

People And Public Spaces

GOAL: Create a sustainable, high-quality, and innovative parks system that reflects the unique identity of Providence.

Access to urban parks can greatly increase the quality of life for those living in Providence, and shape the look and feel of our communities, as well as support the local economy and environment.

One tenth of the city's total acreage is public park space and all residents live within a ten-minute walk of a quality public park. Within this system, there are 120 unique neighborhood parks, which feature playgrounds (at more than half), active municipal cemeteries, miles of walking, biking and hiking trails, ballfields, basketball, outdoor fitness centers, tennis and pickleball courts, skateboard/biking features, waterparks, boat ramps, a zoo, the Museum of Natural History, the Botanical Center, historical buildings, an ice rink, and the largest historical park in Rhode Island, Roger Williams Park.

Open space, parks and outdoor recreation facilities are essential to the vitality and quality of life in Providence. They are not only the heart of local communities, but they are often regional destinations for visitors from near and far. They provide direct contact with nature and a cleaner environment and opportunities for physical activity, social interaction, and community building.

“Vibrant parks and green spaces are at the center of resilient and equitable cities, and increasingly, agencies and public officials are leveraging the many benefits of parks to meet their city-wide equity goals. Through community engagement and applying an equitable approach to park funding, park leaders, public, private, civic, and philanthropic partners are directing investments to communities in greatest need.” – City Parks Alliance

Furthermore, open spaces provide an interconnected system of green spaces that conserves natural ecosystem values and functions, sustains clear air and water, and provides a wide array of benefits to people and wildlife. Green infrastructure is a community's natural life support system, the ecological framework needed for environmental and economic sustainability.

Providence has a diversified public park system. As the city's population increases and changes, so will the city's facilities. This section sets forth objectives and strategies to meet the changing needs for open space, parks and outdoor recreational facilities within the city.

Public Space Changes

New Facilities. During the last decade, Providence saw substantial new development of parks and the restoration of many more. \$49 million was invested in park improvement projects, including 277 major projects completed, with 90 additional major projects in the pipeline. 90% of parks received major improvements, with 100% of parks to have received major improvements by end of 2024. \$23 million were invested in the revitalization of Roger Williams Park, including roadways, green infrastructure,

signage, landscaping, building revitalizations, mechanical/HVAC repairs, biking/walking/running trails, sidewalks, public art, and state of the art visitor's center. 8 new parks were also developed in the last decade, including the beloved Michael S. Van Leesten Memorial Bridge and its surrounding park area. Other investments include renovations to downtown parks, outdoor learning spaces at select schools, 60+ stormwater management features, and much more.

Programming. The Parks Department has a robust and integrated series of programs designed to bring people together outside to promote health and wellness, as well as promote wildlife and conservation education. We are going into our second decade of the Urban Wildlife Conservation Partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service wherein we provide activities that engage students in outdoor learning that aligns with core curriculum and Next Generation Science Standards, as mandated by the district. Furthermore, free USDA meal service and corresponding PlayCorps Programs ensures that students will be fed in our 40% of our parks and engaged when school is out of session. These programs are further supplemented with free fitness classes for all ages and abilities at over 20% of our parks. Some of our key institutions play an integral role in supplementing the core curriculum and providing activities for Providence children, youth and families. The Museum of Natural History, Providence Rink, Botanical Center, Zoo, RWP Visitors Center, and the North Burial Ground all work together to bring free innovative and integrated programs to the public. The Edward Ely Performing Arts Series further supports free performing arts performances in 10% of our parks.

Brownfields to Greenfields. Over the course of the past ten years, the department has transformed several brownfield sites into public spaces. The Woony Adventure Park at the former site of Lincoln Lace and Braid, and Mashapaug Park at the former Gorham site are both great examples of this use. Due to competing demands with housing and public space, and the cost of transforming Brownfields into Greenfields, the Parks Department does not have any plans to develop any additional brownfield areas.

Historic Preservation. In the past ten years, all of the historic buildings under the purview of the Parks Department have been fully renovated or restored. Many of these buildings are within Roger Williams Park and others are in neighborhood parks. In RWP, the Museum of Natural History, Betsey Williams Cottage, the Seal House, Temple to Music, Dalrymple Boathouse, Mounted Command, and Casino have all received major investments that have stabilized further decline and greatly enhanced curb appeal. In city parks, Garvin House on Mashapaug Pond, Esek Hopkins Homestead in Hopkins Park, and Wanskuck Cottage in Wanskuck Park have all been renovated and have found new use as artist-in-residence sites, City offices, or training program sites. Due to aging infrastructure, the Museum of Natural History, and the Casino, will continue to need significant capital investment for the foreseeable future. For the next 5 years, Esek Hopkins Homestead will be the site for an innovative partnership with Providence Preservation Society. The interior of the building is being renovated as part of a workforce development project.

