Public Spaces/Private Money

The Triumphs and Pitfalls of Urban Park Conservancies

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By Peter Harnik and Abby Martin

The Trust for Public Land

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THE TRUST for PUBLIC LAND

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Introduction

There was a time when urban parks were firmly considered the pride, joy and responsibility of taxpayers. Once a park was in the public domain, all agreed that its weight was to be carried on the shoulders of city government.

No longer. While many places still hew to the traditional model, a growing number of cities now utilize private donations to rebuild, refurbish, and even maintain some of their most iconic parks.

Today's favored revitalization structure is the conservancy. New York alone has nearly two dozen such private organizations providing financial support for a park, and thanks to some high-profile successes, this new approach is emerging as a significant park management model in the right circumstances.

The concept stokes both hope and fear. Many an elected official and many a private donor trust that a conservancy can improve park success while holding down taxpayer expense. Others are skeptical, worrying that a narrow group of residents might assume control of a public resource with the best of intentions but without political accountability or an understanding of the broader needs of the citizenry.

This study explores city park conservancies from all sides, using real-life findings and experiences from 41 organizations that have a collective experience record of nearly 750 years.

FLICKR/RONALD WOAN

Schenley Plaza, a key entranceway to Pittsburgh's central Schenley Park, is an emblem of the power and promise of conservancies. The neglected plaza, which had devolved into a parking lot for 60 years, was redesigned and reconstructed by the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and is now the social and environmental centerpiece of its neighborhood.

What is a City Park Conservancy?

Conservancies are private, nonprofit park-benefit organizations that raise money independent of the city and spend it under a plan of action mutually agreed upon with the government. Most conservancies neither own nor hold easements on the parkland; the land remains the city's, and the city retains ultimate authority over everything that happens there. While a few conservancies also exist in suburban and rural places, it is in cities that they've made the biggest impact. (In some cases, they go by a different name such as "foundation," "alliance," "trust" or even "forever." In this report we use the generic word "conservancy.") Most conservancies have been founded to restore a run-down historic park, although a growing number are being created hand-in-hand with their brand-new green spaces. The impetus for their creation often comes from a combination of users and nearby residents, but the political receptivity of the mayor and city government is a *de facto* requirement.

Typically, conservancies are created to fund large capital projects such as repairs to a building, monument, fountain, pathway system, major lawn, forest, or lake. Many evolve to oversee the actual construction and even to provide additional management and programming for the park. A few move up all the way to handling park administration—from maintaining parkland to coordinating concessions to providing security. Most conservancies take on a single signature park, but a few have expanded to several or even assumed a city-wide mandate.

Conservancies generally have large boards and small staffs. Board size reflects the diversity of park constituencies as well as the need for broad financial reach. Staff generally focuses on outreach, fundraising, and contractor management, with only the very largest conservancies hiring significant numbers of maintenance and program workers.

FLICKR/DETROIT RIVERFRONT

Rivard Plaza, a notable stimulus to the revitalization of downtown Detroit, is operated and supported by the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, one of two private institutions partnering with the government to support parks in the city.

Founding Models: New York and San Francisco

Although several park-support nonprofits emerged in the 1970s, the roots of the conservancy movement are usually traced to the founding of New York's Central Park Conservancy in 1980. As with most innovations, the conservancy emerged from a crisis.

A nationwide recession in the 1970s, combined with several decades of depopulation and rising social expenditures, had left New York on the brink of insolvency and in the hands of a financial control board. The crisis severely damaged the parks department, already in decline from its glory days under "Power Broker" Robert Moses. Central Park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, was the jewel of the system, home to the landmark Metropolitan Museum of Art and bordered by expensive apartments. But the park had declined precipitously and was shunned by many New Yorkers as unkempt, unsettling, and unsafe.

Over the years, several organizations had sprung up to save Central Park, but there was disagreement about how to go about it. Some advocates tried traditional protesting and

…And What Isn't a Conservancy.

Not every park-support organization is a conservancy. Here are a few institutional models not covered in this booklet:

Friends of the Park groups. These generally all-volunteer groups focus on hands-on cleanup and grassroots advocacy. Depending on the circumstance, a friends organization may lobby in favor of a park department or criticize it. Either way, the focus is on improved government services, not private philanthropy. In a few cities, these individual park groups are so numerous they have spawned an umbrella organization, with paid staff, that works on park issues citywide. Such advocacy groups may also go by other names, for example New Yorkers for Parks, the Philadelphia Park Alliance, the San Francisco Park Alliance, and Park Pride, in Atlanta.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). These support organizations for core commercial districts are multiplying quickly, to well over 1,000 nationwide. Funded through a small surtax assessment on district property owners, BIDs typically manage sidewalk cleanliness, help visitors and enforce orderliness. Only a few districts have thus far taken on park issues and improvements within their boundaries. Unlike conservancies, BIDs generally do not solicit or receive philanthropic donations.

Most Conservancies in California. Confusingly, the state of California uses the word "Conservancy" to designate a certain type of state agency. These include the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Tahoe Conservancy, the California Coastal Conservancy, and others. Generally, these agencies work within their landscapes to meet environmental and other goals. However, the word is also used in California to refer to a few private nonprofit organizations similar to those discussed in this booklet–for example, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

lobbying without avail. Others proposed private fundraising. In 1978, newly-elected Mayor Ed Koch and parks commissioner Gordon Davis created the position of Central Park administrator, charged with supervising not only park operations and maintenance but also community engagement and park restoration in collaboration with the private sector. Betsy Barlow Rogers, a city planner and Olmsted scholar, got the job and was soon wearing two hats: Central Park administrator and Central Park Conservancy president. This unprecedented solution launched Rogers into uncharted waters. As administrator, she was a civil servant who managed the park, oversaw unionized city workers, set and carried out policies, and reported to the Parks Commissioner (and ultimately the mayor). As conservancy president, she directed special-project fundraising, led a publicity and outreach campaign, oversaw nonunion employees, and reported to the group's chairman (and ultimately its board). While the two roles were spelled out in writing, the job demanded high levels of adaptability, political sensitivity, and personal communication skills rather than a by-the-book bureaucratic approach.

Rogers started by renovating the 1870 Dairy cottage into a visitor center, a relatively small project to test and demonstrate capabilities and build trust. At first, the parks department supplied two-thirds of the funding and most of the staff, but a string of successful restorations led to a growing roster of private donations and ever-bigger projects. By 1998, the conservancy had raised more than $100 million in donations; it was funding two-thirds of the park's budget and 70 percent of its staff. That year, it negotiated a long-term contract with the city to manage the park. Since then, the funding balance has shifted even further, with the conservancy employing 95 percent of the park's maintenance staff and covering 75 percent of its budget. The city continues to own the land, provide all the security (including a 100-person Police Department precinct), fund the Central Park Zoo and all the lighting and power, provide policy oversight, and partner in planning decisions, but the conservancy has the prime role in park management, visitor programing, and planning.

By the late '80s, the Central Park Conservancy's successes had inspired a similar effort in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, another Olmsted and Vaux gem that had come close to hitting rock bottom. Within two decades, the concept was adopted for more than a dozen parks in the Big Apple. More so than in any other city, New York has utilized conservancies as a standard for large or high-profile parks. The improvement of those parks has paralleled—and, some would say, helped spark—New York's resurgence.

Because of New York's cultural and media prominence and the fact that Central Park receives tens of millions of visitors a year, news of the conservancy approach spread. Most leaders from other cities recognized that the scale of the Central Park Conservancy was not possible to emulate, but many were captivated by the concept and started to think about trying something similar. By the early 2010s, park supporters in more than a score of U.S. cities had launched conservancies and were busily raising and spending money.

At about the same time as the launching of the Central Park Conservancy, a parallel effort was getting underway on the west coast. Established in 1981, the Golden Gate National Park Association (it changed to "conservancy" in 2003) was formed to protect the urban and suburban parklands that comprise the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. In the years since, it has funded capital improvements and renovations at 37 sites in San Francisco and two adjacent counties. The most prominent of these is Crissy Field, a former airfield on the San Francisco waterfront that opened as a $34.5-million, 100-acre public park in 2001.

