

The National Recreation and Parks Association recommends that for every thousand people in a city there should be at least 10 acres of recreational space in the form of parks and open spaces. The San Antonio metropolitan area exceeds this minimum with 17.6 acres of land per thousand residents. However, most acquisitions have taken place only recently and are located mainly over the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone, an area which is not accessible to the majority of San Antonio residents. Compared to other cities in Texas, the ratio of inhabitants to open space in San Antonio surpasses Houston's at 10.6 acres per thousand, trails closely behind Dallas with 17.9 acres per thousand, and is less than half of Austin's at 38.9 acres per thousand (Trust for Public Land, 2004a). In 2002, parks and preserves represented 8.0 percent of San Antonio's total land area, up from 4.6 percent in the year 2000 (TPL, 2004b). In terms of per resident park spending, San Antonio ranked 34<sup>th</sup> among the 50 largest U.S. cities at \$60 per resident for the year 2000 (TPL, 2004c). This economic measure is particularly relevant given the deficiency of parks in low income neighborhoods (TPL, 2006a).

Open areas and parks have the potential to create a number of lasting social, recreational, environmental, educational, health and economic benefits. Parks are sometimes the only opportunity that urban residents have to experience the natural environment. Many green spaces are natural habitats which support a wide variety of plant and animal life. These sites could be used as venues for educational activities pertaining to the environment,

ecology, biology and other related disciplines (Pfisterer, 2002). Although criminologists have yet to discover a way to measure directly how much crime is caused by a lack of open space and recreation opportunities, studies indicate that crime typically drops—sometimes dramatically—when open space and recreation opportunities are made available. Research suggests that as communities create more opportunities for recreation and sports, their youth become less likely to engage in criminal and gang activity. Nevertheless, investments in parks and open spaces have generally been considered a low priority. As urban crime and conflict continue to rise, it is becoming increasingly clear that the renovation and proliferation of urban parks represents a viable investment in the security, health and the stability of U.S. cities (TPL, 2006b).

Parks also help encourage healthy childhood development, both physically and mentally, through exposure to a variety of stimulating activities and environments. It is crucial for play settings to include physical features that a child would find in a natural setting, such as trees, animals, dirt, or water. When they incorporate natural elements into their landscapes, parks provide children with a host of developmental and educational experiences. According to the Natural Learning Initiative, a research and design assistance program of the College of Design at North Carolina State University, playing and learning in natural settings:

1. Stimulate all aspects and stages of child development
2. Offer multi-sensory experiences

3. Stimulate informal play, experiential learning, and natural learning cycles
4. Stimulate imagination and creativity
5. Help enhance self-esteem
6. Center children in the environment where they live
7. Help children understand natural systems and the environment in which they live
8. And teach children that nature is regenerative (NLI, n.d.)

Urban parks offer an opportunity for cities to close the educational achievement gap across their communities. Hands-on learning activities such as those provided by playground equipment have been shown to improve the standardized test scores of socially disadvantaged students. There is also a connection between city parks and participation in community development, citizenship and democratic processes. Children value and respect their neighborhoods more when they are included in the design of community spaces (American Planning Association, 2003).

**Pocket parks**—small-scale urban spaces built to serve specific, local populations—create an opportunity for adults, adolescents and children to play an active role in the development of their neighborhoods. Community groups, private entities, or foundations reclaim dilapidated areas, usually one to a few house lots in size, and transform them into parks whose features reflect the unique interests and needs of their users. By engaging the surrounding neighborhood in their creation and ongoing maintenance, pocket parks cultivate a sense of ownership, pride and civic responsibility within communities.

### **Parks in Bexar County**

The San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department operates the City's recreational and cultural programs. It maintains 202 city-owned parks including swimming pools, gymnasiums, cemeteries, sports facilities, recreation centers, municipal golf facilities, the Botanical Garden and Conservatory, the River Walk, HemisFair Park, Tower of the Americas, as well as other historic facilities such as La Villita, the Spanish

Governor's Palace and Market Square. The department is responsible for the maintenance of approximately 16,257 acres of park land (San Antonio Parks & Recreation Department, 2005a).

Parks and open spaces contribute to a positive community image, attracting visitors. A connected system of parks and open spaces enhances opportunities for citizens to walk and bicycle to work, leading to a healthier citizenry and providing viable habitat for wildlife. A survey sponsored by the Kronkosky Charitable Foundation (1999) found that parks were the most popular place in the community for parents to take their young children. Open space is also important because it provides floodways which safely channel water away from homes and businesses. Green parks, natural areas and wetlands help filter pollutants from the air and water and reduce noise pollution.

County and city planning concerning the development and implementation of open spaces and parks differs from state to state. One of the central goals of the San Antonio Planning Commission's Master Plan (1999) is to "plan, develop and sustain a diversified and balanced city-wide system of public parks and recreation facilities based on program needs." In order to accomplish this aim, members of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and Open Space Advisory Board established the following objectives for the San Antonio parks and recreation system (City of San Antonio, 2005):

- Establish a process that encourages civic participation in the ongoing development, implementation and evaluation of the Parks and Recreation System Plan
- Prepare and implement funding requests and master development plans for existing and new City parks
- Acquire and develop new park and recreation facilities in underserved areas
- Plan and develop a city-wide system of multi-purpose linear parks and greenways

- Implement a requirement that subdividers of residential property provide recreational opportunities through either dedication of park land or fees-in-lieu of park land
- Coordinate with adjacent property owners and neighborhood associations to assure that park and recreation facilities and programs are compatible with the surrounding area
- Coordinate with other public or private entities in the acquisition, development, shared use, and operation and maintenance of existing and/or new park and recreation facilities to serve the public's best interest
- Maximize the land use efficiency of heavily impacted parks with the goal of eliminating conflicts and reducing over use and other negative impacts to parks and users
- Assess public park and recreational needs on an ongoing basis, and incorporate these findings into the City's capital improvement program and operating budget processes

In San Antonio, the majority of the land acquisitions are made by buying land from the private sector. Alternatively, private individuals may donate land for parks and open spaces, as was the case with the purchase of Brackenridge Park. Funding for these acquisitions comes from both public and private sources. In May 1999, a bond issue was passed that provided for improvements and acquisitions for 63 park projects. In November 2003, an additional bond issue was approved that allowed for an additional \$27.2 million in bonds for 54 individual parks capital projects (San Antonio Parks & Recreation Department, 2005b).

Projects may also be funded by other sources, such as Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), Certificates of Obligation, and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department grants.

Opened to the public in October 2005, Government Canyon State Natural Area is one of the newest parks in the San Antonio area. Government Canyon is important for both recreational and environmental reasons. Located at the transition point between the Hill Country and the plains of South Texas, the park lies atop the Edwards Aquifer recharge zone. Ensuring that it remains undeveloped will help preserve water quality and provide public, open space for San Antonio residents to enjoy. Numerous groups were involved in preserving the 6,000-acre parcel, the last portion of which was purchased in January 2003 (McLeod, 2003). In March 2005, the San Antonio Parks & Recreation Department began the process of revising its park plan. Since then, it has been working to share its expertise and resources with community groups throughout the city (San Antonio Parks & Recreation Department, 2005c).

Through land acquisition, the development and maintenance of recreational facilities, and the facilitation of geographically dispersed programs and partnerships, the City of San Antonio is creating a network of greenways so that all citizens have access to well maintained, safe and affordable recreational activities. By conserving and maintaining native animal and plant life, natural resources and culturally significant park sites, the city can ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy a variety of natural and heritage sites. The ultimate purpose of these activities is to improve the overall quality of life here in San Antonio (City of San Antonio, 2005).

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