There are many historic statues located throughout the parks system that require on-going maintenance. With all these memorials, the department seeks to work with the organizations that commissioned and/or installed these significant markers to ensure they are well-cared for. Going

forward, all new monuments and memorials must be approved by the Special Committee on Commemorative Works to confirm social significance and a maintenance plan.

Green Measures. Parks aims to improve bio-diversity and adapt to the challenges of climate change. Where possible, we are chemical-free, prioritize sustainably harvested natural materials, use integrated pest management, plant and manage native trees and perennials, manage invasive plants, develop stormwater mitigation features, and implement *leave the leaves* and *low mow/no mow* practices. We have also started to make the transition to electric turf management equipment. Along with other partners, we developed the nationally renowned Providence Stormwater Innovation Center. Our new visitor center is also the City's first net-zero energy building in the city. In winter 2024, we will open the region's first urban wood waste depot that will allow for us to repurpose waste that would otherwise be bound for the landfill.

Street Tree Inventory. The Parks Department maintains an updated inventory of street trees to determine numbers, locations, and condition. The inventory quantifies the environmental benefits of street trees and their contributions to energy savings, carbon storage, pollution mitigation, stormwater management, beautification, and property value.

Tree Planting, Care and Preservation. Tree planting has increased substantially and has grown through the partnership with the Providence Neighborhood Planting Program. The goal is reducing heat islands and a net gain of trees each year, factoring in mortality and tree removal while also ensuring mobility and access for pedestrians in city neighborhoods. The Parks Department has taken steps to ensure healthy trees, including increasing the soil volume of tree wells wherever possible to allow greater absorption of water, nutrients and oxygen. The "tree rescue" program removes tree-choking tree grates, pavement and other harmful infrastructure. Other new initiatives include tree planning and pruning in partnership with community members and organizations.

Key Public Space Assets

City Cemeteries: Roger Williams Family Cemetery, Locust Grove Cemetery, and North Burial Ground. The mission of North Burial Ground (NBG) is to memorialize the deceased, comfort the living, and be a cultural, historical and conservation destination for the community. Going forward it is essential that NBG has the capacity to continue to provide space for municipal burials, and meet the community's needs for open space, conservation, and programs, while being responsive to the finite availability of land for this use. Additionally, the infrastructure and curb appeal must match the use and vision.

Roger Williams Park Museum of Natural History & Planetarium. The Museum of Natural History and Planetarium continues to grow as a local and regional learning and discovery destination for all. It is the state's only Museum of Natural History and public planetarium. Annually, it hosts approximately 40,000 visitors, including students and special program attendees. We are especially excited about our innovative field trip programs, that include planetarium shows and hands-on workshops, for schools, homeschool families, camps, scouts, community groups, and student mentorships, as well as our college internships. The 2023 renovations will allow the museum to host additional public and private events.

Roger Williams Park Botanical Center. The Roger Williams Park Botanical Center hosts over 100,000 visitors annually and provides related education and conservation programs to over 1200 children and adults at local schools, community groups, homeschool families, and more. Not only is it a living museum that connects people to nature, but it also serves as a regional destination and event center. With the 2023 expansion of the grounds and new event pavilion the Botanical Center's role as a premier event location will be codified.

Rink and Providence City Center. The Providence Rink has expanded into a year-round destination and events center. 2023 infrastructure improvements and the new shade sail allow for an extended period of ice-skating as well as a forum for events and programs.

Roger Williams Park Zoo. Roger Williams Park Zoo welcomes approximately 800,000 guests annually. Recently included in their list of the top 26 zoos in the country by U.S. News & World Report, RWPZ is a must-see activity for out of state visitors and a long-standing traditional must-do for local community members. Committed to providing captivating experiences that inspire guests to participate in wildlife conservation, Roger Williams Park Zoo is actively enhancing existing animal habitats for the well-being of its residents. As part of a long-term master plan, the zoo is currently developing an education center and events pavilion that will more than double the size of an existing facility, enhancing its capacity as a destination.