In addition to capital improvements, the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy builds core groups of volunteer stewards, restores ecologically sensitive habitats, propagates plants for habitat restoration, and monitors wildlife. In 2013, 35,000 conservancy volunteers donated more than 500,000 hours of service. The conservancy also builds trails, operates book stores, runs tours, creates signage, and advocates for national park funding. However, since few cities have large natural national parks inside their borders, this model is less transferable to other urban locations. Only a handful of cities can potentially benefit from a similar kind of conservancy for their federal park land. For the rest, the more relevant model comes from New York.

How Big is the Movement?

All told, the city park conservancy universe is small in acreage, substantial in financial clout and number of people served, and growing rapidly.

The parkland under the purview of the conservancies—almost 35,000 acres—is impressive, although miniscule in comparison with the 1.5 million acres in the park systems of the 100 largest cities. By usership, the impact is substantial, with well over 125 million annual visits to the city parks that have conservancies.

The combined spending on operations and capital construction by 41 of the most prominent conservancies totaled $158.9 million in 2012.[1] (This compares with the $6.2 billion spent by public park-and-recreation agencies in the 100 biggest cities that year.) Of the 41 conservancies, 29 spent more than $1 million in 2012; the median conservancy spent $1.5 million. On a per-acre basis, conservancies spent an average of $14,400, about 50 percent more than public park departments.

Most significant, the movement is growing rapidly, with fully half of the 41 coming into existence only since the year 2000.

[1] This figure does not include San Francisco's $33-million-per-year Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy because the vast bulk of that park is located outside of the city limits.

CASE STUDY

Forest Park Forever, St. Louis

Forest Park, a 1,293-acre gem of greenery and culture, strikes a deep chord with St. Louisians. Created in 1876, the park hosted the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition and today houses the region's major cultural institutions—the zoo, art museum, history museum, science center, and the Muny outdoor theatre. The park also features four golf courses, a forest, acres of meadows, scores of playing fields and courts, a lake, and a river. In a city of barely 320,000, the park receives 12 million visits a year.

St. Louis's devastating population decline (from a high of 857,000 in 1950) undermined all the city's institutions, and Forest Park was no exception. Despite the many cultural institutions in the park, and their support organizations, there was no entity looking out for the park overall. In 1986, because of the consternation of community leaders and Mayor Vince Schoemehl, a conservancy was founded. Named Forest Park Forever, its vision was to be a modest Central Park Conservancy working in partnership with the city's Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry. The group's initial goal was to raise money simply to renovate a statue, a Victorian bridge, and a bandstand.

Despite a groundswell of support for the nascent conservancy, its path was not established easily. "Forest Park was loved by all but not always for the same reasons," says former Forest Park Forever president Jim Mann. Some worshipped the park as a natural sanctuary, some for its active recreation opportunities, and some for its abundant cultural offerings. Some groups wanted more facilities, others wanted buildings demolished. As for the "car problem," there was fierce wrangling over whether the park should offer more parking, or less. While private donors wanted to help, most felt that the city needed to bear a portion of the burden. But city taxpayers had stubbornly turned down every proposed capital bond initiative for parks since 1958.

FLICKR/GOBUCKS2

Under the strain of quarreling user groups, the attempt to develop a master plan for Forest Park failed, and for the seven years following the conservancy's founding only emergency repairs held the park together. Finally in 1993, under the prodding of newly elected Mayor Freeman Bosley, Jr., St. Louis voters passed a half-cent sales tax to finance city-wide capital improvements, of which parks were allotted $17 million. It wasn't much money, but Forest Park Forever successfully used it to signal the public's commitment to the business establishment.

Building on the momentum, Mayor Bosley called for an agreement on a new Forest Park master plan, and painstaking negotiations finally unified the warring factions. The key breakthrough was concurrence on a policy of "no net loss of parkland" to automobiles or buildings: any new impermeable surface would have to be compensated by an equivalent area of de-paving elsewhere.

As soon as the master plan was approved in 1995, Forest Park Forever and the city launched an ambitious campaign they called "Restoring the Glory." The city committed $43 million of public funds, which FPF pledged to match in private gifts. The target date to complete the restoration was set for 2004, the hundredth anniversary of the "Meet Me in St. Louis" World's Fair and the 200th anniversary of the Louis and Clark expedition. To achieve the goal, the city enacted a one-eighth-cent sales tax increase and Forest Park Forever launched a multi-level private campaign that brought in donations from 2,004 pennies from grade school classes up to $2.004-million gifts from corporations and foundations. One fundraising stimulus was a pledge by the Danforth Foundation to match all contributions made by medium-sized businesses. (The campaign has since far surpassed its goal.)

The master plan is overseen by a 25-member Forest Park Advisory Board, appointed by the mayor, which reports to the director of the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry. The city retains ultimate authority over the park, but responsibilities have gradually flowed to the conservancy. Under the 1997 agreement, the city was to oversee capital projects while Forest Park Forever was to raise the money for them. However, renovations fell behind schedule, and in 2002 the conservancy was authorized to manage construction. Park maintenance followed a similar path, and Forest Park Forever is now increasingly involved in day-to-day operations.

Paying for maintenance is an ongoing challenge, so in 2012 the partners launched a $130-million joint initiative to expand the Forest Park Forever endowment, with $30 million from new city bonds and $100 million from private money. (The bond receipts are directed into an account that can be used only with the approval of both Forest Park Forever and the city.) The initiatives are projected to increase annual park funding from $10 million to $15 million within a decade. The partnership with the city also includes a 30-year agreement to share decision-making. The city is now responsible for snow removal, trash collection, and building and sidewalk repair, while FPF handles mowing,

turf management, horticulture, and litter pickup. The park now has its own maintenance staff, made up of city workers and Forest Park Forever employees.

Forest Park Forever is perhaps the nation's most successful park conservancy in a smaller city. Former Forest Park Forever President Jim Mann attributes much of that to the master planning process—which was completed before fundraising or politics could influence a project wish list, he notes. Although getting the 1995 agreement was arduous, the document is still in force today. This unified vision has guided fundraising, reassuring donors that the conservancy has the city's blessing in any and all projects. By laying out explicit rules for project design and donor recognition, the plan also has prevented the launching of outlandish ideas. And the meticulous process—stipulating, for example, that each project be brought before the advisory board three separate times—has provided the conservancy and the city with shared guidelines, enabling Forest Park Forever to assume project oversight when the city slipped.

The plan also has insulated the park from shifting political tides. "Nobody had interest or energy to reopen that [planning] process," says Mann. "The renovations were a win for everyone—especially the politicians, who looked good because something was actually getting done!"

Forest Park Forever	
375	**Acres managed (of 1,293-acre park)**
1876	**Park created**
1986	**Conservancy founded**
$3,926,486	**Expenditures***
$12,998,911	**Revenue***
92%	**Contributions and grants as portion of total revenue***
1%	**Earned revenue as portion of total revenue***
51	**Employees**
1,100	**Volunteers**
38	**Voting board members**
5 officers, 12-member executive committee, 18 general directors, 10 ex-officio**	**Board structure**
Yes	**Conservancy manages operations/maintenance?**
Yes	**Conservancy conducts capital projects?**
Yes	**Conservancy programs park?**
Yes	**Conservancy created master plan?**

*Annual, 2009-2012 average

**Ex-officio: Mayor, Parks Director, Alderman, Art Museum, Forest Park Golf Course, Missouri Historical Society, Muny, Science Center, Washington University and Zoo.

What Makes a Park Conservancy Successful?

Maintaining and operating a park is not easy. That's why the task was assumed by the government in the first place. Roads, paths, and buildings must be maintained and repaired, beautiful perennials, trees and shrubs planted and pruned, invasive plants removed, erosion prevented and counteracted, conflicting human uses arbitrated and controlled, automobiles guided and restrained, and signage erected, replaced and refaced. Safety must be assured, drains unclogged, fountains repaired, restrooms cleaned, special events designed and controlled, litter picked up, trash cans emptied, dangerous trees and branches removed, sports leagues managed, and more.

