioned to be responsive to DC residents. Because NPS does not proactively engage with the community, District residents find it difficult to communicate with NPS about issues they see in NPS-managed parks. NPS has no centralized, user-friendly system for connecting with residents, and it is not integrated into the District's 311 system for service requests. Lacking statehood, District residents do not elect representatives who oversee NPS. The agency's lack of engagement with and disconnect from local voters means that NPS is not accountable to DC residents and elected officials.

6 Policies & Procedures

Finally, because NPS is not set up to be a steward of urban spaces, its policies and procedures often prevent the types of programming that residents would like to see implemented in their parks. NPS limits how the community can use its spaces, and its permitting process is lengthy and arduous. Its partnership agreements, designed to facilitate collaboration, are also burdensome. NPS's procedures make it very difficult for community organizations to partner with the agency to provide programming on NPS land.

Together, these challenges have hindered efforts to create an *equitable, well-integrated, and activated* park system that promotes health for all District residents.



ANACOSTIA PARK

Policy Recommendations for the **DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

The upside of these challenges is that the park system contains significant untapped potential. Based on our research, we identified the following policy recommendations for how the District, NPS, and Congress can better leverage the District’s greenspace to create a park system that fully meets the needs of all residents.

Nearly all interviewees agree that to create a cohesive park system that serves the needs of local residents, the District should take control of more neighborhood parks. While accomplishing this would require action by NPS and/or Congress, there are several actions that the District can take independently to improve the park system—and to prepare for a future in which the District directly controls more of its greenspace.

1 Establish an Office of Parks in DPR

The District should establish an Office of Parks within the District Department of Parks and Recreation that is focused on managing the District’s interests in NPS land and expanding the District’s parks management capacity (as distinct from its recreational facilities). Throughout our conversations, we heard a need for consistent staff resources to be dedicated toward the relationship between the District and NPS, identifying areas of collaboration, tracking ongoing projects on behalf of the District and the public, and managing cooperative management agreements and transfers of jurisdiction. In addition to coordination with NPS, this Office would manage and maintain DPR’s portfolio of larger parklands, thereby expanding DPR’s parks expertise, ability to focus on long-term parks planning, and maintenance capabilities.

2 Establish a Parks Advisory Board

Alongside the new DPR office, the District should establish a Parks Advisory Board to serve as a coordinating body for relevant agencies and organizations and provide long-term direction for the District’s park system. This Board should comprise all relevant parks collaborators, including:

- District agencies;
- NPS;
- Business Improvement Districts;
- Community groups;
- The National Capital Planning Commission; and
- The Commission of Fine Arts

This Board should meet regularly to share information about ongoing projects and to identify opportunities for collaboration, advise the Office of Parks, and prepare a joint action plan focused on the future management of NPS land.

3 Establish a Parks Equity Conservancy

The District should establish a Parks Equity Conservancy to support park maintenance across the District of Columbia. NPS and DC frequently rely on outside partnerships to support maintenance and operations, which puts communities with low income at a disadvantage. The District can take independent steps to address some of these funding gaps by establishing a District-wide Parks Equity Conservancy to support stewardship and improvements across the entire park system. A District-wide Conservancy would leverage District funding and philanthropic contributions to support park space across the District, particularly in historically neglected neighborhoods. Alongside the conservancy, DPR should provide technical assistance to communities that are looking to activate and maintain their local greenspace.



EAST POTOMAC PARK

Source: NPS

Policy Recommendations for the **DISTRICT & NPS**

The national interest in some sites, such as the National Mall and monuments, means that the overall park system will always implicate multiple jurisdictions. From our research, we identified several ways the District and NPS can work together to transfer jurisdiction where appropriate and to improve joint management of the DC park system over the long term. While these recommendations will require NPS resources at the outset, they will ultimately reduce NPS's burden in managing parkland by leveraging District resources and streamlining operations.

