



Public Parks





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Americans spend a lot of time in their parks, visiting local parks and recreational facilities more than twice a month on average.¹ In 2017, people spent \$887 billion on outdoor recreation, directly supporting 7.6 million jobs. There are about 10 acres of public park land per 1,000 residents.² Despite their increased popularity, investment in parks is lagging, resulting in deteriorating bridges, trails, parking areas, drinking water systems, and more. State parks and local parks face a \$5.6 billion³ and \$60 billion deferred maintenance backlog, respectively. While the National Park Service's deferred maintenance backlog grew over 9% in the last decade with more than half of their assets in need of repair, federal funding for parks is set to increase with passage of the Great American Outdoors Act of 2020. Meanwhile, limited space in urban areas is causing local governments, utilities, and nonprofits to be more creative by building parks projects that provide mutually beneficial functions, such as public access spaces that also serve as flood control.

INTRODUCTION

Parks support economic prosperity and build thriving, healthy, resilient communities. Besides providing recreational opportunities and green space for all ages, parks provide a suite of ancillary benefits such as higher property values, protection and improvements to drinking water sources, fewer urban heat islands, and stormwater management.⁴

Our nation's public parks are owned and operated by a variety of government entities, including federal agencies, such as the National Park Service (NPS) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), as well as states, regional authorities, counties, and local entities.

CONDITION & CAPACITY

The National Park Service (NPS), which manages 419 parks, covering over 85 million acres nationwide, hosted over 327 million visitors in 2019. The popularity of parks is growing, with national parks visits 13% higher now than a decade ago. There are more than 8,500 state parks nationwide that hosted 807 million visitors in 2017—nearly twice as many visits as to federal parks and forests combined.⁵ There are about 10 acres of public park land per 1,000 residents, and the typical park and recreation agency has about eight full time employees for each 10,000 residents.⁶

The NPS manages more than 75,000 constructed assets, and more than half of them need repair. The

agency currently reports \$11.92 billion of deferred maintenance, including \$6.15 billion in bridges, tunnels, and paved parking areas and roadways, and \$5.77 billion in wastewater and drinking water systems, dams, utility systems, and other non-surface transportation projects.⁷ Over the past decade, deteriorating facilities, an increased number of assets, and resource constraints resulted in a 9% growth in the deferred maintenance backlog.⁸ State parks, meanwhile, have well over \$5.6 billion in deferred maintenance backlogs, with the average state park facing \$143.7 million of deferred maintenance. On average, state parks rated both the condition of their roads and their water infrastructure a “5” (with 1 being the lowest

and 10 being the highest).⁹ Local parks nationwide have an estimated \$60 billion deferred maintenance backlog.

Parks generate economic value in addition to providing recreational benefits. In 2019, 327 million visitors to national parks resulted in \$41.7 billion in benefits to the nation's economy and supported 340,500 jobs nationwide. Visitors spent \$21 billion in 2019, which contributed to more than 278,000 jobs in park gateway communities, or those within 60 miles of an NPS unit.¹⁰ This is an increase from 2018, when 318.2 million visitors contributed \$40.1 billion in national economic output and spent an estimated \$20.2 billion in local gateway regions. In the last five years, NPS visitor spending has increased by \$4.1 billion, and the effect on the U.S. economy grew by \$9.7 billion.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) manages many outdoor recreation areas but trails the NPS in total number of visitors, hosting almost 270 million visits per year among their more than 402 lake and river properties

in 43 states. Over 90% of USACE recreation areas are located within 50 miles of a major metropolitan center. Visitors to USACE recreation areas in 2016 spent \$10.6 billion, supporting about 189,000 jobs nationwide.¹¹

Americans, on average, visit their local park and recreation facilities more than twice a month. In 2017, America's local park and recreation agencies generated \$166.4 billion in economic activity and supported more than 1.1 million jobs,¹² compared to \$154 billion in economic activity in 2015.¹³



Photo courtesy of the National Park Service

THE GRAND CANYON

Local jurisdictions and Americans alike are increasingly rethinking what makes a park. Many local park and recreation agencies are consolidating or partnering with other governmental agencies, private companies, and/or nonprofit organizations to provide a range of services,

including intergenerational programs, playgrounds, walking loops, dog parks, music or movie events, and child and afterschool care, many of which can be incorporated into existing parks facilities.¹⁴



OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE, FUNDING, AND FUTURE NEED

