



Building Tomorrow's Parks

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM
The DC Neighborhood
Parks Task Force



Photo Credit: Sam Kittner

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Our nation's capital should have America's best park system—and aspire to be world class. The District already has some of the most widely distributed green space of any U.S. city, giving us a strong foundation for that ambition. Now we need to build on it by creating parks and programming that meet the needs of all of our residents and visitors.

The Task Force that we co-chaired brought together representatives from across DC's civic, community, and business sectors, drawing on expertise and input from the District government. Guided by the values of equal access to high quality parks and thoughtful stewardship of public assets, we worked to identify ways to improve how the District plans, manages, maintains, programs, and funds its parks. Our goal is a park system that better serves the public while contributing to a healthier and more economically prosperous city.

Our recommendations outline actions we hope DC's next Mayor will pursue in partnership with the Council, communities, and federal government to transform the District's extraordinary open spaces into world-class parks. We offer a path to increase local control over local assets to better meet residents' needs, align resources, and mobilize partners to make our parks more beautiful, welcoming, and usable.

As our nation celebrates its 250th anniversary, we have an opportunity to forge a new path forward and realize the full potential of DC's parks.

Together, we can make the nation's capital home to the greatest parks in America—and the world.

In partnership,



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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the experts who presented at Task Force meetings: Will Klein, Jayne Miller, Carol Coletta, Ben Helphand, Brent Sisco, Ya-Ting Liu, Jon Bouker, and Kelly Collins Choi. We are also grateful to Marcel Acosta for sharing his expertise and generously providing convening space.

We would also like to thank Bill Potapchuk who facilitated the Task Force meetings, as well as the staff who supported the Task Force's work: Barbara Mullenex, Kevin Clinton, Akiima Price, Joe Sternlieb and Becky Strauss.

Table of Contents

01	Introduction	01
02	Key Principles	04
03	Current Management Structure	05
04	Recommendations	09
05	Conclusion	17
06	Appendix	18

1 Introduction

DC residents are fortunate to live in a city with abundant parks and open space. Nearly one-fifth of the District's land is dedicated to parks or recreation, and nearly all residents live within a 10-minute walk to a park. Washington, D.C., has repeatedly ranked first in the nation for the amount and distribution of its open space in the Trust for Public Land's annual ranking for the country's best city park systems.

As the nation's capital, the District is home to many beloved national parks such as the National Mall and national historic sites like Frederick Douglass's house. Local community and DC government stakeholders support and partner with the National Park Service (NPS) to ensure that these assets are responsibly used and preserved, while remaining accessible.

NPS manages approximately 6,500 acres, or 90 percent, of the District's open space, comprising hundreds of individual tracts (known as "reservations"). Due to the District's unique history as the nation's capital, much of this acreage, such as the National Mall, squarely aligns with NPS's core mission of natural and cultural resource preservation.

But many of the city's NPS parks do not have national significance and are the only open spaces available to serve local residents and neighborhoods. In these cases, there is a mismatch between NPS's rules, regulations, and management practices that are designed to protect national park resources and nationally significant historic assets, and the desires and needs of local neighborhoods to access and meaningfully activate limited green space in urbanized areas. Playgrounds, dog parks, movie nights, nature trails, accessible natural areas, and other common features of urban neighborhood parks are often not permitted on NPS-managed land. When uses are allowed, NPS must weigh any investments among competing needs within its budget.



Total Acres
of Parks in DC

7,617

ACCORDING TO
THE GAO

8,398

ACCORDING TO
THE TRUST FOR
PUBLIC LAND

6,500+

CONTROLLED BY NPS

851

CONTROLLED BY DPR

In 2010, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) partnered with NPS and the District to issue the CapitalSpace plan, a comprehensive analysis of the city's parks and public spaces. CapitalSpace acknowledged that because parks in the District system are managed by federal and District agencies to serve different missions, this can lead to challenges in use, planning, and maintenance. CapitalSpace also acknowledged the difficulties NPS faces in managing an urban parks system and in coordinating with local agencies. The plan identified shared opportunities for how NPS and the DC government could work together to achieve a thriving park system.



The DC government has been looking for ways to unlock more of the city's parks potential. Mayor Bowser's 2023 Ready2Play Parks and Recreation Master Plan, developed after a three-year public engagement process, is a strategic blueprint for the DC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) over the next 20 years. It includes strategies for "enhancing our partnership, acquisition and investments in National Park Service spaces," as well as for growing city partnerships with community-based organizations and nonprofits in parks management. The plan also calls for more open spaces, many of which are under federal jurisdiction, to be made more accessible to meet community needs.

NPS has also taken steps to build on CapitalSpace and develop shared strategies for working together on parks and open space in the District. In its 2017 Small Parks Management Strategies, a collaboration with NCPC, NPS aimed to develop consistent strategies for improving management of its 292 small urban parks in the District (ranging from .00045 acres to seven acres in size), which it recognized as an "enormous untapped resource." As part of this study, NPS developed an evaluation tool for assessing whether a small park is more aligned with national interests or local functions. The document provided 23 recommended actions to support small parks vision and goals, including exploring transfers of jurisdiction for

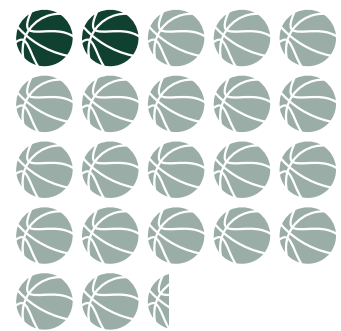
Though the District government controls only 10% of the park space, it provides most of the park amenities.

Playgrounds



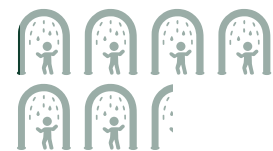
- 19 ON NPS LAND
- 105 ON DPR LAND

Basketball Courts



- 12 ON NPS LAND
- 122 ON DPR LAND

Spray Parks



- 1 ON NPS LAND
- 37 ON DPR LAND

Dog Parks



- 0 ON NPS LAND
- 19 ON DPR LAND

Each icon is representative of 6 parks.



