

VOLUME 3  
**chapter** **7**  
**GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE: PARKS, OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION**

## **A** Context

New Orleans’ system of parks, open spaces and recreation resources is one of its most important assets. The city’s beautiful live oaks, neutral grounds, exceptional large parks and system of neighborhood parks, and the potential of its waterfronts are critical to quality of life. One of the most important themes of this plan is how quality of life is central to the economic success of cities and their ability to retain and attract residents. Excellent parks, recreational resources for adults as well as children and youth, and access to water and nature are key ingredients to the quality of life desired by everyone in the 21st century.



City master plans and comprehensive plans traditionally include a chapter devoted to parks and recreation and many cities also have stand-alone master plans for their park and recreation systems. A Parks, Recreation and Open Space plan for New Orleans was completed in 2002 as part of the pre-Hurricane Katrina master plan process, following a 1980 parks plan. In addition to analysis and recommendations for the overall park and recreation system, the 2002 plan also included a list of park projects by Planning District. This chapter of the 2030 Master Plan is indebted to the 2002 Parks, Recreation and Open Space plan.

The 2002 plan identified seven “core needs” of the system:

- Management and utilization of existing resources
- More recreational opportunities at the neighborhood level
- Greater access to the waterfronts
- Allocation of resources within parks
- Protection of existing resources
- Greater citizen involvement in the planning process and greater cooperation among recreation providers
- Improved funding



In addition, the plan mentioned “emerging trends,” including “a call for a regional approach to funding and coordination, a heightened call for protection of the City’s wetland resources, and recognition of the role parks and open space play in overall community development.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, the traditional elements of park and recreation planning are situated within the broader concept of “green infrastructure.” While the roads, sewer and water lines, utilities, community facilities and buildings constitute the “gray infrastructure” of a city, green

<sup>1</sup> City of New Orleans, Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan, 2002, p. x

infrastructure is the network of parks, tree-lined streets, bike trails and pedestrian paths, river and stream corridors, waterfronts and urban wilds of the city. Both gray and green infrastructure must be planned, created, maintained and restored as systems, not as isolated facilities. After the devastation that Hurricane Katrina visited on the city’s park and recreation infrastructure, the core needs identified in 2002 remain pressing, but the “emerging trends” have also become more salient.

In the second half of the twentieth century, when cities were losing population and struggling with declining funds, urban park systems faced the challenge of doing more with less and less. After the storm, the New Orleans park and recreation system suffered even more serious blows. Now, city leaders increasingly understand that parks are critical to a high quality of life and bring economic benefits, and that signature parks contribute to the identity and visibility of the city.

How do we analyze the green infrastructure system of New Orleans? One way is to understand the extent and value of the tree canopy through analysis of satellite imagery. In August 2002, the nonprofit organization American Forests prepared an analysis of the New Orleans metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup> The study area included portions of Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes and did not include the city east of I-510 (*i.e.*, Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge and other eastern wetlands were not included). Using high-resolution satellite imagery, the analysis found that 24 percent of the area in the study area was covered by tree canopy, 33 percent was impervious surfaces (streets, buildings, paved areas), 28 percent was open space (pervious but not tree-covered), and 12 percent was water. The study estimated the existing benefits and the potential benefits if tree cover were to be increased to 40 percent as follows:

**TABLE 7.1: ESTIMATED BENEFITS OF TREE COVER TO THE NEW ORLEANS METRO AREA—AT 24% AND 40%**

	24% TREE CANOPY (2002)	ESTIMATED VALUE	40% TREE CANOPY (POTENTIAL)	ESTIMATED VALUE
Stormwater retention capacity in cubic feet	370 million	\$741 million	431 million	\$863 million
Pounds of pollutants removed from the air in pounds	2.8 million	\$7.1 million	4.6 million	\$11.7 million
Storage of carbon in tree biomass in tons	1 million		1.84 million	
Carbon sequestration in tons per year	10,000		16,600	

SOURCE: AMERICAN FORESTS, *URBAN ECOSYSTEM ANALYSIS, NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA METROPOLITAN AREA: CALCULATING THE VALUE OF NATURE*, (AUGUST 2002), PP. 2-3.

Through the efforts of the city and nonprofit organizations like Parkway Partners and Hike for KaTreeNa, New Orleans has been working to replace the over 100,000 trees lost as a result of Hurricane Katrina. While trees are integral to the city’s lush, semi-tropical character, they also function as critical element of the city’s stormwater and pollution mitigation system.

The green space and recreation system in New Orleans is owned and managed by multiple entities of which the major agencies are:

- Two City departments: Parks and Parkways and the New Orleans Recreation Department (NORD)
- City Park Improvement Association, responsible for City Park
- Audubon Nature Institute, responsible for Audubon Park and Zoo, Woldenburg Park, Nature Center, Species Survival Center (formerly Wilderness Park), and the new riverfront park in design as of 2009
- Orleans Levee Board, responsible for public green space on and adjacent to the levees, such as Lakeshore Park

<sup>2</sup> American Forests, *Urban Ecosystem Analysis, New Orleans, Louisiana Metropolitan Area: Calculating the Value of Nature*, (August 2002) available at [www.americanforests.org](http://www.americanforests.org).

