

Complete Communities

Green Space and Affordable Housing



Enthusiasm for living in “complete” communities is growing, with more people seeking denser, walkable neighborhoods that have a range of conveniences nearby. Many Americans want spaciousness, too. One way of achieving density without inducing claustrophobia is through the creative use of natural greenery. In suburbs, that means backyards. In the city, it means parks. Complete communities also entail multiple transportation opportunities and enough housing types for a diverse population.

When it all comes together, it’s magical. However, single-issue advocates sometimes find themselves at loggerheads. Parks and affordable housing proponents, in particular, have trouble finding common goals or even a common language. When space is at a premium, what is more important? But if neither constituency has enough clout to get what it wants, together they may.

In September 2007, under a grant from the Home Depot Foundation, The Trust for Public Land’s Center for City Park Excellence tested that notion. It gathered 22

experts in housing, parks, urban development, and planning to dissect and discuss the issues.¹ Although the participants agreed that there were Herculean challenges to collaboration, they dug deeply and found many theoretical opportunities for collaboration.

California

Follow-up research reveals that several localities have already instituted successful cross-functional programs. California is one. Although requiring affordable units has proven controversial, California has had some success giving communities incentives. The state’s Workforce Housing Rewards Program offers incentives such as park money. Sacramento, for one, has constructed enough low-cost housing since 2002 to generate rewards of \$6.7 million from the state and has programmed about \$2.6 million toward park-related projects. In a neighborhood where 300 new mixed-income housing units substantially increased the population, the city acquired and cleaned up a one-acre brownfield for a new plaza.

“We’re using the Workforce Housing Rewards money to put amenities in place,” says Desmond Parrington, Sacramento’s urban infill coordinator. “We’ve invested in this park to provide for all of the new development in that area, including both affordable and market-rate housing.”

In 2007 Californians strengthened the effort with a ballot measure. Under the straightforward name The Housing Related Park Program, the state offers communities cash for creating and renewing parks in return for building affordable housing. The \$200-million program runs for six years and could be profoundly influential for those seeking to make affordable housing more attractive to mayors and neighbors.

Minnesota

Minnesota’s Livable Communities Act, passed in 1995, similarly tries to foster both affordable housing and breathing space. The concept is far from universally accepted, but of 472 Livable Communities grants made in the Twin Cities over the first 10 years,

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24 were for projects that had both components. Most notable was the Wacouta Commons redevelopment in downtown St. Paul, which turned a barren neighborhood of parking lots and gap-tooth buildings into a vibrant community with mixed-income, multistory housing built around a new two-acre park. St. Paul and Minneapolis still need more affordable housing, but according to the recently retired manager, Jan Gustafson, the program “has given cities a chance to show that these kinds of developments can work.”

New England

In Massachusetts, the Community Preservation Act of 2000 allows towns to tax themselves to participate in a state fund. A minimum of 10 percent of the annual revenues of the fund must be used across three core community concerns: acquisition and preservation of open space; creation and support of affordable housing; and acquisition and preservation of historic buildings and landscapes. Thus far, more than one-

third of the state’s jurisdictions have voted to participate. Through 2007, more than \$100 million in Community Preservation funds were spent on affordable housing, \$142 million on open space preservation, \$38 million on recreation facilities, and \$91 million on historic preservation.

Significantly, in the run-up to the act’s passage, extensive political polling revealed that neither the conservation community nor the housing community alone had sufficient strength to pass a one-dimensional measure. Only by combining the passionate support of two separate constituencies were proponents able to prevail.

Vermont, meanwhile, has united separate missions in one agency, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. The board invests in both the preservation of rural natural land and the provision of urban affordable housing. In 20 years it has produced 8,700 permanently affordable homes and 250,000 acres of recreation and natural areas.