Photo Credit: Sam Kittner

small parks that function primarily as spaces for local-serving recreation, open space, transportation, or infrastructure.

The DC Neighborhood Parks Task Force was convened under the leadership of Councilmember Matt Frumin and former Mayor Tony Williams, Executive Director and CEO of the Federal City Council, with Deputy Mayor Nina Albert serving as a government advisor. The Task Force brought together stakeholders from across all eight wards, including DC agency staff, Business Improvement Districts, ANC commissioners, community-based organizations, park and recreation experts, and parks advocates to develop strategies for a stronger park system. The Task Force also consulted national parks experts, including the Trust for Public Land, and examined DC's parks management structure and budget against national benchmarks. District government representatives provided technical expertise and information but did not participate in developing the recommendations, which do not represent an official District government position.

2 Key Principles

During Task Force deliberations, these principles were frequently mentioned and informed the final recommendations:



Kalorama Park, Ward 1. Photo Credit: Adams Morgan Partnership BID

01

The District should manage parks to create environmental, public health, community safety, and economic value for neighborhoods and residents in every part of the District.

02

Park resources should be allocated to ensure that every resident has access to high-quality, safe, and welcoming parks.

03

Park design and amenities should be as responsive as possible to the needs of each neighborhood.

04

Park land should remain dedicated to public use and enjoyment.

05

The District should pursue opportunities to increase local access to outdoor space at minimal cost through local community-driven partnerships.

06

The District should pursue administrative efficiencies that reduce park management costs and improve outcomes.

07

The District should improve the park user experience to ensure residents can easily reserve amenities, report problems, suggest improvements, and navigate the parks management system.

Current Management Structure

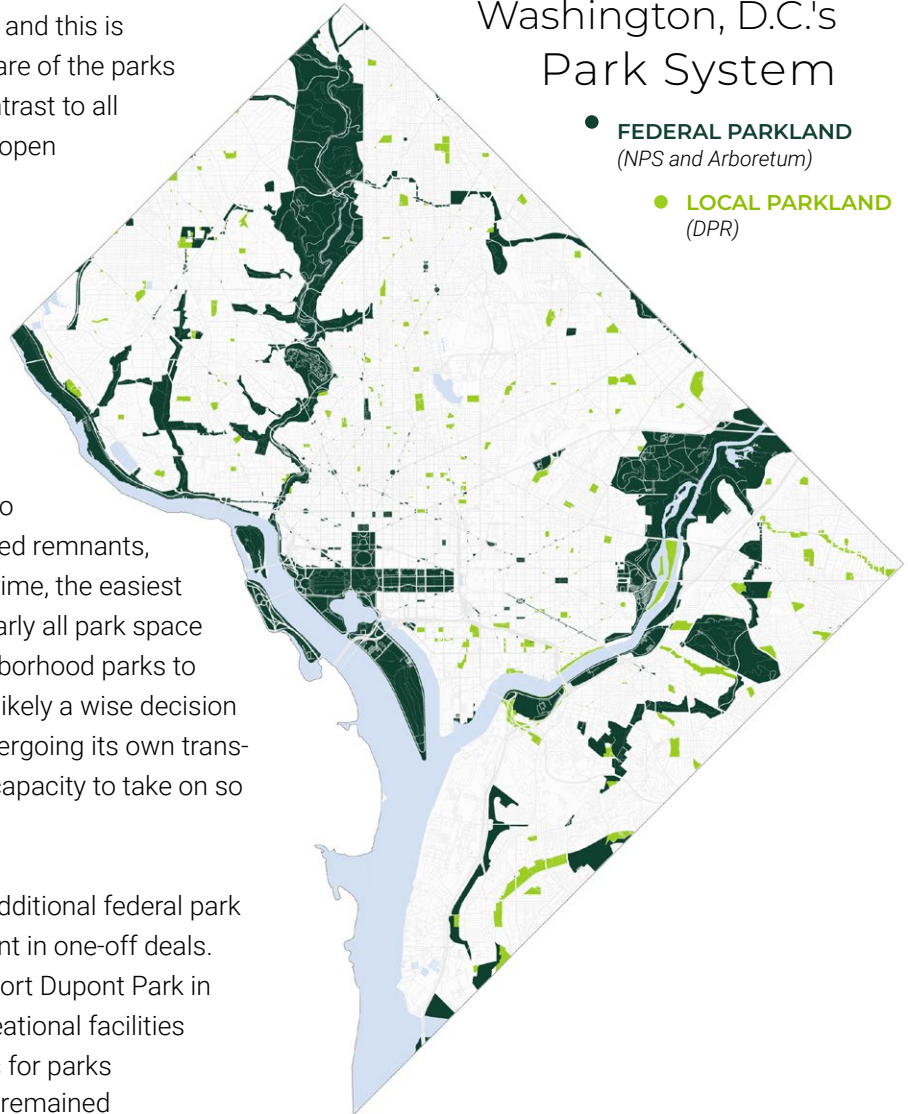
The DC government is unique among major cities in not having a true centralized parks department, and this is largely because it manages only a small share of the parks (about 10 percent) within its borders. In contrast to all other U.S. cities, about 90% of the District's open space is under federal jurisdiction.

The current parks management arrangement resulted from the process that established DC Home Rule in the early 1970s. While other functions of the District were firmly placed under local municipal control, Congress transferred many NPS-managed recreational facilities to the District but left most other NPS-controlled remnants, parks, and forested areas with NPS. At the time, the easiest and most practical solution was to keep nearly all park space under NPS, including everything from neighborhood parks to traffic medians and golf courses. This was likely a wise decision at the time, as the DC government was undergoing its own transformational build-out and did not have the capacity to take on so much land all at once.