"Conservancies exist because the projects they're working on are really difficult," says Lindy Eichenbaum Lent, director of Denver's Civic Center Conservancy. "It's important to acknowledge that the issues they're founded to tackle have eluded other efforts."

Conservancies fill in the gaps of public park agencies, says Anne Olson of Houston's Buffalo Bayou Partnership. "These partnerships are essential for keeping parks in good shape without having to compete for limited funding in every budget cycle. The public and private sectors each strengthen the other's funding commitments and management capabilities."

Not everyone agrees that government needs propping up by the private sector. Jack Linn, who worked on the public side of partnerships as former assistant commissioner in the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, cautions that private conservancies should not be seen as a panacea for park problems. "Conservancies are Plan B," he says. "They should not be perceived as the default approach to funding park upkeep and restoration. There's a real danger in removing the public obligation to fund park and recreation systems."

Agreeing with Linn is civil rights attorney Larry Krasner, who defended a group of Occupy Wall Street protesters. "I think there is a trend of analogizing public space to shopping malls," Krasner says, "and I think a lot of people view that as a sad state of affairs. It seems to indicate that government is insufficiently funded or not able to provide services we used to take for granted."

Regardless of any clashes over ideology, private park conservancies are multiplying rapidly; about 50 percent of major cities now have at least one.

For people who are skeptical of government—whether due to frustration with opaque accounting practices, concern over municipal willpower, or fear of political discontinuity—a conservancy can be perceived as a Rock of Gibraltar in a shaky environment. As one observer put it, "Mayors come and go but conservancies maintain equilibrium." Of course, the opposite situation can also occur: there are conservancies with significant board and staff turnover operating in cities with stable, multi-term mayoral administrations. No matter the situation,

THE EXPERIENCE SO FAR
WHEN PARKS AND THEIR SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS WERE FOUNDED

City	Conservancy	Park Created	Conservancy Founded
Atlanta	Historic Oakland Foundation	1850	1984
Atlanta	Piedmont Park Conservancy	1887	1989
Atlanta	Grant Park Conservancy	1883	1999
Atlanta	Chastain Park Conservancy	1938	2004
Baltimore	Mount Vernon Place Conservancy	1829	2008
Birmingham	Railroad Park Foundation	2010	2008
Boston	Emerald Necklace Conservancy	1879	1997
Boston	Friends of the Public Garden	1634	2000*
Boston	Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy	2007	2004
Buffalo	Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy	1870	1995
Dallas	Friends of Fair Park	1886	1986
Dallas	Woodall Rogers Park Foundation	2012	2004
Denver	Civic Center Conservancy	1894	2004
Detroit	Detroit 300 Conservancy	1847	2001
Detroit	Detroit Riverfront Conservancy	1975	2002
Hartford	Bushnell Park Foundation	1854	1981
Houston	Buffalo Bayou Partnership	1899	1986
Houston	Memorial Park Conservancy	1925	2000
Houston	Discovery Green Conservancy	2008	2004
Houston	Hermann Park Conservancy	1914	2004*
Louisville	Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy	1880	1989
Memphis	Shelby Farms Park Conservancy	1975	2007
Memphis	Overton Park Conservancy	1901	2011
New York	Central Park Conservancy	1858	1980
New York	Riverside Park Conservancy	1872	1986
New York	Prospect Park Alliance	1868	1987
New York	Staten Island Greenbelt Conservancy	1984	1987
New York	Randall's Island Park Alliance	1933	1992
New York	The Battery Conservancy	1823	1994
New York	Friends of Hudson River Park	2003	1999
New York	Friends of the High Line	2009	2000
New York	Madison Square Park Conservancy	1847	2002
New York	Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy	2010	2005*
Oklahoma City	Myriad Gardens Foundation	1981	2011*
Philadelphia	Fairmount Park Conservancy	1855	2001
Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy	1889	1996
Portland	The Forest Park Conservancy	1947	1989
San Antonio	Brackenridge Park Conservancy	1899	2008
San Jose	Guadalupe River Park Conservancy	1990	1995
St. Louis	Forest Park Forever	1876	1986
Washington, D.C.	Trust for the National Mall	1791	2002

*Year that organization took on significant conservancy operations.

conservancies and cities can bolster each other, promoting an equilibrium that evens out the peaks and valleys of both government and private sector variability.

Thus, to help conservancies be as successful as possible, and to avoid critical pitfalls, we have closely studied what makes them succeed or fail. This booklet distills a set of lessons and best practices for the field.

Formal Agreement with the City

Public-private partnerships are a "belt and suspenders approach," says Deborah Marton, director of the New York Restoration Project. Which entity is which varies from place to place, but without both functioning smoothly together, the structure won't hold up.

The nascent conservancy faces a paradox. It needs a high profile, important portfolio of tasks to attract publicity and donations, but it does not yet have the experience to assure success. Moreover, no matter how much money a conservancy brings in, it operates on land owned by its public partner. Remembering this is crucial to issues of trust and respect and shared credit—the troika of factors that makes or breaks the relationship.

The best way to insure success is through a formal agreement defining both parties' roles, often in the form of a memorandum of understanding (MOU). This contract cements the partnership by detailing authorities and responsibilities for fundraising, park planning, design, construction, maintenance and other matters. For a newly formed conservancy, the MOU provides legitimacy and the imprimatur of the government (enabling fundraising) while delineating responsibilities that the fledgling institution can handle. For the city, the MOU protects the public interest in the park, defending against unexpected conservancy initiatives or donor influence.

"When a private group proposes a public-private partnership, the city needs to do its research," says Betsy Smith, who worked with conservancies as an assistant commissioner in the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "You have to ask, how much responsibility should the organization take on? Does the organization have the capacity to accomplish what it wants to do?"

There is no boilerplate language for a contract like this. Each agreement is driven by the current problems and perceived needs of the park, the ambitions of the private group, and the city's capabilities. Some conservancies start off with an MOU fully focused on capital projects that repair or renew historic structures. Later, if successful, some seek to extend their mission into maintenance and management. Others do it the other way, starting out small with programming while building capacity to take on capital projects.

In crafting an agreement, some matters arise universally: who are the stakeholders and how much say will they have in planning and implementing the agreement? Which partner will handle the bidding and manage the construction on capital projects? How will maintenance be divided between the partners? What will protect private dollars from being misspent? How will donors be recognized?

CASE STUDY

Piedmont Park Conservancy, Atlanta

Often called "the Central Park of the South," Piedmont Park has served as Atlanta's green gathering place for more than 100 years. Originally the site of the Gentleman's Driving Club, the land was home to the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition. The city of Atlanta purchased it for a park in 1904, expanding the city limits to allow it to fit. Eight years later, the Olmsted Brothers firm created a powerful vision for Piedmont Park, but the plan was unfortunately never fully implemented. For more than a century, significant park acreage wasn't even designed and developed, much less maintained or programmed.

In the 1970s, the city lost the capacity to maintain Piedmont Park adequately, and park misuse threatened to bring down the value of surrounding communities. Dying trees, decrepit buildings, and pockmarked lawns—plus rampant drug use and frequent assaults—signaled a park in need of an intervention.

The first effort to reverse the decline occurred in 1976, when an innovative parks commissioner closed park roads to cars on weekends. Despite initial howls of protest, the program was notably successful in reducing crime and many of the anti-social activities and, within several years, was extended to a permanent, all-week ban of cars on park roads.

But it wasn't enough, so in 1984 a group of Midtown citizens formed Friends of Piedmont Park to promote small-scale volunteer and advocacy efforts. Over five years,

FLICKR/CLINTON STEEDS

the friends group added business and community leaders to its membership and reorganized as the Piedmont Park Conservancy. The reorganization was intended to upgrade a modest shaker into a major mover, but mutual distrust with the city hampered that evolution, and the conservancy struggled to get a foothold

"We debated with the city whether we could exist, whether we could take the park over, and what we'd have to do for the city in order to run and renovate the park on our own," says Mike Semrau, the conservancy's founding board chair. There followed several years of negotiation before an agreement was finally reached in 1992. Even then, skepticism of the new organization ran high, in part because the community was still bitter that earlier master plans had called for repurposing parkland for other uses. Early meetings regularly collapsed into screaming matches.

