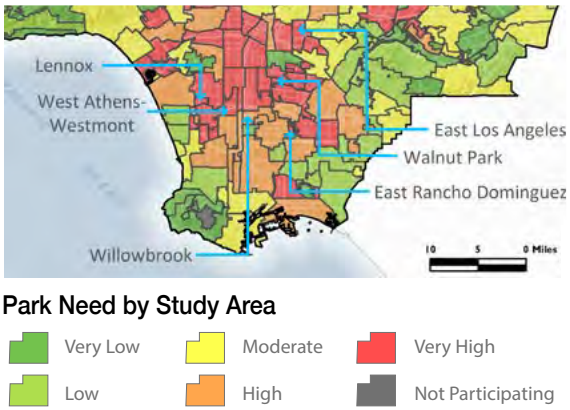
Project Highlight

Community Parks and Recreation Plans in Los Angeles County

Six unincorporated communities located within a highly urbanized area of Los Angeles County are the focus of the *Community Parks and Recreation Plans*: East Los Angeles, Each Rancho Dominguez, Lennox, Walnut Park, West Athens-Westmont, and Willowbrook. Located within the urban core of Los Angeles County, all six communities are primarily residential communities with commercial uses along major corridors. Because of their established community identities, generally well-defined boundaries, and unique histories, they have remained unincorporated, rather than become parts of adjacent cities. Prior analysis by the County indicates that the six communities are substantially underserved by parks and recreational facilities. Also, they are generally characterized by relatively low income, high levels of crime, and childhood obesity.

The Project

The *Community Parks and Recreation Plans* analyze and address the unique park, recreation, and urban greening needs in each of the six communities. Each plan starts with examination of local demographics, existing parkland and recreational facilities, parkland gaps, current recreation programs, trees and tree canopies in existing parks, transportation and connectivity to parks, and availability of land for recreational purposes. This baseline information, combined with input from the public involvement process, informs a detailed assessment and prioritization of local park and recreation needs. The needs assessment in turn informs a green space vision, design concepts for potential new urban park and trail projects, and strategies to address the identified needs. Implementation is also addressed, including partnership and funding opportunities and detailed next steps for actualizing the green space vision and strategies.



Left to right: New park development implementing the community's sustainability ideas is already underway, including this park in Willowbrook. County Analysis identified the six communities as highly underserved by parks and recreational facilities. Source: County of Los Angeles

The plans are intended to make all six communities more sustainable by creating additional parks, green spaces, and recreational amenities for residents. Implementing the plans will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by significantly increasing the number of residents who can walk, bicycle, and take transit to parks, and incorporating alternative energy production facilities, green building practices, and improved water efficiency in irrigation equipment, low-water plants, and recycled water for irrigation. Another focus of the plans is carbon sequestration from tree planting at existing and future parks, trails, and other community places. All of these improvements will increase the quality of life and health in the six communities, which in turn will advance economic and social sustainability.

The community process for the six *Community Parks and Recreation Plans* was so successful that the County Departnment of Parks and Recreation applied a similar approach countywide. The *2016 Los Angeles Countywide Comprehensive Parks & Recreation Needs Assessment* represents a historic undertaking to engage all communities in Los Angeles County in a collaborative process for future decision-making on parks and recreation. Five metrics for community park needs were quantified for 189 study areas. The massive community engagement program incorporated traditional methods and social media, including workshops conducted by parks departments and community-based organizations, resulting in identification of priority projects and cost estimates. In the November 2016 election, a new funding mechanism for park improvements was passed by voters in the form of a new parcel tax, as part of the Safe, Clean Neighborhood Parks, Open Space, Beaches, Rivers Protection and Water Conservation Measure (Measure A). This new funding, which has special provisions for high need communities, can be tapped for projects identified in the *Community Parks and Recreation Plans* for East Los Angeles, Each Rancho Dominguez, Lennox, Walnut Park, West Athens-Westmont, and Willowbrook.

Local/Regional Connection

The six *Community Parks and Recreation Plans* represent unique solutions for actualizing sustainability objectives in the two primary regional frameworks: the *2016-2040 Regional Transportation Plan/ Sustainable Communities Strategy (RTP/SCS)* for the Southern California Association of Governments region and the *Unincorporated Los Angeles County Community Climate Action Plan 2020* (CCAC). The RTP/ SCS advances a vision where many communities are more compact, seamlessly served by numerous public transit options, people live

Source: County of Los Angeles

Locally-Driven Solutions

- Better use of existing public facilities, such as a “park plaza” in unused space next to an existing library, including exercise equipment and outdoor seating for reading books.
- Creative sites for new park spaces close to residents, including several that are currently being acquired by the County.
- Coordination with local water and power providers for creating parks and trails within utility corridors.

closer to daily destinations and live more active and healthier lifestyles, and economies grow. Similarly, the CCAC greenhouse gas reduction approach focuses on transportation and compatible compact development, but it also establishes strategies related to water conservation, green building and energy, and land conservation and tree planting.

Agency Collaboration for Action

Collaboration between the County Department of Parks and Recreation and the Regional Planning, Public Health, and Public Works departments resulted in very positive outcomes during formulation of the plans. Most of the interaction took place as part of the County's Healthy Design Workgroup. The staff across the four departments became better acquainted with each other's projects, and together they identified opportunities to complement and support each other's efforts.