In the ensuing years, NPS has transferred additional federal park parcels to District ownership or management in one-off deals. For example, NPS transferred a portion of Fort Dupont Park in 2010 so that the District could expand recreational facilities at the site. But the jurisdictional parameters for parks management within the city's borders have remained largely unchanged: nearly 90% of the District's parkland and open space is under NPS jurisdiction, while DPR's remaining 10 percent is focused largely on recreation facilities and amenities. This arrangement from 1973 explains why the DC Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR) is more of a recreation department than a parks department: its function reflects its portfolio.

Fifty years after Home Rule, the DC Government is well established and has the capacity to manage a robust municipal park system. The Task Force believes that the time has come to update the overall arrangement.

Washington, D.C.'s Park System



NPS's responsibility over a large urban parks system, including small pocket parks and city street infrastructure, is unique to the District and very different from its nationwide mission to preserve historical monuments and largely uninhabited wilderness areas. In the District, 60 percent of the park sites under federal jurisdiction are less than one acre in size, and most have no amenities or structures on them. For some parks, local entities or partners may be better equipped to respond to changing neighborhood park needs like building a dog park, fixing a playground or basketball court, or even maintaining wilderness in densely populated areas.

Who's Responsible for Parks for People?

DPR'S MISSION STATEMENT

DPR's mission is to provide equitable access to Gold Standard **recreational** programs, services, and facilities—across all 8 Wards.

NPS'S MISSION STATEMENT

The National Park Service **preserves unimpaired** the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.



Chinatown Park Festival 2024. Photo Credit: DowntownDC BID

In some cases, community-desired programming is prohibited by NPS regulations. In others, shared management of such spaces creates hurdles for local government functions; for example, when the DC Department of Transportation (DDOT) wants to make improvements to a sidewalk that is on or abuts NPS land, it must first go through an expensive and time-consuming federal negotiation and review process.

From a local resident's perspective, "who to call" about parks matters can be confusing. Without signage or even a shared understanding of who owns what, it's nearly impossible for residents to know which open space is the responsibility of the District or NPS. Even within the DC park system, different "parks" functions are distributed across many agencies. Trash collection is handled by the Department of Public Works (DPW), recycling and maintenance by the Department of General Services (DGS). Recreational programming and activations like festivals are run by DPR, natural land management by the Department of Energy & the Environment (DOEE), and tree care by DDOT. While some of these functions were separated intentionally with the rationale that consolidating maintenance functions across agencies could create efficiencies and economies of scale, the system can also create challenges for frontline accountability and user experience.

The responsibility to manage the city's local parks, reservations, and remnants is an unnecessary burden on NPS staff and resources. At the same time, the complex structure makes it challenging for the District government to provide the types of city parks and programming its residents and visitors need.

Key Players:

Who Does What in DC Parks



DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

Operates rec centers, DC-controlled recreational facilities and fields, and pools

Opens and closes DC-controlled parks

Park permitting

Recreational programming

Park Master Planning (Ready2Play) small planning team

Capital Projects Planning

Level 1 Maintenance: light repair/parts replacement, light landscaping



DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL SERVICES

Capital projects management

General maintenance: mowing, janitorial services, trades repair, parts replacement, shoveling

Portfolio management: land acquisition, vacant lands, facility condition assessments

Recycling at DPR parks



DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Stormwater management, some invasive removal, some natural lands management

Environmental monitoring

River remediation

Manage Kingman and Heritage Islands, Aquatic Resources Education Center

Environmental education



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

Collects trash from public litter cans at DPR parks



Eastern Market Metro Park, Ward 6. Photo Credit: Sam Kittner, Capitol Hill BID



DISTRICT DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Tree maintenance and protection, trimming, light invasive removal

Right-of-way maintenance

Management of many small triangles

Trail maintenance

Who Does What in DC Parks, *Continued.*

METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT (MPD)

Law enforcement for illegal activity in parks, noise complaints, and unauthorized vehicles on trails.

DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DCPS)

Manages a significant number of outdoor recreational facilities like fields, playgrounds, and courts. These are open to the public on a school-by-school basis.

DEPUTY MAYOR FOR HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES (DMHHS)

Works to clear encampments of the unhoused and connect to services.

DEPUTY MAYOR FOR PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (DMPED)

Manages large redevelopment projects that may incorporate new park space. (McMillan/Reservoir Rec Center, Walter Reed, RFK)

CITY ADMINISTRATOR

Oversees many, but not all, of the agencies responsible for DC parks (DGS, DOEE, DPW, DDOT). *Note: DPR is housed under the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME).*

DC HOUSING AUTHORITY (DCHA)

Large landowner, sites often have own playgrounds, courts, and sometimes rec or community centers for residents.

EVENTS DC

Manages ball fields at RFK campus.

OFFICE OF PLANNING (OP)

Reviews development proposals and issues set down reports to the Zoning Commission on projects that may include new parks and public space as community benefits.

"FRIENDS OF" GROUPS*

These non-governmental groups operate under agreements with DPR or NPS. Typical activities include volunteer events, plantings, landscaping, some invasive removal. Can advocate and raise money for parks.

BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS (BIDS)*

Work under grant agreements or MOUs with the city to maintain parks and public spaces within boundaries. Every agreement is unique, but most manage day-to-day maintenance. Capital replacements still managed by DPR/DGS.

**Quasi- or Non-governmental*

From a planning perspective, such jurisdictional complexity means no one entity oversees the overall parks picture or strategy. No one entity ensures parks have the same level of investment or quality across the city. NPS management within the District is divided into six different administrative units known as superintendencies—which contributes to additional confusion for residents trying to address issues in their neighborhood park. And many NPS planning decisions within the District are made at a regional level by the National Capital Region administrative unit that also covers parks in Maryland and Virginia.