"We needed to overcome great distrust because folks in the neighborhood associated us with earlier threats to the park," recalled Debbie McCown, an early president of the conservancy. To build rapport, the conservancy created a 50-member community advisory board to vet projects and address park users' concerns. At the same time, having ex-officio board members facilitated better communication with the mayor, city council, and parks department. Finally in 1995—six years after the conservancy's incorporation—the partners approved a new Piedmont Park Master Plan, clearing the way for serious fundraising.

The Piedmont Park Conservancy's initial $1.5 million capital campaign focused on the more heavily visited south end of the park—improvements to public safety, the restoration of lawns and small historic elements, a dog park, and new programming. Successive campaigns grew dramatically in size—to $6 million, then $25 million—and funded and managed extensive restoration of historic buildings—a boathouse, a meeting hall—and a new irrigation system. The conservancy also designed and built a new community center. Most controversial, prompting protracted debate, was a new hillside automobile garage for the Atlanta Botanical Garden balanced by the concomitant closing of a surface parking lot in the center of the park. The conservancy steered the conversation on that project to approval and then managed construction.

Since 1995 the Piedmont Park Conservancy has become a leviathan. It implements the park's master plan, oversees all aspects of capital improvements, and funds and executes about 85 percent of daily maintenance. (Of Piedmont Park's approximately $3-million annual operating budget, the city of Atlanta currently contributes only $175,000, down from about $400,000 in 1992). The organization runs on a mix of revenue, roughly 40 percent earned and 60 percent donated. The conservancy has five facility management agreements with profits going toward park maintenance.

"When you take on a master plan that grows the park, you have to figure out new ways to manage upkeep," former conservancy CEO Yvette Bowden told City Parks Blog in 2013. "In this economy, you have to be nimble with your business model, making sure you can

take care of everything you open. Part of our commitment to our donors, supporters and members is that we're not going to take our eyes off the maintenance factor."

Moving gradually north through the park with its renovations, the Piedmont Park Conservancy is now tackling its biggest challenge—designing for the very first time 53 acres of unkempt woodland that had sat ignored for a century. Phase I, which cost $43.5 million and opened in 2013, covered 41 acres and added miles of trails to the park, converted a green waste dump into new ball fields, forged a park connection to the Atlanta BeltLine, removed invasive plants from a three-acre hardwood forest, and planted 1,000 trees. Phase II will rework the remaining 12.5 acres into a water-retention area, community garden, outdoor classroom, and new playground.

Despite its many successes, the conservancy is not completely free of challenges. Public safety, though vastly improved, remains a concern, and residents were rattled in 2009 by a fatal stabbing near Lake Clara Meer. The city and the conservancy have stepped up patrols, installed security cameras, and revisited strategies to stimulate activity. New conservancy-funded security officers enforce the 11 p.m.–6 a.m. closure, which has greatly reduced drug dealing, cruising, and sleeping out in the park.

Piedmont Park Conservancy	
185 acres	**Park size**
1887	**Park created**
1989	**Conservancy founded**
$11,608,365	**Expenditures***
$6,678,384	**Revenue***
88%	**Contributions and grants as portion of total revenue***
6%	**Earned revenue as portion of total revenue***
51	**Employees**
2,924	**Volunteers**
48	**Voting board members**
9 officers, 6 at-large, 28 general directors, 5 ex-officio**	**Board structure**
Yes	**Conservancy manages operations/maintenance?**
Yes	**Conservancy conducts capital projects?**
Yes	**Conservancy programs park?**
Yes	**Conservancy created master plan?**

*Annual, 2009-2012 average

**Ex-officio: Mayor, Parks Director, Council President, and Mayoral and Council appointees.

The MOU is usually key to a conservancy's ability to raise funds. Donors must be convinced that their investment in the city's property will be protected, that the project will be effectively managed, and that government will not walk away from its responsibilities after the project is completed. For the public partner, the agreement assures its role in planning and policy oversight on high-visibility issues from naming protocols to concessions to private events. "The city must have ultimate authority and must be respected for that authority," says Betsy Smith. "You can't have a conservancy group that doesn't want anything to do with the city."

These are not small issues, especially if large egos are involved. In many cases, getting a signed memorandum has taken a year or more; in one case it took seven years and a change of administration in the mayor's office.

The fledgling conservancy may be tempted to avoid political strife by putting off formal negotiations with its public partner. But minor disputes in the relative peace of the conference room can turn into major obstacles if a project moves forward without an agreement. Having an accord in place buffers the partnership from pressures generated by a financial downturn or a contentious municipal election. The more stakeholders a park has—cultural institutions, advocacy groups, neighborhood associations—the more important a signed agreement is.

Moreover, that overarching agreement is not equivalent to a series of project-by-project contracts. "No one's in charge and everyone's in charge, nobody owns the park and everybody owns the park," says one observer about a partnership that has relied on interim agreements. In that instance, political gridlock has frustrated the conservancy's attempts to sign a broad MOU, and a weak board of directors has lacked the clout to force a resolution. The conservancy, which wants to serve as an umbrella organization for the park rather than as another

Where to Put the Money and the Office?

One way to maintain an arm's-length relationship between a conservancy and a parks department is to keep the money separate—no commingling of private with city funds. Conservancies should have their own bank accounts for depositing donations and paying expenses. If a conservancy receives city support for specific projects, the city's control over those funds should be through a memorandum of understanding rather than through a shared account. This is not only good financial management; it's also likely to stimulate more and larger gifts from donors wary of municipal budgeting procedures.

Similarly, although a city may generously offer a conservancy free or low-cost office space at parks department headquarters, generally this is not a good proposal to accept. The whole point of a conservancy is to take a fresh approach to the park system, and being located in the womb of the bureaucracy—using the same conference room, telephone exchange, or even e-mail system—conveys otherwise. While a conservancy should be located close enough to the parks department to facilitate easy, frequent meetings, its office space must be perceived by the public as separate.

interest group jockeying for position, is anxious to take on gradually more complex capital projects. But after years of work, it has been unable to get an agreement under which it can offer unified oversight.

A Role for Public Officials

MOUs and conservancy bylaws often stipulate an *ex-officio* role for the city's park director—or even the mayor—as either a voting or nonvoting member of the board of directors. This can be crucial to the success of the partnership, particularly when the conservancy is in a management role. Many conservancies also include board seats for other officials as well as a fixed number of appointees by the mayor or city council.

Having such people guarantees that the public interest will be represented while protecting the board from "privatization" accusations. However, with the privilege of board membership also comes the responsibility to attend board meetings and events, or to designate another public employee to do so. Participation by public officials reaffirms to volunteer board members that their work is important and appreciated. It also provides the opportunity to resolve inevitable disagreements productively rather than in public discord. Finally, being at a meeting helps keep the park director from the embarrassment of not knowing something important about a highly visible public park.

"I learned from my predecessor, Henry Stern, never to take for granted that private citizens would devote their time and money to a public park," says Adrian Benepe, former commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. "He made it a point to always publicly thank the conservancies at their meetings and events."

Master Planning and Project Prioritization

On average, a park is already over 80 years old by the time a conservancy comes into play. Its roads may be crumbling, its trails overgrown. It may be plagued by teetering walls, diseased trees, boarded-up restrooms, an algae-clogged lake, burned-out lights, chipped steps, and splintered benches. It may have become a hangout for scary people or a center of illegal or antisocial activities—damaging to the spirits and property values of its neighborhood or even the whole city. Some of the park's problems, like graffiti, might be extremely visible; others may be hidden but actually more significant—improper drainage, for instance. Inevitably, there will be competing ideas about which problems should be tackled first. Conservancy board members and donors, in particular, may have strong opinions about how and where their dollars should be spent. Differences of opinion can lead to emotional finger-pointing and political gridlock.

Key to staving off conflict is a plan, an attractive and visionary document that springs from a well-considered process, respects both history and change, and incorporates lots of input from experts and the public. Since a master plan can cost $250,000 or more and demand a lot of effort, it can serve as an ideal first project for a conservancy, testing whether the nonprofit can raise funds and tackle a complex project fraught with potential controversy.