1 Prepare a Joint Action Plan on Management

The District and NPS should prepare a joint action plan that is specifically focused on future management of NPS land to fully meet the potential of the District's park system, given the constraints and capabilities of both NPS and the District government. This plan should identify land that would be appropriate for cooperative management agreements and transfers of jurisdiction, as well as areas where the two jurisdictions can coordinate on maintenance and operations.

2 Establish a Shared Database

The District and NPS should establish a shared database to consolidate (and synchronize) information on federal and local parks and open spaces. A shared database will address the stated need for improved information sharing and establish a common and transparent understanding of who owns what. This database would be used to inform coordination between jurisdictions and to facilitate greater transparency with the public.

3 Coordinate Service Request Response

The District should work with NPS to develop a coordinated approach to handling service requests. Currently, NPS is not integrated into the District's 311 system, and the agency does not have its own centralized system across its administrative units. A coordinated system would make it easier for residents to reach the appropriate contact when issues arise with their local parks.

4 Create One Online Permitting System

The District and NPS should work together to establish one permitting system for all parks. Currently, NPS does not have an online permit application and different standards are applied depending on administrative unit. The two jurisdictions should work together to develop a joint system for all parks and facilities regardless of managing agency.



ROCK CREEK

Policy Recommendations for the **NATIONAL PARK SERVICE**

In addition to working with the District on the recommendations above, we identified several actions that NPS could take independently to improve its stewardship of its DC neighborhood parks. We offer the following recommendations for NPS that can be taken without congressional action.

1 Simplify its Permitting and Partnership Process

NPS should simplify its permitting and partnership processes. For permitting, we recommend that NPS establish an online permit application, streamline applications, and provide permit consistency across operational units. For partnerships, NPS should seek to simplify the existing partnership agreements to make them more accessible to community groups and decrease the burden on NPS in overseeing them.

2 Revise Administrative Boundaries

NPS should consider revising the administrative units in the National Capital Region. Currently, NPS operates six different units in the District, each with their own operating procedures and policies. NPS should consider redrawing the three major units into just two so that the National Mall and Monuments are in one unit, reflecting their national use, with the rest of the parks in a second unit geared toward local use.

3 Increase Community Engagement

NPS should increase community engagement to build connections with District residents and ensure that their management of park resources consistently reflect the needs of local residents.

4 Prioritize Local Use of Parklands

NPS should amend its management plans to prioritize local uses for community parks to emphasize the goal of sustainable use of these spaces by the public, rather than prioritizing preservation for future generations.



Policy Recommendations for **CONGRESS**

While the District and NPS can take many steps without congressional action (including transfers of jurisdiction), Congress can more permanently address some of the issues identified in this report by transferring land title to the District outright, increasing federal funding for NPS's urban parks, and by statutorily recognizing the unique needs of urban parks.

1 Transfer Ownership of Local Parks to DC

Congress should transfer title of local-facing parks to the District of Columbia to give District residents autonomy and control over their local park system. Land transfers would also relieve the federal government of the costs of managing and maintaining DC's neighborhood parks and allow NPS to focus on assets most central to its mission.

2 Establish an Urban Parks Division

Congress should establish an Urban Parks Division within NPS to address the fact that NPS's conservation-based mission does not map onto the needs and pressures of parks located in an urban environment. By locating urban parks in a separate division, NPS can establish a separate set of founding rules and regulations more responsive to the realities and needs of urban parks.

3 Increase Funding & Support to NPS

Congress should increase funding for urban NPS parks, particularly in the National Capital Region, to address a significant deferred maintenance budget and staffing shortages.

+ Strengthen Presidential Appointments

Congress and the President should ensure that appointments to the Commission of Fine Arts and National Capital Planning Commission have demonstrated experience with and commitment to active urban public spaces.

Together, these recommendations will help both NPS and the District of Columbia realize the full potential of the District's park system to meet the needs of District residents and maximize the health and environmental benefits of the District's greenspaces.