The DC government and NPS do the best they can within the constraints of the current arrangement. DPR has laid out a citywide parks vision in the 2023 Ready2Play Master Plan, but is largely unable to implement the plan because the agency controls only a slice of the DC parks experience. The District government and NPS have a strong relationship and decades of experience coordinating across jurisdictional lines. Both DPR and NPS work closely with nonprofit “Friends” groups across the city to meet community park needs.

Nevertheless, the current system departs from a clear pattern among the country’s best-performing urban parks systems. Most have a centralized parks department that handles all things park-related, from overall vision to day-to-day maintenance and parks and recreation. In cities where several agencies share parks responsibilities, inter-agency coordination is a persistent challenge. In addition, many top-performing cities have established citywide nonprofits that work alongside the parks department to support broader parks coalitions, build public backing for policies and park funding, and manage philanthropic campaigns to complement public funding.

4 Recommendations

To better meet the needs of both NPS and DC residents, the DC Neighborhood Parks Task Force offers the following recommendations:



Eastern Market Metro Park, Ward 6. Photo Credit: Sam Kittner, Capitol Hill BID

01

Transfer parks that primarily serve local needs and are not nationally relevant from NPS to the District.

02

Build and improve the District's park management and coordination capacity.

03

Explore cost recovery options to increase the city's parks management capacity.

04

Foster community management of small neighborhood parks and parklets.

01

Transfer parks that primarily serve local needs and are not nationally relevant from NPS to the District.

The District and NPS should jointly assess the park system and determine which parks and assets are best managed locally and which are best retained under federal stewardship, based on their uses, significance, and management needs. Parks that primarily serve local residents should be managed by the District, while federal resources should be focused on nationally significant parks and assets. Transfers could occur through, as appropriate, a full transfer in ownership, Transfer of Jurisdiction (TOJ), or a Cooperative Management Agreement (CMA). This process should reflect the reality that some NPS assets, such as statues, historic land formations, and other important cultural and historical artifacts, should continue to be preserved through easements and other such means for protecting specific interests. In addition, these decisions will have to balance the District's current fiscal constraints and its vision for a more fully activated, better maintained park system with more local management.

RECOMMENDED CATEGORIES FOR FEDERAL PARK TRANSFERS

The Task Force recommends organizing NPS transfers into six categories based on park function, management needs, and transfer strategy. As it is building its own management capacity, the District should prioritize remnants, small parks, and parks that can leverage external partnerships as priorities for transfer.

REMNANTS

The District contains hundreds of tiny federally owned parcels, including median strips, traffic islands, and sidewalks, that primarily serve a transportation or infrastructure function. Transferring these parcels to the District would reduce both DC and federal costs and administrative burdens. Many of these parcels have been identified in NPS's Small Parks Management Plan as having low alignment with NPS's mission and values. Consistent with NPS's Plan, *remnants with primarily a transportation or infrastructure function should be administratively transferred as a unified transaction*—in most cases, for management by DDOT.

SMALL PARKS

Small parks (under 1 acre), including triangles and circles, are designed to serve areas within a quarter-mile radius, and provide opportunities for respite, public art, and small-scale nature experiences. Many small parks under federal jurisdiction are not strongly aligned with the NPS mission, but have the potential to support the surrounding community with more local control. Consistent with NPS's Small Parks Management Plan, the District and NPS should work together to *administratively transfer small parks that function primarily as local-serving recreational and open space to the District in a unified transaction*.

NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS

Neighborhood parks are 1-10 acres and primarily serve areas within a half-mile radius. Although most NPS neighborhood parks do not have amenities, these parks have the potential to meet neighborhood needs through amenities like playgrounds, sports fields, seating and picnic areas, and community gardens. As the District builds the capacity to manage and maintain its parks, it and relevant partners should request to *transfer neighborhood parks that primarily serve the basic active/passive recreational, social, cultural, and environmental needs of local neighborhoods* to facilitate more local-facing activation and maintenance.

DISTRICT PARKS

These larger parks serve citywide recreational, social, cultural, and environmental needs beyond adjacent neighborhoods, including extensive open space areas. These parks have the potential to offer a diverse array of active and passive recreational opportunities for DC residents, such as athletic fields and courts, play areas, picnic areas, trails, extensive open space areas, and large-scale native plantings and trees. The District should *pursue transfers or agreements between the District and NPS for District parks that protect and preserve any historical elements while allowing for greater activation of parkland for community uses*.

NATURE CONSERVATION PARKS

Nature conservation parks include forests, meadows, and wetlands, and are appropriate for minimal infrastructure and low-impact use like hiking, environmental education, and nature-play equipment. Although these parks are well-aligned with NPS's conservation mission, many of NPS's nature conservation parks are under-resourced, inhibiting maintenance and active use, and may be more appropriate for stewardship by the District and local partners. The District should *pursue transfers of local-facing nature conservation parks to facilitate community stewardship and low-impact activation*.

DESTINATION/DOWNTOWN PARKS

Destination parks are located in commercial areas or have a special history or use that attracts non-local visitors. Destination parks may include amenities such as cafes or concessions, landscaped areas, art installations, and play structures. Many are located in the downtown area, where demand for parks is high, but parks do not currently meet the level of service needed for daily use. *The District, in partnership with BIDs, should pursue TOJs or CMAs for downtown parks that allow the DC government or the BID to invest in improvements to parks and greater programming and activation*.

02

Build and improve the District's park management and coordination capacity.

The District's capacity to manage parks, at DPR and citywide, will need to grow significantly to support an expanded park portfolio and to implement the recommendations in the Ready2Play Plan. The District should complete a study and plan on how to best organize the District's park planning, management, programming, maintenance, and capital projects functions to optimize overall park system performance. A consolidated agency or public entity is a best practice that should be explored. A first step toward improved coordination would be to create the new position of Coordinator of the Public Realm, modeled after the Director of the Public Realm in New York City, within either the City Administrator's Office, a Deputy Mayor's office, or the Executive Office of the Mayor. The person in this position would have broad authority to work across DC and federal agencies to resolve interagency and interjurisdictional challenges. Finally, the District should develop clearly articulated pathways for managing transfers from NPS that address maintenance, finance, programming, and responsibility. To accomplish all this, the District should allocate additional funding for citywide park planning and implementation.