The two most important questions a master plan addresses are: what should be done, and when. If a park needs attention across many areas, it is essential that solutions be prioritized. Memphis's Overton Park Conservancy discovered this in 2011 when the young group enthusiastically dove into a set of projects based on the park's old master plan. But until it strategically prioritized its to-do list, the new group's scattered ambitions left it unfocused and stretched thin, constantly scrambling to fulfill the wishes of individual board members.

A well-made plan can also forestall conflicts between the very stakeholders who forged the conservancy in the first place. These instigators may be as diverse as conservationists, cultural leaders, historic preservationists, dog owners, playground advocates, and neighborhood spokespeople—each with his or her own set of priorities. Reconciling those interests during the planning process can be arduous but also empowering, says Jim Mann, former director of Forest Park Forever, the conservancy for St. Louis's Forest Park. "No one wanted to go through that again," he said, "so everyone committed to the overall goal."

A master plan is also an irreplaceable tool when working with donors, says Doreen Stoller, director of Houston's Hermann Park Conservancy. When a request comes up, the plan offers guidance "We won't accept gifts that don't fit into the master plan," she said, "and we don't let donors dictate the look and the feel of the park."

A Strong and Effective Board of Directors

While having a dynamic chief executive is a great benefit, it is the conservancy's board of directors that is usually the make-or-break factor in success. Board members must help with fundraising, strategic guidance, advocacy, political connections, and other key resources. While a passionate commitment to the park is a given, it isn't enough. Wealth helps, although

RAILROAD PARK FOUNDATION

Birmingham's Railroad Park, the city's newest and most ambitious park, would not have come into existence without a public-private partnership. The Railroad Park Foundation, which raised millions in private donations, now manages the city-owned facility.

CASE STUDY

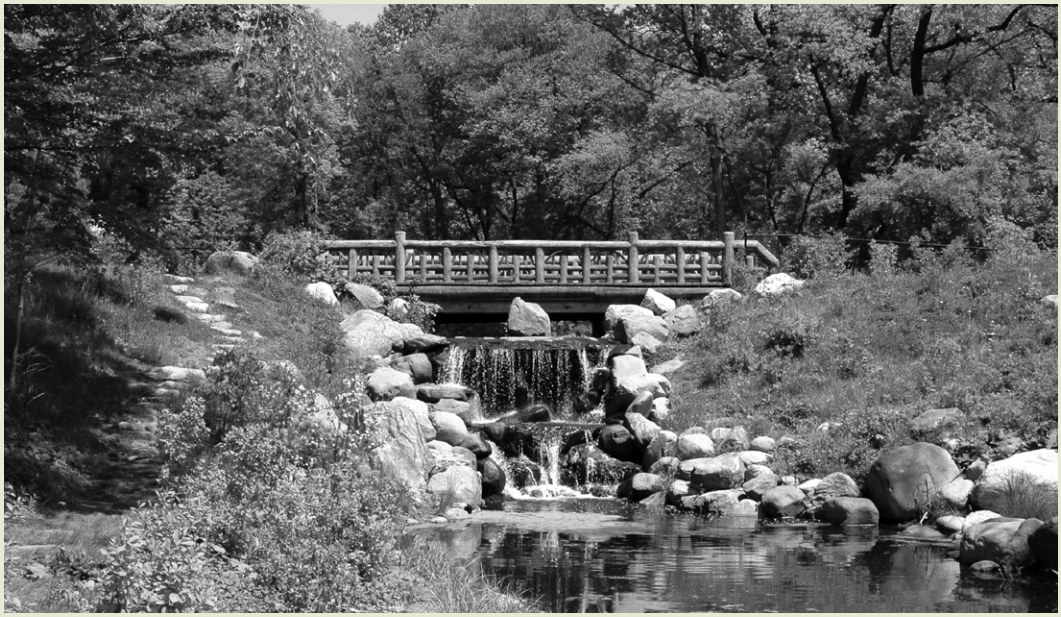
Prospect Park Alliance, New York

By the 1970s, after a century of wear and tear, Prospect Park, the 585-acre Brooklyn gem designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, had fallen onto hard times. Neighbors were hesitant to enter it. The lovely woodlands and stream, designed to mimic an Adirondack Mountain wilderness, were a wreck, and most of the historic buildings were closed.

In 1980, using a community development block grant, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation created a Prospect Park administrator and assigned her three herculean tasks above and beyond the day-to-day responsibilities: planning a capital program, finding private money, and getting people into the park. The woman hired for the job was a go-getter named Tupper Thomas.

Across the East River in Central Park, the city was already seeing what a conservancy could accomplish, but Brooklyn in 1980 was very much an "outer borough" without nearly the wealth or political power that Manhattan could muster. Still, city resources alone could not turn around such a large park, so Thomas began talking to local activists about forming a private friends organization. After seven years of negotiations, false starts, and incubation, the Prospect Park Alliance was incorporated with a 32-member board of directors and Thomas as president.

Although the renewal of Central Park has captured most of the limelight, Prospect Park's rebirth was in many ways an equal success since the neighborhood has had far fewer resources to work with.



PROSPECT PARK ALLIANCE

Thomas's initial challenge was to draw visitors to a park widely viewed as dangerous. One of her first projects was refurbishing the carousel and driving out its resident drug dealers. The Alliance also organized scientific field trips for schoolchildren (sometimes escorted by police officers at a teacher's request), anticipating that students would return to the park with their families in tow. The strategy worked, and families slowly but surely ventured back into Prospect Park.

From the start, the Prospect Park Alliance was a bit different from other conservancies, augmenting standard fundraising with a shot of direct advocacy. After the organization surveyed park visitors to find out where in Brooklyn they lived, it then used the details to target elected officials from the far corners of the borough – many of whom hadn't realized how far their constituents traveled for a major park experience.

Thomas's entrepreneurial approach shaped the agreements that still guide the Alliance. Bucking the norm among conservancies, she kept things nebulous, even resisting a formal memorandum of understanding for years. Subsequent agreements on concessions, licensing, and specific capital projects have been signed only as needed. (However, since Thomas's retirement in 2011, that may be changing; new director Sue Donoghue says the organization is reevaluating the mix of agreements to consider "a more comprehensive document that reflects the spirit of the partnership.")

As for the master plan, amazingly, Prospect Park relies on the original 1860s design produced by Olmsted and Vaux. That vision was so strong that the Alliance's periodic strategic plans have been formulated merely to implement it and to undo some of the design damage made over the intervening years. Most recently, in 2013, the Alliance replaced an old skating rink with the new Lakeside Center, which offers winter ice skating, summer roller skating, a café, and restrooms. Besides the new building, the $76-million project refurbished 26 acres of the park's landscape—including rebuilt trails and new pedestrian access points—and restored Olmsted and Vaux's original Music Island and the natural shoreline of the park's lake.

Over the years, Prospect Park Alliance has shifted its private spending from capital projects to everyday park maintenance. With the city still a major funding source—now on the capital side rather than operating side—the Alliance's budget has grown from $200,000 in 1987 to over $12 million today. Funding is partly through philanthropy, partly from government sources, and partly through revenue from a carousel, a paddle boat concession, the historic Lefferts House, a tennis center, and sports fields on the parade ground.

Among the ongoing challenges for the Alliance has been keeping up with Brooklyn's changing demographics. Neighborhoods surrounding the park are home to residents of diverse ethnic groups, income levels, and preferred parkland uses. Although the park's widely emulated Community Committee has helped negotiate these conflicting interests, the Alliance must periodically rebalance the committee to ensure that it still

takes the pulse of surrounding populations. Achieving diversity on the Alliance's board of directors is also important, notes Chairwoman Iris Weinshall. "The neighborhoods have changed and the catchment area for the park has changed, so we need to make the board more young, vibrant, and reflective of our community."