"While some may think of recreation as 'fun and games'...opportunities for recreation and physical activity help address a variety of problems faced by these communities, such as high levels of obesity and related diseases, gang violence, and stress related to finances and the economy."

-Clement Lau, Departmental Facilities Planner

One example of this collaboration is their partnership on community engagement, as described under Effective Community Engagement below. Another example is cross-pollination between a study of health and safety in public spaces in three of the communities (completed by the Department of Public Health and Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust) and development of the six plans. For example, the community input received during development of the six plans helped the Department of Public Health to secure grant funding to prepare pedestrian plans in West Athens-Westmont and Walnut Park.

Effective Community Engagement

Community involvement was at the heart of the planning process – the six plans were formulated "from the ground up." The customized process for each community was based on the project goals, as well as an understanding of the particular issues in the community. In each of the six communities, the County Department of Parks and Recreation partnered with local community-based non-profit organizations, including the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust and From Lot to Spot, to engage community members in discussions about vision, needs, priorities, implementation ideas, and partnership opportunities. Methods included stakeholder interviews, focus groups, questionnaires/surveys, community workshops, design workshops, tabling events, community tours, and youth programs. The use of

Community members of all ages provided input on ideas and priorities, as a result of the County's many engagement activities. Source: County of Los Angeles

multiple methods helped to increase the number and diversity of participants.

Meeting fatigue among many community members was recognized by the project team, and extra effort was paid to maintaining engagement. Tactics included partnering with other County departments on outreach activities addressing multiple projects, such as at the Willowbrook Community Fair. The project team also proactively addressed concerns about planning discussions not leading to tangible outcomes by keeping community members apprised about potential Measure A funding opportunities for implementation.

Recreation, walking, neighborhood connections, urban forestry, health, water efficiency, and community culture are integrated into the park plans, as shown in this Walnut Park illustration. Source: County of Los Angeles

Sustainability Benefits for California

Implementation of the *Community Park and Recreation Plans* will help to advance many of California's sustainability objectives, particularly in the areas of:

- Equity
- Public health
- Reduced automobile usage and fuel consumption
- Water conservation
- Energy conservation and efficiency
- Revitalized urban and community center

IMPACT ON WATER CONSERVATION

Changes to maintenance and landscape installation within existing and future parks can provide dramatic water conservation. Key water saving strategies include:

- Utilizing **DRIP IRRIGATION** instead of spray heads (estimated 16% water savings)
- Planting **LOW WATER USE PLANTS** and replacing high water use ones (estimated 62% water savings)
- Applying **COMPOST** in planting areas and in turf areas (estimated 10-13% water savings)
- Utilizing **MULCH** regularly to retain soil moisture (estimated 20% water savings)

Figure 5.12 demonstrates how these savings could be applied to a 10,000-square foot sample park project in Willowbrook.

FIGURE 5.12 SAMPLE PARK PROJECT WATER SAVING

project size	*10,000-square feet*
project description	*conventional high water use lawn with spray*
estimated water use (gallons per year)	*349,994*

Action	Estimated water use (gallons per year)	Estimated Water Savings (gallons per year)
Switch spray heads to drip irrigation	292,348	57,646
Switch high water use plants to low water use plants	131,248	218,746
Add 3.5% or 5% organic matter content compost	307,995	41,999
Add 3 inches of mulch to planting areas	279,995	69,999

IMPACT ON GREENHOUSE GAS REDUCTION

Implementing the vision plan and urban greening goals in Willowbrook could include many actions that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase carbon sequestration.

- Improving the pedestrian network that encourages more people to walk would **DECREASE VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED** and reduce emissions.
- Utilizing **ON-SITE ALTERNATIVE ENERGY PRODUCTION** would limit dependence on fossil fuels for energy needs.
- Increasing **TREES** in the urban environment would improve capacity to "sequester" carbon by removing it from the atmosphere and storing it in their wood and in the soil.

It is also possible to quantify the impact of new trees in Willowbrook. As described in Chapter Two, the Park Forest (existing trees within parks only) is estimated to sequester 338,371 pounds (153.48 Metric tons) of carbon annually. There is limited opportunity to increase tree canopy and carbon storage at existing parks in Willowbrook. Adding additional parks with healthy urban canopy coverage is one strategy to increase the overall carbon stored by the park forest. However, the complete benefits of the urban forest are best understood at the community scale, rather than limited to trees within parks. As shown in Table 5.2, it is estimated that the current forest sequesters 1,297 Metric Tons of carbon dioxide per year, and that approximately 2,851 Metric Tons would be sequestered by the target canopy.

It is important to consider that the planting of trees along streets, at parks, and throughout communities can contribute to greenhouse gas reduction in other ways than carbon sequestration, including but not limited to: providing shade for buildings, thus reducing air conditioning usage; reducing the urban heat island effect; and creating streets and paths that encourage people to walk or bike, thus reducing vehicle trips.

Maintaining or increasing current canopy coverage for existing parks (21% for all parks combined) and ensuring coverage of at least 15% for new parks would ensure sustained or increased carbon sequestration by the Park forest. In addition, selecting trees that have high capacity for carbon sequestration, especially for sites near freeways and other sites that have high levels of air pollution, can improve the contribution of the urban forest to greenhouse gas reduction. Trees that are highly effective at sequestration are identified in the Preferred Tree List in Appendix E.

Sustainability benefits are quantified in each plan. Source: County of Los Angeles

For More Information

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