MODEL: NEW YORK CITY'S CHIEF PUBLIC REALM OFFICER



To help navigate New York City's complex public space management ecosystem, the first-ever Chief Public Realm Officer was appointed in 2023 to coordinate across city government, community organizations, and the private sector. The Officer, supported by a small staff, sat in the Mayor's office and used the power of the executive to corral city agencies to quickly solve public space problems like removing eyesore scaffolding and increasing public restroom access. The office also served as the go-between for local community partners and the government, including by running a Public Space Academy to teach neighborhood leaders how to run events and activations. A similar position in the District could tackle intergovernmental coordination while also overseeing intergovernmental coordination with NPS and other park partners.



Photo Credit: Mount Vernon Triangle CID

WHO SHOULD MANAGE DC'S PARKS?

Exploring Models for a Modern Park System

The District is already slated to bring on significant new park acreage at RFK campus, Poplar Point, and Kenilworth North. To manage these and the additional transfers recommended by the Task Force, the DC government will need a stronger, more coordinated park management structure—one that's built for growth, accountability, and long-term stewardship.

Strengthen and Expand DPR

The District could build on its existing agency by expanding DPR's park management capacity, transitioning the agency from a recreation-focused agency into a true parks and recreation department—in the words of many Task Force members, “putting the P in DPR.” By consolidating park planning, management, programming, and maintenance functions currently scattered across agencies, the city could improve user experience, reduce duplication, and achieve cost savings per acre managed. This DPR expansion would be mainly a reorganization of existing resources and staff, with new functions to be funded by some combination of general fund appropriations and more earned income, as discussed in the “Paying for Parks” section.

Create an Independent Park Agency

Another option is to establish an independent agency, modeled on the DC Public Library (DCPL) system. DCPL operates under a Mayor-appointed, Council-confirmed, Board of Trustees and a professional chief librarian, who together oversee planning, management, programming, and maintenance of a citywide library system. DCPL also works closely with the DC Public Library Foundation, a supporting foundation

that helps raise money for library programs and projects. This structure allows for strategic, long-term planning while maintaining public accountability through the city's budget and oversight process. A comparable model for parks could enable consistent leadership, long-term vision, and partnership with a supporting philanthropic foundation, all elements that may be well suited to park management in DC.

Leverage Independent or Quasi-Governmental Models

The District could also look to instrumentalities such as Events DC, an independent government authority, and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) for alternative models. These entities combine stable, dedicated tax revenue with professional management capacity and flexibility to raise private resources. For example, Events DC, which already manages some parks on behalf of the city, plans, manages, maintains, and programs public facilities under a Mayor-appointed, Council-confirmed Board of Directors, supported by dedicated revenue streams. A similar approach for parks could deliver the benefits of the DCPL model along with bonding authority to do capital projects from dedicated resources.

03

Explore cost recovery options to increase the city's parks management capacity.

For most park systems, cost recovery (i.e., generating revenue from parks and facilities) is a key part of park financing. Cost recovery strategies typically include items and services for individuals and small groups such as concessions, classes, rentals, sponsorships, and larger, commercial events. Currently, the District recovers less than 5 percent of its parks and recreation costs, far less than the national average (26 percent). Recognizing that universal access continues to be a key priority, the District should evaluate cost recovery strategies from other jurisdictions and develop a cost recovery framework that increases income from parks while also maintaining equal access to all facilities and programs regardless of ability to pay.



Chinatown Park Festival 2024 (web-ready version) Photo Credit: DowntownDC BID



Eastern Market Metro Park, Ward 6. Photo Credit: Sam Kittner, Capitol Hill BID

THE COST OF RUNNING AN EXPANDED PARKS SYSTEM IS MODEST AND ACHIEVABLE

The Task Force's budget working group analyzed what it would cost for the District to assume responsibility for additional parkland and found that this could be achieved at modest additional costs. These estimates are provided in the section "Paying for Parks" below. The working group also identified four ways that the city could lower its park management costs and increase its revenues:

Increase Cost Recovery in Line with Peer Jurisdictions

The District recovers less than 5 percent of its parks budget through earned income—far below both the national average of 26 percent and our regional peers, which range from 16 percent to 45 percent. Most cities charge modest fees for programs and private use while keeping everyday access free. The Task Force recommends a more sustainable cost recovery approach in line with peer jurisdictions: DPR's fee structure should be updated to recover more income from programming with more individualized benefits, while continuing to provide reductions for low-income residents, and programs with broad community benefit should remain subsidized or free. Even small adjustments, which would bring the city in line with nearby jurisdictions, could generate millions annually to improve and expand local parks without limiting access.

Expand Community Partnerships

BIDs and other community groups could support the funding and management of neighborhood parks to share or offset the cost of providing better parks with the District.

Establish an Entrepreneurial Parks Fund

The District could help offset the costs of park maintenance by creating a dedicated fund or entity empowered to pursue sponsorships, concessions, advertising, and rentals. This would be a particularly good fit for destination parks, which typically have higher maintenance costs but also higher revenue potential. To strengthen the fund, the District could also consider a public contribution or match.

Reduce Costs through Operational Efficiencies

The District could save money by reducing operational complexity with NPS and by consolidating functions so there are fewer agencies touching the parks. The District spends millions annually—mostly in capital funds—coordinating with NPS on its properties or ones that are adjacent to DC roads and paying for administrative requirements triggered by NPS ownership.

04

Foster community management of small neighborhood parks and parklets.