Prospect Park Alliance	
585 acres	**Park size**
1868	**Park created**
1987	**Conservancy founded**
$11,698,228	**Expenditures***
$9,996,987	**Revenue***
60%	**Contributions and grants as portion of total revenue***
40%	**Earned revenue as portion of total revenue***
308	**Employees**
3,400	**Volunteers**
34	**Voting board members**
4-member executive committee, 29 directors, 3 ex-officio**	**Board structure**
Yes	**Conservancy manages operations/maintenance?**
Yes	**Conservancy conducts capital projects?**
Yes	**Conservancy programs park?**
No	**Conservancy created master plan?**

*Annual, 2009-2012 average
**Ex-officio: Parks Director, Council Member, and Brooklyn Borough President.

activists of modest means may also make excellent board members. Each one needs also to commit to real problem-solving of one sort or another through financial generosity, technical expertise, communication ability, constituency motivation, or other skills. Since some board seats are commonly filled by *ex-officio* members—park agency and government representatives—the remaining places must be filled strategically.

Municipal officials do not have voting power on most conservancy boards but they retain ultimate ownership and authority over the park. In practice, this means that the city must sign off on the activities of the conservancy. In the case of Forest Park in St. Louis, a 25-member Forest Park Advisory Board, appointed by the mayor and separate from the conservancy board, oversees park policies and implementation of the master plan.

When a conservancy pulls off a seemingly impossible feat—landing a million-dollar check, getting a major appropriation from Washington or the state capital, scoring prime-time coverage on national TV, being named a partner by a giant corporation—it's usually a board member who makes it happen. As Debbie McCown, former director of the Piedmont Park Conservancy, noted: "I can't pick up the phone and get to the mayor, but my board members can and do."

Achieving the perfect board isn't easy. Using only the Social Register to build a board courts distrust, if not hostility, from those who believe their beloved park will be taken away from them, one fancy wedding reception or exclusive party at a time. On the other hand, a board populated solely with time-tested activists and advocates—more common if a conservancy has grown from a "friends-of-the-park" organization—may not have all the resources, skills, and connections to be effective. The purpose of a conservancy is to do something that a friends group can't: raise enough private money to make significant capital improvements. The best boards include plenty of members with wealth and connections but also a few recognized park champions with strong credibility, knowledge, and history with the park. (Ideally, a park should have the support of both a friends group and a conservancy, each with a board suited to its goals and methods.)

More than one conservancy has been forced to recognize its lack of board connections and fundraising prowess. Most often, this comes not as a high-profile collapse but as a gradual strangulation—the conservancy simply cannot raise enough money to make a difference. "Our organization is going through great growth," one conservancy director said, "but the people involved in its founding, those who rolled up their sleeves and made it get started, aren't the ones to take it to the next level. I hope we can make the transition seamlessly, with the board understanding that it needs to open spaces for others."

Another conservancy director agreed. "The early grassroots advocates appointed themselves to our board with the best intentions but bad consequences. Our work is now all about the resources, the connections, and the fundraisers, and we're in an interesting and often difficult transition to a more powerful board."

ANNUAL REVENUE, SELECTED CONSERVANCIES
2009-2012 AVERAGE

Private Group	City	Annual Revenue
Central Park Conservancy	New York	$38,912,440
Friends of the High Line	New York	$23,550,671
Detroit Riverfront Conservancy	Detroit	$13,999,813
Forest Park Forever	St. Louis	$12,998,911
Prospect Park Alliance	New York	$9,996,987
Shelby Farms Park Conservancy	Memphis	$9,040,279
Woodall Rogers Park Foundation	Dallas	$8,599,294
Hermann Park Conservancy	Houston	$6,873,615
Buffalo Bayou Partnership	Houston	$6,699,486
Piedmont Park Conservancy	Atlanta	$6,678,384
Randall's Island Park Alliance	New York	$6,170,925
Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy	Pittsburgh	$4,807,576
Discovery Green Conservancy	Houston	$3,927,356
Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy	Buffalo	$3,415,794
Madison Square Park Conservancy	New York	$3,345,021
Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy	Boston	$3,034,730
Myriad Gardens Foundation*	Oklahoma City	$2,840,753
Railroad Park Foundation	Birmingham	$2,773,465
The Battery Conservancy	New York	$2,472,244
Overton Park Conservancy*	Memphis	$2,456,492
Trust for the National Mall	Washington	$2,220,063
Friends of the Public Garden, Inc.	Boston	$1,977,304
Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy	Louisville	$1,782,767
Fairmount Park Conservancy	Philadelphia	$1,743,632
Riverside Park Conservancy	New York	$1,574,183
Detroit 300 Conservancy	Detroit	$1,394,878
Emerald Necklace Conservancy	Boston	$1,300,425
Memorial Park Conservancy	Houston	$1,274,455
Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy	New York	$1,199,471
Historic Oakland Foundation	Atlanta	$1,097,644
Friends of Hudson River Park	New York	$884,966
Civic Center Conservancy	Denver	$637,387
Chastain Park Conservancy	Atlanta	$557,473
Guadalupe River Park Conservancy	San Jose	$494,722
Friends of Fair Park	Dallas	$444,700
Forest Park Conservancy	Portland	$413,907
Staten Island Greenbelt Conservancy	New York	$402,265
Mount Vernon Place Conservancy	Baltimore	$378,297
Bushnell Park Foundation	Hartford	$133,522
Grant Park Conservancy	Atlanta	$116,013
Brackenridge Park Conservancy	San Antonio	$113,045

*2012 only

One way a conservancy can broaden board capacity while retaining founding advocates is to create a second body, often called an advisory board, and fill it with key park and recreation experts, issue advocates, and community leaders. These people may have just as much—or more—wisdom and activism to offer as board members. While they may not be in a position to bring in high-dollar donations, enthusiastic and capable advisory board members can garners grassroots political support and offer expertise on maintenance and usership issues. While a board of directors focuses on fundraising and oversees long-term planning, the advisory board may weigh in on the practical issues—should dogs be allowed off-leash, can park roads be closed to cars, how much concert promoters must pay to restore lawns, and more.

Conversely, some conservancies have created honorary trustees, people so well-known and so busy with other matters that they cannot commit enough time to be board members but can still provide key connections and visibility on an as-needed basis.

Robust Fundraising is Mandatory

Clean, safe, sustainable parks don't come cheaply, and most conservancies take on a heavy fundraising role. In fact, a conservancy should not be attempted by any group not committed to serious fundraising. While there is no official financial threshold, annual revenues of $500,000 seem like a minimum for success. In our study, the median annual revenue of the conservancies was nearly $1.7 million a year. The decision to create a conservancy is not one to be taken casually!

In some ways, an underfunded conservancy may be worse than no conservancy at all. Without a conservancy, public expectation for park excellence falls on the parks department, city government, and the mayor. If a new conservancy is held up as the solution for park problems, political pressure on the government may be lessened. But if the conservancy is then unable to raise sufficient resources to make a difference, the park will be without both private money and public political influence. Sometimes the very existence of a conservancy can discourage other individuals or groups who want to improve a park. High-profile but ineffective fundraising by the conservancy— direct-mail, billboards, print advertisements, for example—might create the impression that park problems are being solved when in fact they aren't.

Conservancies face the obstacle that while almost everyone loves parks, the public assumes that they have already been paid for. "People don't understand why they need to contribute to something supposedly covered by their tax dollars," says Jesse Brackenbury, executive director of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy. "Nobody gives 'donations' to their government."

Getting Recognition Right

Another challenge is keeping the park thoroughly public while giving donors recognition. Universities, hospitals, museums, performance centers, and other nonprofits have a long history of naming buildings and rooms for benefactors; as the conservancy movement has grown, the offering of naming opportunities to donors has become more common, bringing with it both advantages and challenges.