Good Ideas from Cities

Some cities are thinking comprehensively, too. In Oregon, the Portland Development Commission (PDC) has provided nearly 92 acres of new and renovated parks in the past quarter-century. Most famous are the four parks of the new Pearl District. The Pearl is a dense, upscale neighborhood built on a former rail yard. PDC built 1,700 low-income housing units there and spent \$23 million renovating one park and creating three others. The combination of affordable housing and parks explains the unusual number of children in the Pearl—almost unique among urban infill neighborhoods nationwide. PDC pays for the parks with tax-increment financing, a mechanism whereby new taxes generated in a specific neighborhood are channeled for a period of time not to the city’s general fund but to localized infrastructure improvements. Also, the commission is required to set aside 30 percent of tax-increment revenue for affordable housing.

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Denver has seen the private sector create similar results. On the site of an old amusement park, New York-based Jonathan Rose Companies set a goal of creating a housing development with sale, rental, market-rate, and affordable options. Opened in stages between 2002 and 2007, Highlands Garden Village has a central neighborhood park and community gardens. The green spaces, which the Rose Companies own and maintain, are open to the public.

Similar expansion of mission and vision is happening at the grassroots level. Boston’s Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation (ABCDC) began in 1980 as an affordable housing group, but its leaders soon realized that nearby trash-strewn parks were harming its mission. The corporation has since adopted 10-acre Ringer Park, the area’s main green space, where it organizes clean-ups and varied programming.

“Keeping the park clean has been important in bringing residents together,” says Kate Jordan, ABCDC’s open space organizer. “Plus it defuses our role as an affordable housing developer. People may not always agree with affordable housing, but they usually support better open spaces—and we can use this as a source of common ground.” ABCDC also led the effort to create an open space master plan for the area.

A group in Lincoln, Nebraska, is taking a similar tack. Working in historic Antelope Valley, where only 14 percent of residents own their homes, NeighborWorks Lincoln is simultaneously investing in a 24-unit mixed-income development and the expansion of eight-acre Trago Park. The housing is financed through affordable housing tax credits, city support, and loans; the park is a joint effort with the city. NeighborWorks paid for a community organizer and donated \$30,000 in capital funds. Executive Director Michael Snodgrass says the improved park is expected to attract and retain residents and is key to achieving additional investment. “Families want to be next to parks, especially when yard space is limited,” he notes. “But for the park, I don’t think we’d be in this neighborhood.”

Strength in Numbers

Perhaps most exciting, collaboration between housing and parks advocates can yield a result greater than the sum of its parts. Back in 1994, following Myron Orfield’s detailed research in Portland, Oregon, the University of Minnesota professor warned the city about its apparently negative economic and housing trends.

Concerned about losing their status as “smart growth capital” of the United States,

local leaders formed the Coalition for a Livable Future. Today it comprises more than 90 organizations spanning the urban spectrum and has scored impressive results—for example, playing a major role in passage of a \$227-million regional parks referendum and increasing funding for affordable housing. The Coalition successfully advocated for the fair distribution of the Portland Development Commission’s tax increment financing revenue, with parks advocates taking the unusual position of agreeing to a 30 percent set-aside for affordable housing. According to Michael Houck, executive director of the Urban Greenspaces Institute and one of the coalition’s founders, without the coalition a fight would have ensued between parks and housing advocates.

“It’s been a very powerful movement that’s led to a tight connection between the ‘greens’ and the ‘housers,’” concludes Houck.

Forming and maintaining tight connection is not easy. But it’s what will make cities great places to live, with the housing and parks gears cranking in sync. And it is not a moment too soon, as the country contemplates how to absorb 100 million more persons in the next 40 years.

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Endnote

¹ A longer report, “Livable, Affordable and Diverse: How Parks Can Promote and Mitigate Increased Urban Density,” is available from the Center for City Park Excellence in Washington, DC. E-mail ben.welle@TPL.org or call (202) 543-7552.



Ringer Park baseball field and playground, maintained by Allston-Brighton Community Development Corporation. Photographs: Caroline Ellis