Community-based stewardship can supplement public management capacity, strengthen the connection between communities and their parks, and make parks more responsive to neighborhood needs. A community stewardship program, modeled on Chicago's **NeighborSpace**, would empower the District's residents to support its local parks. Under such a program, the District would work with neighborhood groups, ANCs, and other local partners to design and manage their neighborhood space. An outside partner would provide support such as basic insurance, fiscal sponsorship, and technical assistance, while acting as the liaison between the community group and the DC government. It would also act as the backstop for operations and maintenance, to account for changes in neighborhood leadership and capacity and ensure that there are no gaps in stewardship. Existing organizations, including the District's certified land trust, Casey Trees, are prepared to launch this program as a pilot with a community group in every ward and expand as more small parks are transferred to the city's portfolio.

MODEL: CHICAGO'S NEIGHBORSPACE EMPOWERS COMMUNITIES TO STEWARD THEIR PARKS



NeighborSpace, a nonprofit land trust founded in 1996, partners with the City of Chicago and the Park District to protect and support small, community-managed public spaces. It provides a legal and administrative framework that allows neighborhood groups to design, program, and maintain gardens, pocket parks, and natural areas without the burden of land ownership or liability. The city and its partners deed properties to NeighborSpace, which holds the title, provides insurance, and offers technical support. Today, NeighborSpace supports over 100 community-managed green spaces across Chicago, transforming previously neglected spaces into lasting public assets. This model is also cost effective for the city, with most funding coming from philanthropic and external sources, supplemented by city support and government representation on the board.

Conclusion

We are proud that the District has abundant, well-distributed parkland. At the same time, we have learned that there are opportunities to make the city's park management approach more responsive to community needs and more cost efficient. Given the current federal activity in this space, this is a uniquely important time to create a framework to enable constructive collaboration designed to meet local and federal interests.

This moment presents an opportunity to reimagine the nation's capital as a city whose park system reflects both its storied past and its vibrant future and serves both its millions of visitors and the 700,000 Washingtonians who live, work and play here. The District has a stellar track record of repositioning former federal assets into valuable neighborhood anchors that expand economic activity and the local tax base. If adopted, these recommendations will create a legacy of accessible, vibrant, and community-driven public spaces for generations to come.



DowntownDC LIVE! at Franklin Park, June 06, 2024, featuring Moonshine Society. Photo Credit: DowntownDC BID



Photo Credit: Sam Kittner

Appendix

Parks Management in the District

How can neighborhood parks be more responsive to community needs?

Lessons from the country's best park systems and how they've approached two major challenges: governance and funding.

To better understand how the District can strengthen its park system, the Task Force enlisted the Trust for Public Land's (TPL) Land and People Lab to research how the nation's top park systems are governed and funded. The Land and People Lab is TPL's "think and do" tank that advances equitable parks access through the power of evidence.

TPL reviewed the 25 best big city park systems in the country, as ranked by its annual ParkScore index, to compare their governance, funding, and community engagement practices to those in the District. The research also included interviews with leaders from several best-in-class park nonprofits.

TPL's findings were clear: residents of cities with the best park systems tend to be healthier, more socially connected, and more active. These cities tend to have better coordination across public, nonprofit, and private partners, and to treat parks as a shared civic investment that delivers measurable community and economic returns.

TPL'S KEY FINDINGS:

The District is an outlier among top-performing park systems in its structure and funding.

The District's park system—split between multiple federal, local, and private partners—is an outlier among top-performing cities. Only New York and Houston have a comparably complex landscape of park management entities. In the District, parks management is spread across multiple federal agencies, six DC agencies, several quasi-public entities, and numerous nonprofits, universities, and business improvement districts (BIDs). The District is the only park system in the country where the National Park Service (NPS) manages a neighborhood park system.

Further complicating matters, the District divides its core functions (park maintenance, capital planning, recreational facility maintenance, and programming) across separate agencies. A review of the country's top park systems illustrates the

extent to which the District is an outlier: 18 of the top 25 park systems manage the core functions within a single park and recreation agency. An additional five of the top 25 systems have split parks and recreation agencies, but maintain clarity on which agencies manage what (e.g., parks versus recreation centers). The District and Pittsburgh are the only two systems that have a parks and recreation agency that is not responsible for park maintenance, which creates confusion for both residents and staff and challenges for budgeting, coordination, and service delivery.

Funding structures are another key differentiator. Among the 25 top-performing park systems, two-thirds (17 cities, including 7 of the top 10) have dedicated revenue for parks and recreation, meaning that funding is largely not subject to the annual appropriation process.

These dedicated sources often come from property taxes, but also include sales tax, sweetened beverage tax, and a payroll tax. Dedicated funding provides stability, allows for long-term planning, and protects park budgets from political and economic fluctuations. In contrast, the District's park system relies almost entirely on annual appropriations.

Inter-agency coordination is difficult—but can be improved through a focus on outcomes.

Many of the best-performing park systems have moved away from viewing parks solely as "assets" to be maintained and instead focus on outcomes such as health, community connection, climate resilience, and equity. This shift changes incentives. When the priority is asset management, agencies have little incentive to coordinate or share resources. When the focus is on resident outcomes, collaboration is essential.

In the last decade, many cities have also moved away from centralized services approach and back toward placing park maintenance and capital planning responsibilities in park and recreation agencies. This has happened for two reasons. First, this reflects the above shift from "assets" to "outcomes," which acknowledges that parks are not just street medians that need lawn mowing and trash pick-up. Rather, cities maximize park benefits when parks reflect community needs and are supported by dedicated park and community-specific staffing

and funding. Second, cities have found that centralized park and recreation agencies make it easier for residents to know who to engage for all things parks.

Cities with effective interagency coordination focus on role clarity and alignment with the actual capacity and mission constraints of each organization. Coordination mechanisms, such as New York City's Chief Public Realm Officer, can help improve coordination challenges from the perspective of a resident. In addition, consolidating park maintenance, design, and programming functions reduces coordination challenges and ensures parks better meet the needs of community residents.

Citywide nonprofits can provide financial and coordination support.