ANNUAL SPENDING, SELECTED CONSERVANCIES
2009-2012 AVERAGE

Conservancy	City	Annual Spending	Per Park Acre
Friends of the High Line	New York	$11,928,415	$1,772,424
Madison Square Park Conservancy	New York	$3,092,202	$498,742
Discovery Green Conservancy	Houston	$4,751,895	$395,991
Woodall Rogers Park Foundation	Dallas	$1,344,733	$258,602
Rose F. Kennedy Greenway Conservancy	Boston	$3,849,152	$256,610
Detroit 300 Conservancy	Detroit	$1,554,426	$200,313
Railroad Park Foundation	Birmingham	$3,446,114	$181,374
Myriad Gardens Foundation*	Oklahoma City	$1,881,606	$110,683
The Battery Conservancy	New York	$1,751,335	$70,053
Piedmont Park Conservancy	Atlanta	$11,608,365	$62,748
Detroit Riverfront Conservancy	Detroit	$7,242,497	$61,902
Civic Center Conservancy	Denver	$541,715	$45,143
Central Park Conservancy	New York	$37,227,935	$44,161
Buffalo Bayou Partnership	Houston	$1,683,192	$37,404
Trust for the National Mall	Washington, D.C.	$4,779,953	$32,661
Mount Vernon Place Conservancy	Baltimore	$185,345	$29,420
Prospect Park Alliance	New York	$11,698,228	$19,997
Historic Oakland Foundation	Atlanta	$842,622	$17,665
Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy	New York	$1,045,982	$16,092
Friends of the Public Garden, Inc.	Boston	$1,255,495	$15,333
Randall's Island Park Alliance	New York	$6,214,614	$14,352
Forest Park Forever	St. Louis	$3,926,486	$10,471
Hermann Park Conservancy	Houston	$3,486,526	$7,835
Overton Park Conservancy*	Memphis	$1,210,906	$6,653
Riverside Park Conservancy	New York	$1,681,304	$5,095
Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy	Pittsburgh	$5,347,882	$3,146
Bushnell Park Foundation	Hartford	$110,560	$2,988
Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy	Buffalo	$3,503,314	$2,919
Fairmount Park Conservancy	Philadelphia	$2,146,947	$2,359**
Shelby Farms Park Conservancy	Memphis	$6,550,650	$2,047
Friends of Fair Park	Dallas	$519,666	$1,876
Guadalupe River Park Conservancy	San Jose	$444,816	$1,853
Chastain Park Conservancy	Atlanta	$453,747	$1,693
Friends of Hudson River Park	New York	$894,714	$1,627
Emerald Necklace Conservancy	Boston	$1,171,475	$1,403
Grant Park Conservancy	Atlanta	$124,481	$947
Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy	Louisville	$1,953,275	$936
Memorial Park Conservancy	Houston	$1,100,350	$769
Brackenridge Park Conservancy	San Antonio	$92,281	$375
Staten Island Greenbelt Conservancy	New York	$446,567	$249
The Forest Park Conservancy	Portland	$433,255	$84

*2012 only **Reflects the portion of park acreage served

Of course some donors, large and small, wish to remain anonymous or want no more recognition than a listing in a newsletter or annual report and perhaps an invitation to a gala honoring them and their peers. In 2014, Tulsa businessman George Kaiser made history twice—first by contributing and raising the largest-ever private gift for a city park ($350 million) and then by not asking that the park bear his name. (It will be called "A Gathering Place for Tulsa.")

But often donors want additional credit, such as a plaque in the park or their name on a particular park space or facility. Recent examples include Icahn Stadium, on New York's Randall's Island; the Cullen Family Carousel, on the Detroit riverfront; and, in Houston's Hermann Park, the Mary Gibbs and Jesse H. Jones Reflection Pool—a mouthful to pronounce. In Boston and Dallas, major supporters were allowed to name entire parks for a mother and a son—the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway and Klyde Warren Park, respectively.

With foresight, cities and conservancies can establish minimum thresholds for naming rights as well as guidelines for the size of plaques and signs so that they do not dominate the landscape. In some parks, the names of the major donors can be found on a wall of honor near a major entrance. In others, donations for landscape restoration require an endowment for ongoing care—a truly enlightened gift that might be commemorated with a modest plaque on a rock or other natural feature carefully designed to fit into the landscape.

Another common way to raise funds is through a party or gala, from the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy's Spring Hat Luncheon to the Myriad Gardens Foundation's "Orchids in October" luncheon to the Fairmount Park Conservancy's "Glow in the Park" evening party.

Concessions and Earned Revenue

If a conservancy cannot bring in enough money through donations, it may want, or be forced, to layer revenue-generating concessions onto its fundraising palette. This may be as simple as selling promotional goods emblazoned with the conservancy's logo or tagline, such as t-shirts, mugs, water bottles, and jewelry. These items can also serve as premiums for donations and promotions for the conservancy's brand.

More complicated and riskier, a conservancy can operate a fee-based facility or service in the park— a golf course, skating rink, restaurant, boat or bike rental, or even just a squadron of food pushcarts. In some large, older parks, like Piedmont Park in Atlanta, concessions have existed for years, and transferring them to a conservancy is a relatively minor step. But establishing new concessions in a park may be controversial—perceived as expensive, elitist, or signaling a shift in the park's image. A few conservancies, including the Prospect Park Alliance and Forest Park Forever, generate major concession revenue. Some others may decide that they don't have enough foot traffic to support concessions and that running them would not generate enough revenue for the considerable effort involved.

"Conservancies should keep in mind that any concession requires significant administrative

EARNED REVENUE AS PERCENT OF TOTAL REVENUE
2009-2012 AVERAGE

Conservancy	City	Earned Percent
Myriad Gardens Foundation*	Oklahoma City	61.9%
Staten Island Greenbelt Conservancy	New York	53.9%
Randall's Island Park Alliance	New York	53.8%
Prospect Park Alliance	New York	40.1%
Discovery Green Conservancy	Houston	33.8%
Central Park Conservancy	New York	23.4%
Detroit 300 Conservancy	Detroit	17.2%
Madison Square Park Conservancy	New York	17.1%
Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy	Buffalo	16.4%
Grant Park Conservancy	Atlanta	16.0%
Hermann Park Conservancy	Houston	13.0%
Riverside Park Conservancy	New York	11.9%
Shelby Farms Park Conservancy	Memphis	11.0%
Chastain Park Conservancy	Atlanta	9.8%
Guadalupe River Park Conservancy	San Jose	7.8%
Civic Center Conservancy	Denver	6.8%
Railroad Park Foundation	Birmingham	6.4%
Piedmont Park Conservancy	Atlanta	6.1%
Buffalo Bayou Partnership	Houston	5.8%
The Forest Park Conservancy	Portland	4.0%
Historic Oakland Foundation	Atlanta	3.6%
Woodall Rogers Park Foundation*	Dallas	2.9%
The Battery Conservancy	New York	1.7%
Fairmount Park Conservancy	Philadelphia	1.5%
Forest Park Forever	St. Louis	1.4%
Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy	New York	1.4%
Friends of the Public Garden, Inc.*	Boston	1.2%
Friends of Fair Park	Dallas	1.1%
Friends of the High Line	New York	1.1%
Friends of Hudson River Park	New York	1.0%
Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy	Louisville	0.5%
Brackenridge Park Conservancy	San Antonio	0.4%
Emerald Necklace Conservancy	Boston	0.3%
Memorial Park Conservancy	Houston	0.2%
Bushnell Park Foundation	Hartford	0%
Detroit Riverfront Conservancy	Detroit	0%
Mount Vernon Place Conservancy	Baltimore	0%
Overton Park Conservancy*	Memphis	0%
Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy	Pittsburgh	0%
Rose F. Kennedy Greenway Conservancy	Boston	0%
Trust for the National Mall	Washington, D.C.	0%

*2012 only

time, often more than anticipated," says Hermann Park Conservancy director Doreen Stoller. She recalled one compelling idea to offer horse-drawn carriage rides. But an analysis revealed that there would be no profits after paying staff and the idea was shelved. On the other hand, not all low-profit-margin ideas should be dropped, and the conservancy did agree to take over the Pinewoods Café. "We decided that having food available to visitors would make a better space," says Stoller. "But we didn't just wake up one morning and open a café—we thought a lot about the costs and benefits of running the concession."

Cordoned-off Events

Perhaps the riskiest way for a conservancy to raise revenue is to regularly offer a portion of the park for private events—weddings, reunions, business parties—and then cordon it off from other uses. Not only does this remove a scenic spot from public enjoyment, but economic realities often dictate rental fees above what many people can afford, leading critics to cry that the park is being "privatized."

"The first priority of a concession should be serving the public," says Betsy Smith. "Concessions shouldn't be windfalls. You don't want conservancies relying on concessions, because you don't want them to get too excited about commercial activity in the park."

