Sparking Change:
Catalyzing the Social Impacts of Parks in Underserved Neighbourhoods
Park People Executive Summary, February 2017

Parks are not simply green places of respite with grass and trees. They are critical pieces of the social infrastructure of our cities, which have a role to play in creating more inclusive, equitable places that are shaped by and for the people living there.

Sparking Change is the new report by Park People, a charity that builds strong communities by animating and improving parks. It tells the story of communities that have taken action in their local parks through spearheading improvements, engaging diverse community members, and organizing events and activities that draw people into the park—a process we refer to as "park engagement."

We found that parks can bring a rich set of positive social benefits to neighbourhoods when communities are actively taking a lead in shaping and programming the park, but it takes partnerships with non-profits and governments to invest in community leadership, improvements, and programming.

Through Park People's work over the last five years, we've seen how parks can be important sites for community development—the process by which residents take action to improve their neighbourhood. By providing an open, accessible venue that promotes social gathering, cultural exchange, and shared storytelling, parks are important in developing a sense of community, safety, and belonging.

In recognition of growing inequality and the prevalence of neighbourhood-based inequities, *Sparking Change* focuses on the work of community members, municipalities, and partner organizations in underserved neighbourhoods. We took our cues from the City of Toronto's Neighbourhood Improvement Areas, which were identified through a selection of equity-based criteria.

Through conversations with community members, non-profit and City staff in seven different North American cities, including Toronto, we identified five social impacts of park engagement and 10 key strategies for achieving these impacts. These are:

1. Creating a sense of change and shared ownership
   - Pair park improvements with conversations about ongoing community involvement
   - Make small, strategic investments that will have an outsize impact
2. Building confidence and inspiring civic leaders
   - Focus on capacity building and ensure groups are community-led
   - Plan for group sustainability by focusing on structure and leadership
3. Reducing social isolation and creating inclusive communities
   - Design fun, meaningful, and targeted programming
   - Create opportunities for people to connect over food
4. Providing a place for diverse people to gather
   - Recognize multiple histories through active engagement
   - Create partnerships that leverage unique strengths
   - Recognize and address barriers to participation
5. Supporting local economic development
   - Use the park as a "start-up" space for local entrepreneurs

Highlight Stories

- In Toronto's Chester Le Park, a translator and engagement worker was employed to reduce barriers to participation in park programing and gardening by those who don't speak English.
- Through creative models for community participation and ongoing engagement, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, co-creates parks with local residents and engages them in programming the park afterward.
- Groups in Edmonton, Winnipeg, and Toronto use gardening and food to spur social connections, tackle food insecurity, and provide places for newcomers or people with disabilities to garden.
- The Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee in Toronto, creates opportunities for local entrepreneurs to sell homemade food, clothing, and crafts in a market at the local park.
- In Portland's Cully Park, community members are involved in planning and managing the creation of a new park, including an intertribal garden co-managed between local Indigenous people and the parks department.

Key Points

- **Programming is key to fostering social connections in parks**. There is often a lot of focus on capital improvements (new playgrounds, benches), but programming is a critical component of creating parks that have opportunities for people to meet others in their neighbourhood.
- **Parks are gateways to becoming civically involved**. Park engagement can be a first step to becoming more civically engaged through volunteering, getting involved with local community boards, and advocacy campaigns. Park engagement helps build skills and confidence in public speaking, advocacy, and outreach.
- **Small actions and investments have big impacts**. Small wins and milestones keep people excited, encourage others to get involved, and create a visible presence of people in the park. It might be as simple as organizing a group park clean-up or hosting a community picnic. Small, simple funding and grants keep things accessible and help volunteer groups grow.
- **Parks are important sites of local economic development**. By providing start-up space to local entrepreneurs, cooks, and craftspeople, parks can be important tools in creating local economic opportunities, but only if the regulatory environment allows these uses to flourish. Indirect economic impacts, such as learning new skills and networking, are more likely.
- **Parks where people are visibly engaged are cleaner and well-maintained.** When community members establish a visible presence in a park—whether its through a garden or hosting events—others in the neighbourhood treat the park better and may be more willing to become involved themselves. Engaged community members feel a sense of ownership over local parks that help keep them clean and amenities well-maintained.
- **Park groups should be community-led, but support is often needed.** While it's important to ensure community members lead projects themselves, strong partnerships are critical. The support of a paid staff member in a partner organization or government is often necessary to assist with tasks like organizing meetings, applying for permits, and funding applications. However, challenges can arise if that paid position is terminated, so open communication and shared decision-making is necessary for success.

Sparking Change also includes an evaluation toolkit that groups can use to measure and track their social impact. You can download this toolkit, the entire report, and an expanded literature review on our website at www.parkpeople.ca/sparkingchange