- US Fish and Wildlife Service, responsible for Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge
- School Districts, responsible for school recreation areas

The extent of fragmentation of the above entities is somewhat unusual, particularly the division into two separate municipal departments—one that manages parks and green spaces and the other that manages recreational/cultural facilities and programming. A study sponsored by the Afterschool Partnership of Greater New Orleans found that only 3 percent of recreation and park agencies in the country are separated in this way. The study recommended that the two agencies be merged and further recommended a Special District model with an elected Commission and taxing power.<sup>3</sup> A citizen committee convened by Councilmember Fielkow is considering that recommendation as this document is being written. As discussed in the next section, this plan also recommends detailed evaluation of a new agency that would have responsibility for green infrastructure, community parks, and recreation programs.

## Municipal departments

The Department of Parks and Parkways manages a landscape of approximately 2,000 acres of open space: 839 neutral grounds; 433 parks and playgrounds; 511 acres of regional parks and golf courses; and 281 acres of other resources such as historic sites. The department has responsibility for more than 400,000 trees.

The New Orleans Recreation Department manages recreation centers and recreation programs. It is only partially recovered from Hurricane Katrina. In 2009 and 2010, over \$21 million in storm-related and city funds have been designated for renovations and improvements to NORD facilities.



Although there are some programs for adults, NORD focuses on programs for children and youth. Programs include:

- Youth basketball, baseball and volleyball
- After school tutorial programs (with JOB1, UNO and Dillard)
- Cultural programs: ballet, tap, jazz and modern dance (partnership with the New Orleans Ballet Association, or NOBA), drama and other performing arts
- Youth football (2300+ youth) (partnership with NCAA Football and Allstate Sugar Bowl)
- Music programs: voice, instrumental, piano
- Youth and adult arts and crafts, ceramics and sewing
- Adult and senior fitness
- Summer swimming programs
- Summer camp serving 5,000+ youth



<sup>3</sup> *Best Practice Study of Municipal Recreation Departments*, Afterschool Partnership of Greater New Orleans, July 2008, <http://www.gnoafterschool.org/library/>.

Booster clubs and other volunteer organizations support team athletics at a number of parks. In addition, NORD has pursued corporate sponsorships and other partnerships to support expanded programming.

Several nonprofit organizations work on parks issues, including “Friends” organizations focused on specific parks:

- Parkway Partners
- Trust for Public Land
- Hike for KaTreeNa
- Friends of City Park
- Friends of Brechtel Park

In addition, Audubon has a membership program.

## Level of Service and Funding for Parks

The traditional measures of park and recreation Level of Service were developed by the National Recreation and Park Association during the years of suburban expansion after World War II. These measures emphasized the number of acres per 1,000 persons and were intended to be applied in the development of new subdivisions and suburban regions. Of course, it is possible to have many acres in rarely visited parts of a city which could give a misleading impression of actual park access. (Bayou Sauvage, with its 23,000 acres, would skew the measure considerably for New Orleans, for example.) Counting only the city-managed parks, City Park, and Audubon Park, the traditional Level of Service measure for New Orleans today is approximately 7.7 acres per 1,000 persons (based on an estimated population of 330,000). This is comparable with cities such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, Atlanta and San Francisco, but less than Boston, Minneapolis, or Seattle.<sup>4</sup>



Specialists in urban parks, like Peter Harnik, Director of the Center of City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Land, now focus more on funding as the proper measure of level of service for city parks. As he told the 2006 Urban Park and Recreation Summit, “I used to think that acreage and facilities were most important, but now it appears that city park excellence is more tied to spending.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, per capita spending is now used as an important measure for urban parks. A survey by the Trust for Public Land of 2006 park-related expenditures per resident (both operating and capital expenditures and combining all park agencies) found an average of \$91 per resident. Expenditures ranged from \$268 per person in San Francisco, \$116 in Atlanta, to \$66 in Philadelphia and \$54 in Baltimore<sup>6</sup>. It is difficult to arrive at a comparable figure for New Orleans because total park spending is divided among NORD, Parks and Parkways, City Park, Audubon Institute, and the Orleans Levee District.

Before Hurricane Katrina, City Park received almost no public funds and generated over 98 percent of its own operating revenue. As a result, it was chronically underfunded and unable to achieve its potential as one of the largest urban parks in the country. The City Park Master Plan, adopted in 2005 and updated

<sup>4</sup> “Total Parkland per 1,000 Residents by City, FY 2007,” Trust for Public Land, [www.tpl.org/content\\_documents/citypark\\_facts/ccpe\\_TotalAcresperResident\\_08.pdf](http://www.tpl.org/content_documents/citypark_facts/ccpe_TotalAcresperResident_08.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Peter Harnik, “Beyond the Numbers: The State of America’s City Parks Today.” Presentation to the National Recreation and Park Association Urban Park and Recreation Summit, Chicago, May 2006, [www.nrpa.org/content/default.aspx?documentid=3573](http://www.nrpa.org/content/default.aspx?documentid=3573).