Citywide park nonprofits can play a critical role in top park systems. Six of the ten highest-ranked cities (and ten of the top 25) have a dedicated citywide nonprofit. These take two common models: foundations and coalitions. Foundations frequently serve as a philanthropic partner to a public agency, while coalitions support a network of community and "Friends of" groups.

TPL's research found that a coalition structure is likely the most relevant model for the District's needs. This model typically provides a support network of community groups via fiscal sponsorship, technical assistance, re-grant programs for maintenance and programming, and convenings. The coalition model has the potential to greatly expand citywide capacity by empowering neighborhood groups to care for their local parks and channeling philanthropic and other resources into community-scale projects. However, because of the number and scale of partners, coalition models also often come with added complexity. Examples of effective coalition models include *Austin Park Foundation* and *Atlanta's Park Pride*. Chicago's *NeighborSpace* is also similar to a coalition model, but differs in a key respect: as a land trust, it owns community-managed sites, rather than supporting a park and recreation department or other city-managed sites.

Foundations are primarily a philanthropic partner to a public agency. They directly fund capital projects, programming (scholarships, events, etc.) and maintenance needs. Foundations may also host events, organize volunteer days, and oversee advocacy campaigns. Key examples of citywide park foundations include *Minneapolis Park Foundation*, *St. Paul Parks Conservancy*, and *Cincinnati Parks Foundation*.

Key Takeaways from TPL's Research:

How the District compares to other cities—and what it can learn from them:

01

FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE

The District's park system is managed by more agencies and partners than almost any other U.S. city, and it is one of only two park systems studied where the parks agency does not fully manage park maintenance. The result is unclear accountability, making coordination and community responsiveness more difficult.

02

FEDERAL ROLE

The District of Columbia is the only city where NPS manages a neighborhood park system.

03

NO DEDICATED PARKS FUNDING

Most top-ranked cities have dedicated funding streams for park maintenance and staffing; the District relies almost entirely on annual appropriations.

04

LACK OF CITYWIDE PARK NONPROFIT

Leading park systems often have a central nonprofit that raises supplemental philanthropic funding and helps to coordinate partners. The District does not have a citywide parks nonprofit.

05

A WAY FORWARD

Consolidated park management, stable funding streams, and expanded community partnerships could make the District's park system more effective and responsive.

Citywide park nonprofits are financed through a variety of revenue models. These include funding nonprofit overhead via programmatic revenue from A-list (destination) parks, public/private matching funds for re-grants to community groups, and corporate sponsorship of events and signature facilities, among others.

Quasi-public agencies can play a valuable but specialized role.

TPL's research found that quasi-public agencies play a valuable but usually specialized role in city park systems. These agencies are empowered via governmental authority, but all have some level of independent governance. They include special assessment districts, such as BIDs or tax-increment finance zones, and development corporations. Examples include *Brooklyn Bridge Park Corporation* and the *Houston Parks Board Local Government Corporation*. These entities typically manage site-specific development and projects, such as destination parks, where revenue from leases, sponsorships, or tax assessments can sustain operations. TPL also found that effective quasi-public agencies typically partner with a nonprofit that provides philanthropic, community engagement, or other support.

For this reason, quasi-public agencies may be less effective for neighborhood-scale parks. This is consistent with the District, where quasi-public agencies such as BIDs primarily manage destination parks and facilities. The District has also seen successful partnerships between quasi-public agencies and nonprofits, such as the NoMa BID and the NoMa Parks Foundation.

Bottom Line:

Though the District faces unique management challenges, there are successful models to draw from and an opportunity for government, community partners, and the private sector to chart a path to a more effective park system. Agencies with consolidated park functions, stable funding streams, and city-wide nonprofit partners are proven strategies of high-performing park systems that are responsive to residents' needs.

Paying For Parks

The relationship between excellent parks, positive health benefits, and surrounding real estate values and city tax revenues is well documented. Investing in parks is not just a social good—it's a smart fiscal strategy. High-quality parks improve public health, raise surrounding property values, and increase city tax revenues. The better our parks, the stronger our city's bottom line.

The Task Force's budget working group analyzed what it would cost for the District to assume responsibility for a large number of NPS remnants, reservations, and parks that were identified as sites for potential transfer. The total list comprised about 2,440 acres across 107 park sites, as well as about 215 remnants. Using NPS budget data and benchmarks from the Trust for Public Land, the group estimated that maintaining these parks and remnants at a target level of service would cost roughly **\$13.6 million annually**. This estimate is based on best-practice city park systems, which spend between \$3,000 and \$40,000 per acre, depending on park type and intensity of use.

The working group also estimated what it would cost to maintain the sites under current maintenance conditions. Although NPS's current spending on maintenance is not available at the park level, NPS Infrastructure Fact Sheets from FY 2024 indicate that the agency currently spends a modest budget on annual routine maintenance for its parks outside the National Mall and Memorial Parks. Based on NPS's current annual routine maintenance targets, the group estimates that maintaining the potential transfer sites in their current condition would cost less than **\$4 million annually**.

The District's current park spending per acre is around the national average, but it stands out for lacking dedicated funding sources, having limited external partnerships, and recovering far less revenue from fees and earned income from its peers. DC also has higher administrative costs due to both the complexity of the way it distributes park management across many agencies, and high coordination costs imposed by NPS ownership. The working group looked at all four of these areas to suggest pathways to both increase city revenues and reduce costs:

- **Expand Community Partnerships:** Build a NeighborSpace-type model with Casey Trees to co-manage small neighborhood parks at low cost, and formalize partnerships with BIDs and Main Streets for shared park maintenance.

- **Increase Earned Income Fairly:** Update DPR's fee structure to recover more income from programming with more individualized benefits, while continuing to provide reduced rates for low-income residents, and keeping everyday public access free.
- **Establish an Entrepreneurial Parks Fund:** Create a dedicated fund or entity empowered to pursue sponsorships, concessions, advertising, and rentals.
- **Achieve Operational Efficiencies:** Consolidate overlapping park functions across agencies and reduce duplicative coordination costs with NPS.