City Center Rink at BankNewport City Center. The City Center Rink has become the center for year-round downtown parks programs. Working in Partnership with 195 District parks, and other partners, we have developed well-loved community initiatives that happen at rink and throughout the extensive network of downtown parks. The addition of an artistic and utilitarian shade sail and rink renovations scheduled for the spring of 2024 will further secure the rink as the downtown event and recreation space.

Roger Williams Park Gateway. The 2023 Gateway showcases the best of what we do at parks, sustainable, innovative urban park design, and connects our flagship park, Roger Williams, to the surrounding communities. Going forward, the center will become a local and regional destination for community, cultural, arts and environmental programs. We will continue to promote all that we do in Roger Williams Park and promote this flagship park as a single campus with many venues and opportunities for programming, conservation, and historical, cultural and community connections.

Neighborhood Park Renovations. Parks renovations have been informed by the mission and vision to offer state of the art facilities that foster community building, passive and active recreation, increase of green space through sustainable management practices, welcoming and accessible play spaces encouraging free and open play, and unique creative expression through participation of local craftspersons and artisans.

Waterfront Parks. The vision for a series of connected waterfront parks is almost realized. The addition of the Michael S. Van Leesten Memorial Bridge and the 195 District's new park spaces on the east and

west side of the Providence River provide for a seamless connection from Gano Park, India Point Park, the Hurricane Barrier, and through to Waterplace Park. What is missing from this picture is a climate resilient, enhanced, and naturalized waterfront park that will provide for boat dockage, visitor's center, as well as basic services and eating and drinking establishments. In the next 5 years, we plan to see this project completed.

Public Space Challenges and Opportunities

Climate Resiliency. The greatest challenge facing our parks system is the management of stormwater and reduction of flooding against sea level rise and storm surge, while also restoring and creating new park features and marine habitats. Parks approaches design for resiliency and adaptation to the changing climate and its effects. Design considerations focus on practices to mitigate heat island effect, decrease soil erosion, and provide for on-site stormwater infiltration.

Available Land. Being mostly built out, Providence has limited areas for new open space and recreational facilities; existing park space is often overused by athletic leagues. Going forward it is imperative that field use is scheduled and sustainable.

Limited Resources. While resources are limited, the Parks Department takes advantage of opportunities to bring in additional funds through revenues, grants, and partnerships. We will continue to inform and promote the City's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) bonding process. We also use data to ensure that our spaces and facilities are maintained to ensure longevity. We have robust training, inventory, and work order management systems that enable us to do preventative maintenance and schedule replacement equipment/features before issues arise.

Meeting Demand. While Providence is an evolving City and the demographics change over time, what remains constant is the need for quality outdoor spaces and diverse programs. We will continue to work with over 50 friends and neighborhood groups to help inform the decisions and priorities for public spaces. We encourage the development of new ways of connecting with the community.

Connected and Clean Waterways. Building on the aforementioned, all of the waterways in Providence are connected and most run through our park system. It is of vital importance to ensure this water is clean for recreation use, community health, and fish/wildlife habitat. Additionally, a fish passage facility is needed at Roger Williams Park. The Cunliff Lake Dam, located at the downstream end of the network of water basins in Roger Williams Park is a short distance up from the mainstem of Pawtuxet River. Cunliff Lake and connected water basins in the park will provide opportunity for a significant expansion to the current self-sustaining population of diadromous fish (river herring) in the Pawtuxet River, providing an increase in the forage base for important species of fish in Narragansett Bay and Rhode Island Sound. This heavily visited park, located in a densely populated neighborhood also provides an outstanding opportunity to inform the public about the efforts and the importance in restoring and managing the living natural resources of our coastal streams and estuaries. The new boardwalk and fishing dock at Roger Williams Park will further promote these connections.

Well Designed and Maintained Network of Parks. While everyone lives within a ten minute walk of a quality public park, it is essential that every facet of these parks not only be, unique, include state-of the art facilities and equipment, and reflect the needs of the community, but also comprise a comprehensive network of parks with diverse amenities and ease of access to all. This network will connect children and families to nature, offer opportunities for free and open play, provide traditional and non-traditional recreation opportunities, connections to the arts, and be climate resilient. Priority projects are determined by equity and community need. The Parks Department has a team of landscape and graphic design specialists that ensure the best practices in urban park design and maintenance are considered.

Objectives and Strategies

OBJECTIVE PS1: PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES

Provide and enhance outdoor recreational, cultural, arts, and performing arts programming throughout the city.