<sup>6</sup> “Park-Related Total Expenditure per Resident, by City, FY 2006,” Trust for Public Land, [www.tpl.org/content\\_documents/citypark\\_facts/ccpe\\_TotalSpendingbyCity\\_08.pdf](http://www.tpl.org/content_documents/citypark_facts/ccpe_TotalSpendingbyCity_08.pdf).

in 2007, called for \$115 million in repairs and improvements and an additional \$5 million annually in operating funds. A dedicated property tax was initially envisioned to support both the operating and capital budget. The park suffered over \$40 million in damages from Hurricane Katrina and as a result, the state began to provide financial support through the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. The park expects to continue to receive 30–40 percent of its operational funding from the state and generate the remainder from park operations. The park is expecting to receive dedicated revenues from the tax on slot machines at the fairgrounds, capital funds from the state, and private donations.<sup>7</sup>

**TABLE 7.2: NORD AND PARKS & PARKWAYS BUDGETS, 2004–2009**

YEAR	NORD	PARKS & PARKWAYS	TOTAL
2004	\$7,047,498	\$7,523,639	\$14,571,137
2005	\$5,253,790	\$6,251,790	\$11,505,586
2006	\$923,632	\$3,827,744	\$4,751,376
2007	\$1,769,755	\$5,001,070	\$6,770,825
2008	\$4,494,119	\$5,369,521	\$9,863,640
2009	\$4,848,439	\$5,419,970	\$10,268,409

Audubon Nature Institute receives dedicated tax millage in two parts—for the Audubon Park and Zoo and for the Aquarium—which constitutes about 20 percent of its revenues. Most of the remainder of its budget comes from admissions, sales, events, recreational and educational activities, memberships (about 11 percent), and other fundraising.

The municipal park and recreation departments—Parks and Parkways and NORD—receive funds from the general budget. The 2002 parks plan noted that city funding for parks and recreation was extremely variable. Capital expenditures ranged from only \$225,000 in 1998 to \$7,050,000 in 2001, with the budget for 2005 estimated at \$235,000. The 2009 combined capital budget for both departments is \$34.5 million, based on federal disaster-related funding sources. Operational budgets are shown in Table 7.2, above.

Both agencies have many fewer employees compared to 2004. NORD employed 251 FTEs (full-time equivalent employees) in 2004 and is funded for 78 in 2009. Parks and Parkways had 219 FTEs in 2004 and is funded for 144 in 2009.

The Green Infrastructure Map—included at the end of this chapter—shows the network of parks and recreational facilities, neutral grounds, and open levees in the context of estimated areas of contiguous tree canopy and general wetland conditions. The map shows how the neutral grounds, in particular, have the potential to serve as green connectors throughout large portions of the city. Where these resources do not already exist, appropriate routes can be identified for linkages, such as the Lafitte Greenway, in design as of 2009, which will add a 3-mile greenway in a part of the map that now does not show much green.

### Proposed Changes in Park and Recreation Organization

In the fall of 2008, a citizens’ committee created by the City Council—the New Orleans Recreation Community Advisory Panel—began meeting to study options for improving the city’s park and recreation system. The panel’s recommendations were issued in late August of 2009 and, focusing exclusively on NORD, included the following:

- Create a 12-member New Orleans Playgrounds and Recreation Commission (NOPRC) as a special district through a change to the Home Rule Charter.
- Put the 300 acres of properties currently used by NORD but maintained by the Department of Parks & Parkways under the control and management of the new NOPRC with a professional superintendent.
- Fund the NOPRC by incremental increases in voter-approved dedicated millages to a total of 7.5 mills a year by the ninth year of operation, which would provide an annual budget of \$20 million a year.
- Involve the private sector through a separate foundation to provide support for the recreation system.

<sup>7</sup> *New Orleans City Park Master Plan*, amended November 27, 2007, p. 10.

## **B** What The Public Said

Previous plans for New Orleans placed top priority on:

- Improve and expand parks and open space.
- Restore the tree canopy.
- Enhance streetscapes and the pedestrian realm.
- Develop the waterfront for public access.

During the Master Plan process, public attention focused particularly on the following concerns:

- Provide adequate funding and maintenance for existing parks and open space (before creating new parks).
- Provide adequate security in parks.
- Use parks for flood protection and stormwater drainage.
- Develop new walking and jogging paths.
- Develop new active recreational areas and community gardens.
- Preserve and restore the tree canopy throughout the city.
- Provide public access to water wherever possible and respect ongoing planning for the riverfront.
- Place new parks near schools and neighborhood amenities and services.