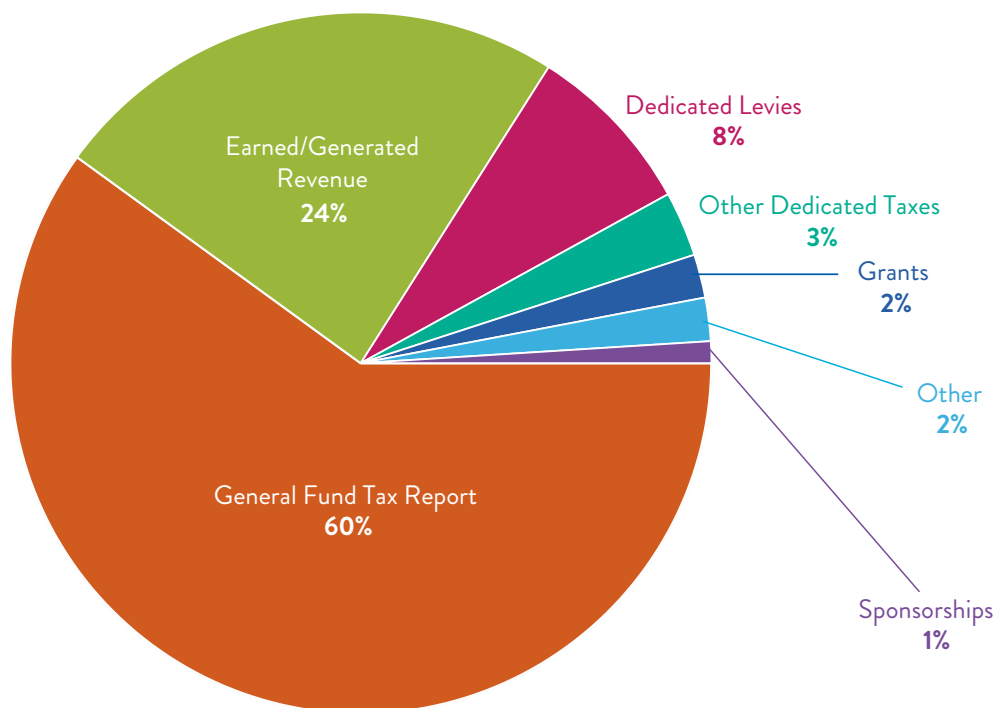
Despite the increasing popularity of parks, investment is lagging, resulting in deferred maintenance backlogs and deteriorated parks facilities nationwide. However, 4 in 5 Americans believe their local parks are well worth the average \$70 per person paid annually in local taxes for their upkeep, with more than 30% of Americans believing parks are worth more. An overwhelming 91% of Americans agree that parks and recreation is an important service provided by local governments.¹⁵

Within the NPS, road and bridge improvements are partly funded by mandatory allocations from the U.S. Department of Transportation and fee collections. Additionally, the NPS also collaborates with states to submit joint applications for U.S. Department of Transportation grants. The remainder of repair, rehabilitation, and operations and maintenance funding comes from discretionary annual appropriations. In FY2020, the NPS received \$572 million in discretionary

funding and \$510 million in mandatory funding for its deferred maintenance backlog, which is about 26% of the agency's full budget.¹⁶ Discretionary funding for NPS deferred maintenance has increased by 52% over the last decade, but these accounts also cover other maintenance activities outside of deferred maintenance.¹⁷ Even with the increased funding, assets are rapidly deteriorating, and there remains a large gap between what the NPS needs and what they receive in annual funding.

Typical local park and recreation agencies receive 60% of their funding from general fund tax support. Because the general fund is not dedicated to funding only parks, the amount of money allocated each year is often inconsistent. Meanwhile, typical local park and recreation agencies dedicate 44% of their operating budget to maintenance.¹⁸ Inconsistent, uncertain funding makes capital planning for parks difficult.

Sources of Operating Expenditures



Source: National Recreation and Parks Association, "2020 NPRA Agency Performance Review"

Over the past decade, state parks' operating expenditures have steadily decreased, falling from more than \$3 billion in 2008 to about \$2.5 billion in 2019.¹⁹ State parks generate an average of 45% of their own funding through user fees, while the remainder comes from the states' general funds and a mix of dedicated funds and federal funds.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is a critical source of funding for the protection of natural resources, the preservation of water quantity and quality, the development of outdoor recreation projects, and increased recreation accessibility for all Americans.²⁰ More than 98% of the nation's counties have a park project that has been funded by the LWCF.²¹ The LWCF is funded with revenues generated through offshore oil and gas energy development; for every \$1 invested, a yield of \$4 in economic value is realized. The LWCF

is authorized at \$900 million a year; less than half of the \$40.9 billion in total revenues that have accrued in the LWCF have been appropriated, leaving a balance of approximately \$22 billion.