Strategies:

- A. Provide a diversity of programming at park facilities throughout the city.
- B. Diversify and expand programmed athletic opportunities in parks.
- C. Expand parks programming opportunities for youth.
- D. Develop new space(s) in the city for large-scale festivals.
- E. Support and encourage public art in park spaces.
- F. Expand use of school facilities for programs through interdepartmental collaboration.
- G. Collaborate with organizations to enhance access to programming and educational opportunities.
- H. Adapt programming in parks facilities to changing demographics of the city.
- I. Support federal and state parks and recreation plans that help implement this comprehensive plan.

OBJECTIVE PS2: SUSTAIN OUR PARK ASSETS

Provide the necessary resources to build and maintain a parks system that offers a diversity of recreational opportunities for all residents.

Strategies:

- A. Supplement City funding with additional funds from user fees, concession and lease agreements, and grants.
- B. Supplement City maintenance resources with maintenance sharing agreements.
- C. Collaborate with institutions, businesses and organizations to sponsor and fund programs.
- D. Ensure balance between services, fees and programming.
- E. Establish reasonable and feasible maintenance standards.
- F. Increase park maintenance staff during peak seasonal periods.

- G. Incorporate low maintenance designs into park renovation projects.
- H. Investigate and implement innovative park maintenance plans with public and private partners.

OBJECTIVE PS3: LINK PUBLIC SPACES

Connect neighborhoods and open spaces through a network of bicycle and pedestrian friendly streets and trails.

Strategies:

- A. Continue to develop a connected system of greenways for continual access along the entire waterfront and through adjacent neighborhoods.
- B. Strategically acquire parcels to link open spaces.
- C. Explore opportunities involving public and private land to provide continuous public access to the waterfront along rivers and ponds without land acquisition.
- D. Collaborate across City departments and with community organizations to identify and implement improvements to the city’s bicycle and pedestrian networks.
- E. Through development incentives, negotiation, and other mechanisms, create publicly accessible open spaces through private land development.

OBJECTIVE PS4: INCREASE ACCESS TO PARK FACILITIES

Provide for a regular program of park and recreation improvements that reflect resident interests in recreation and physical fitness.

Strategies:

- A. Prioritize development of new parks and improvements to existing parks based on neighborhood need, incorporating equity analysis of factors like access to green space, neighborhood tree canopy, and level of urban density.
- B. Provide public park and recreation facilities in proximity to schools.
- C. Expand and diversify park use opportunities.
- D. Increase accessibility of park facilities for residents of all levels of physical abilities, including incorporating universal design and PROWAG principles into park improvements and investing in infrastructure like accessible picnic tables.

OBJECTIVE PS5: STEWARDSHIP OF RESOURCES

Protect natural and cultural resources by incorporating them into the fabric of an overall system of public open space and enhance their climate resilience.

Strategies:

- A. Promote public access to the waterfront and water-based recreational activities.
- B. Explore opportunities to create new open spaces along waterways (rivers, ponds, streams) where none currently exist.
- C. Encourage the conservation, restoration and preservation of environmentally sensitive areas through means such as evaluating expansion of conservation areas.
- D. Continue to study and implement best practices in climate resilient design of park and conservation areas to support citywide management of increasing levels of stormwater, sea

level rise, and extreme heat.

- E. Encourage pedestrian access to and passive use of designated conservation areas.
- F. Identify and protect key vistas and view corridors.
- G. Ensure the stewardship of historic park facilities and landscapes.
- H. Promote the restoration of historic park sculptures through public/private partnerships.

OBJECTIVE PS6: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Ensure the success of public spaces by involving the community in planning and maintenance efforts.

Strategies:

- A. Encourage community ownership of neighborhood parks and other civic and public spaces through “friends of...”, “park watch dogs” and similar programs.
- B. Develop an ongoing process for updating neighborhood and citywide resident interests and needs for park and recreation facilities and public programming.
- C. Provide opportunities for community input in park and recreation facility renovation efforts.
- D. Increase public knowledge about existing park and recreation spaces as well as athletic, arts and performing arts programming activities.
- E. Promote a civic culture of properly caring for public spaces.

OBJECTIVE PS7: COMMUNITY GARDENING

Continue to identify, establish, maintain and expand city park sites for community gardens.

Strategies:

- A. Work with residents and community groups to identify viable community garden sites.
- B. Identify and prioritize community garden expansion in neighborhoods lacking community gardens or access to health food.
- C. Expand community gardening opportunities on under-utilized park land.
- D. Investigate ways to identify and match potential park-owned garden sites with growers.
- E. Continue to aspire to every Providence resident living within a ten-minute walk of a community garden.