Together, these measures could yield over \$15 million per year in new revenues and savings, enough to absorb and enhance hundreds of NPS parks and remnants at no net cost to the District. With strategic management, the District can take on new federal parklands and maintain its growing system of neighborhood parks while maintaining fiscal sustainability and equal park access District-wide.

FUNDING STRATEGY	ESTIMATED REVENUE OR COST OFFSET (ANNUAL)
Expanded Community Partnerships	\$3 MILLION
Increased Cost Recovery (up to 10.5%)	\$5.5 MILLION
Sponsorships & Concessions	\$1 MILLION
Operational Efficiencies	\$6 MILLION
TOTAL	\$15.5 MILLION

Although the Task Force did not look at the costs or structure to manage the planned new parks at RFK and Poplar Point, it is clear that it will have to dedicate resources to do so. The findings of the Task Force should give confidence to DC planners that the city can both take on these new destination parks and also provide neighborhood parks at a cost that is far less than the expected benefits.

Transferring Federal Parks to the District

There are well-established processes for shifting federal or NPS property toward more DC local management and control. There are three main “transfer” options with different levels of federal versus local control: Cooperative Management Agreements (CMAs), Transfer of Jurisdictions (TOJs), and full transfer of ownership (fee simple).

CMAs provide for joint management between NPS and a local jurisdiction, where NPS usually retains a large role in overseeing the park, while the local jurisdiction is responsible for maintenance and programming costs. The agreement can be negotiated directly between the DC government and NPS, without the need to go through any other federal body.

TOJs provide more local control, allowing a local jurisdiction to administer, maintain, and manage the property. The federal government retains ownership, while the District is responsible for all management, maintenance, and decision-making. For TOJs involving NPS, there is almost always a stipulation that the space be used for recreation purposes only, with no possibility of private development. TOJs are also usually negotiated directly between the DC government and NPS, and they must be approved by the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) and the DC Council. Congress has been involved in pushing through some TOJs in the District (e.g., RFK stadium site), but Congressional legislation is not required.

Full transfer of ownership requires either an act of Congress or a disposition process through an interagency GSA transfer where the District would have the first right of refusal. Most full transfers of ownership of NPS land within the District have been for private development purposes rather than for recreation (e.g., Georgetown Heating Plant and Southeast Federal Center), but this method could be used to transfer parks as well.

Over the past several decades, most CMAs, TOJs, and fee transfers within the District have been negotiated site-by-site. Each can take several years or even decades to negotiate and execute. There is no statutory requirement that transfers be handled this way. Multiple parks can be bundled and transferred in a single transaction, as occurred for many of the initial transfers to DPR in the 1970s. The DC Lands Act of 2006, which contained the conditions of transfer for Poplar Point, also contained numerous other transfers for both large and smaller sites. Furthermore, bundled transfers are what NPS

recommends doing for many types of small parks in its 2017 Small Parks Management Plan.

The type of transfer process and whether to package them together depends on a site’s purpose:

- *Full ownership* transfer in one large package might make sense for spaces that serve a transportation or infrastructure function and are of no relevance to the core NPS mission or historic preservation or public recreation.
- *Sets of packaged TOJs*, with more local control, could be ideal for parks that serve almost no federal or historic purpose and whose recreational purpose will remain in perpetuity.
- *Site-specific CMAs or TOJs* could be best for parks like the Fort Circle Parks that have historic resources but are also appropriate for local stewardship and low-impact recreation.
- Any site that fits squarely within NPS’s mission should remain entirely federally controlled (e.g., the National Mall or the Frederick Douglass House).

There have been important lessons learned from previous federal transfers that can help guide better outcomes in the future, especially when the type of transfer did not align with a site’s best use.

Expensive destination parks with little historical value, for example, may not be ideal for CMAs because such agreements severely restrict opportunities to activate the park and recover management and maintenance costs through concessions or event rentals. CMAs may not be a good fit for parks that require large local investments, as they limit local control over management decisions.

Full ownership transfers have historically been burdened with a higher bar for federal approval. At Poplar Point, such a transfer has taken over 20 years to complete because the agreement came with so many cumbersome stipulations. Given current federal efforts to discard properties more generally, the District should explore transfers that serve the District’s interests, particularly for simpler sites that have no clear federal or historical purpose.

Meetings

November 13, 2024

December 13, 2024

January 29, 2025

February 26, 2025

April 30, 2025

June 4, 2025

September 10, 2025

Experts & Presentations

Will Klein, Director of Research, Trust for Public Land,
Urban Park Governance Models

Jayne Miller, PROS Consulting, *How Do We Think About
the Big Picture for DC Parks?*

Carol Coletta, CEO, Memphis River Parks Partnership

Ben Helphand, Executive Director, Neighborspace,
Neighborspace: Community-Managed Open Space

Brent Sisco, DPR, *Management of Parkland in DC*

Ya-Ting Liu, Chief Public Realm Officer, NYC, *New York
City's Realm of Possibility: Reimagining Public Space*

Jon Bouker, Partner, ArentFox Schiff, *Federal Transfers*

Steven Reilly, HR&A, *Funding Sources/Identifying Revenue
Sources for Parks*

Will Klein, TPL, *How can neighborhood parks be more
responsive to community needs? Lessons from the coun-
try's best park systems*

Kelly Collins Choi, Director, Policy & Land Conservation,
Casey Trees, Opportunities for Small Parks

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DowntownDC Parks Master Plan, DowntownDC BID, 2023, available at <https://www.downtowndc.org/about-us/reports/downtowndc-parks-master-plan/>

National Capital Parks—East Infrastructure Fact Sheet, National Park Service, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/National-Capital-Parks-East-Deferred-Maintenance-and-Repairs-Factsheet.pdf>

Rock Creek Park Infrastructure Fact Sheet, National Park Service, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/upload/Rock-Creek-Park-Deferred-Maintenance-and-Repairs-Factsheet.pdf>