In 2020, the bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act was enacted into law, which creates a National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund and directs up to \$9.5 billion over five years in unobligated federal mineral revenues — such as royalties from on and offshore oil & gas and renewable energy development on public lands — to address the deferred maintenance backlog at the NPS and other federal agencies with public lands. The law also permanently and fully funds the LWCF and ensures its funds are used for its intended purpose. It is estimated that fully addressing the NPS deferred maintenance backlog would create or support 108,364 jobs.²²

RESILIENCE AND PUBLIC SAFETY

As the frequency of extreme weather events increases, so does the need to reduce combined sewer overflows (CSOs). CSOs discharge untreated wastewater and stormwater, often containing agricultural runoff and toxic substances, directly into nearby bodies of water. While the primary way to deal with combined sewers is the separation of storm and sanitary sewers, the use of parks as raingardens is an innovative way to manage stormwater sustainably. These green infrastructure systems use the natural environment to manage stormwater and provide a diverse range of ancillary benefits such as aesthetic value to communities; increasing property values by up to 20%; filtering rain which reduces water pollution and protects drinking water sources; providing up to

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\$3.8 billion in air pollution savings; and keeping cities cooler by reducing the heat island effect.²³ Green infrastructure being implemented in parks across the

nation is also becoming more cost competitive with gray forms of infrastructure in certain contexts.

Green and open spaces, including floodplains, floodways, and estuaries, are being more fully embraced as part of a total parks programs. Efforts are being made, especially in areas of repeated flooding, to return those areas to their original uninhabited state so that they can not only act as buffers between

bodies of water and inhabited areas, but provide wildlife habitat. In this way, our parks can contribute greatly to the sustainability of communities and mitigate the effects of climate change.



Photo Courtesy of WSP USA

BERKELEY ISLAND PARK IN OCEAN COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

People use parks for a wide range of purposes, and they expect that regardless of what activity they may engage in, they are protected from crime and that help will come in the case of natural disaster. For example, the wildfires of 2020 greatly impacted public lands in the western states. During the crisis, federal and state

agencies worked collaboratively to rescue campers and preemptively close facilities to protect the public. A dramatic example of this was the National Guard airlift of 150 people from a U.S. National Forest Service campground that was cut off by fire.²⁴

INNOVATION

Parks are increasingly being used for multiple functions, from recreation to green stormwater management, to transformation into lifelong learning centers used for arts, culture, education, events, conferences, retreats, and other similar programs. State and local parks are partnering with other agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private entities to find innovative ways to make these green spaces accessible and desirable to every member of the community.

Some state parks are working with innovative Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping technology to efficiently track all projects underway within the park system, including park, facility, and infrastructure needs. These GIS databases assist with asset management and task and revenue tracking, and they provide information for data-driven decision-making on future development and infrastructure repairs based on important metrics like return of investment and infrastructure age.

Many states have implemented innovative funding mechanisms for their parks. For example, some states have dedicated sources of funding for recreation such as a portion of lottery proceeds, redirecting sales taxes on sporting goods, or dipping into real estate tax revenues. These funding tools have had varying levels of success. However, revenues from federal excise taxes on shooting, hunting, fishing, and boating equipment provided more than \$1.1 billion to states in 2018.²⁵

Meanwhile, the NPS is engaged in partnerships where outside organizations assume some asset maintenance responsibilities or where the NPS leases assets to other parties in exchange for the lessee rehabilitating or maintaining the asset. Many NPS units also engage volunteer groups to perform maintenance duties; it's estimated that if the NPS could increase its number of volunteers to 600,000 by 2028, it would result in 40 million hours of volunteer labor valued at \$802.6 million over a 10-year period.²⁶



Photo Courtesy of WSP USA

SHIRLEY CHISHOLM STATE PARK IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK



Public Parks



RECOMMENDATIONS TO RAISE THE GRADE

- Fully fund the Great American Outdoors Act, which creates a dedicated fund to address the National Park Service's deferred maintenance backlog of nearly \$12 billion and permanently and fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- Enact legislation to permit agencies, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to retain user fees in the park system in which they were collected for use at its facilities, for parks and recreation uses.
- Mainstream the utility of GIS and other technologies to assist with asset management and to enhance user experience at parks.
- Promote the benefits of multiple-use parks that increase the community's resilience, such as rain gardens, which reduce stormwater pollution and protect drinking water sources.
- Encourage local, state, and federal public parks to partner with other government agencies and outside entities — private companies, nonprofit organizations, and volunteer groups — to assist with asset maintenance and to develop multiple uses for the park that maximize their use and benefit for the community.
- Strive to make all parks facilities and programs accessible to everyone by making the parks walkable, making public transit accessible, and making the parks accommodating to those of all ages, incomes, abilities, and community-specific needs.
- Ensure that parks facilities and programs are maintained and located across all parts of communities by eliminating “parks deserts.”

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