For most conservancies, New York code prevents the temptation by requiring all concession revenues to be returned to the city's general fund. Although that policy predated conservancies, "it's a reminder that they must seek out philanthropy," says Smith. (In a few cases where a conservancy funds the lion's share of a park's daily upkeep—such as the High Line and Randall's Island—the city allows the conservancy to keep revenues as a contribution to park maintenance. Those special agreements set a high threshold for a conservancy's private contributions, says Smith, "because the concession business cannot exempt a conservancy from making private philanthropy a key part of the puzzle.")

Jim Griffin, director of the Pittsburgh Parks Division and former facilities director at the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, has a similar philosophy. Speaking to the National Recreation and Park Association, he said, "You have to stick to what you know about the character of the park. Don't give up the culture of the space to make a buck. If you try an event and it feels wrong, make it a one-time mistake and move on."

One of the most prominent examples of an ill-starred private event was the Great GoogaMooga food and music festival, which took over Prospect Park's Nethermead for three days in 2012. The music was free but food vendors filled the meadow with commercial operations. (Some parts of the park were fenced off for exclusive use of those holding $250 VIP passes.) The Prospect Park Alliance received a $75,000 usage fee from organizers, some of which went to reseeding the damaged portions of the meadow, but there was still a public outcry. The 2013 Great GoogaMooga featured a new layout that better protected the park and kept more of it open to the public but it again drew loud complaints. Finally, in 2014, the parks department and the Alliance decided that Prospect Park was an inappropriate venue and ended the run.

CASE STUDY

Civic Center Conservancy, Denver

Civic Center Park fills the grand space between Denver's two most important civic edifices—the City and County Building and the Colorado State Capitol. Accented with tree groves, its structures include the Greek Theater, the Colonnade of Civic Benefactors, a number of memorials and monuments, the Seal Pond, and the historic Carnegie Library. Partially designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the 12-acre park has an illustrious history, but in recent decades it became run down, has lacked amenities and programming, and has often been empty.

In 2004, newly elected mayor John Hickenlooper made the improvement of Civic Center Park a priority. A new master plan called for a public-private partnership, and the head of the mayor's parks transition team, designer and philanthropist Elaine Asarch, took on the challenge. Pulling together a group of concerned citizens, including a prominent developer, a downtown civic advocate, a University of Colorado regent, and the president of Historic Denver, she founded the Civic Center Conservancy to help the city restore, enhance, and bring activity back to the park.

"We wanted to reintroduce people to this historic urban oasis and engage the community in its future," says conservancy director Lindy Eichenbaum Lent. The group aspires to work in four key areas: advocacy, programming, public engagement, and fundraising for capital improvements.

"Before the Conservancy, Civic Center had numerous stakeholders, but no constituency. Now the park has a consistent voice," says Lent. The organization has a full-time staff of three and about 40 active volunteers.

EVAN SEMON PHOTOGRAPHY

The conservancy's labors have yielded four big fruits: an annual Independence Eve celebration featuring a free concert, fireworks, and a light display; a bike-in summer movie series; free warm-weather fitness classes, and Civic Center Eats, a twice-weekly lunchtime gathering of food trucks with live music, also in the summer. The park now attracts about a million visitors a year—but success wasn't easy.

The conservancy began life with a tough lesson. It hired famous architect Daniel Libeskind (designer of park neighbor the Denver Art Museum) to create conceptual renderings. But the artistically wild conceptions caused a public furor. The conservancy was accused of trying to implement a unilateral vision for the space, the project was shelved, and the Denver parks director ultimately lost her job over the controversy. Lent attributes the blow-up to poor community outreach. "It's important to define a vision and mission both internally and externally," says Lent, especially in a place like Denver where the conservancy model had been unfamiliar.

After the setback, the conservancy reevaluated its plan. Postponing the launch of a major capital project, it focused instead on increasing community trust through incremental successes in programming and advocacy. Its modest annual budget of $700,000 also forced a scale-back of its plan to take over park maintenance responsibilities from the Denver Parks and Recreation Department.

The conservancy's largest source of income comes from corporate sponsorships and philanthropic grants, with a growing percentage from food truck concessions and individual donations. (Although organizers of large events in Civic Center Park must pay a permitting fee, the revenue goes to the city's general fund rather than to the conservancy.)

Ironically, despite the park's bulls-eye site, the physical location actually hampers the conservancy's ability to raise more money. Surrounded by government buildings and nonprofit entities—the Denver Art Museum, Colorado Education Association, and the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception—the park lacks a natural constituency of nearby private-sector companies or well-heeled residents in the position to make large donations or throw themselves into major fundraising campaigns.

Resources might be easier to come by if the park were located within Denver's high-powered, 120-block Downtown Denver Partnership, a business improvement district (BID) that receives tax surcharge payments from landlords and business owners. However, it isn't. The boundary was drawn to avoid the park and surrounding area since government buildings and nonprofits wouldn't contribute to the BID either.

The conservancy did pioneer a relationship with the BID, contracting with it to pick up litter, remove graffiti, and pressure wash pavement in the park. Called "Civic Center Sparkles," the summer-only program cost $107,500 over three years, an expense split

evenly between the two organizations. Unfortunately, funding ran out and the program was discontinued after 2011.

Safety has also been an issue in the park, which is close to downtown transit hubs, and where historic structures and landscaping provide shadowy hiding places for vagrants and drug dealers. A 2013 shooting in the park put off donors and some visitors, but it galvanized political support for the conservancy, Lent says. "The media attention credited the city for efforts they were undertaking [to address crime] and encouraged them to continue." At the same time, Lent says, "everybody touted the conservancy's programming as a solution to reducing crime." The mayor allocated more money for policing and security, and the parks department stepped up summertime programming.

The conservancy is now circling back to address capital improvements, as called for in the 2005 Civic Center Park Master Plan. Having successfully advocated for the park's inclusion in the 2007 Better Denver bond initiative, which guarantees $9.5 million in public money to attract and leverage privately raised funds, the conservancy is planning a $25-million Centennial Campaign. Its goals include the restoration of the historic Greek Theater and Carnegie Library; an endowment for programming and maintenance; and the design and construction of a long planned but never built central feature for the park.

Civic Center Park's challenges are real, but can be overcome, Lent says. "We're here to make the case that this is a space worth fighting for."

Civic Center Conservancy	
12 acres	**Park size**
1894	**Park created**
2004	**Conservancy founded**
$541,715	**Expenditures***
$637,387	**Revenue***
93%	**Contributions and grants as portion of total revenue***
7%	**Earned revenue as portion of total revenue***
4	**Employees**
45	**Volunteers**
13	**Voting board members**
6-member executive committee, 9 directors, 2 ex-officio**	**Board structure**
Some	**Conservancy manages operations/maintenance?**
Yes	**Conservancy conducts capital projects?**
Yes	**Conservancy programs park?**
Yes	**Conservancy created master plan?**

*Annual, 2009-2012 average
**Ex-officio: Parks Director, and City Council Member.

What About Maintenance?

For conservancies and city governments alike, finding the money to cover basic maintenance costs can be a challenge—often *the* challenge. "Maintenance isn't as sexy as big construction projects," says longtime Prospect Park Alliance leader Tupper Thomas and current executive director of New Yorkers for Parks.

Many conservancies are launched with capital projects as a main focus and maintenance only as a second priority. This approach is clear and easy for the public to understand—the city has responsibility for the park but the conservancy helps by renovating one or more icons. Donors also like the visibility and relative predictability of capital projects; there is no worry that their contributions might be mixed with tax revenue for ongoing park maintenance.

But nothing lasts forever. How are restored buildings and park features—not to mention the day-to-day horticulture—to be maintained? Raising money for maintenance and management can be a harder sell for donors, says Linda Cox, director of the Bronx River Alliance. "Foundations like to fund innovation," she says. "Finding someone to celebrate and maintain the successes is much more difficult."

Atlanta's Piedmont Park Conservancy has been particularly pressed by maintenance expenses. Not only has park usership climbed steadily, but the very capital improvements that have made the park so desirable have also increased annual maintenance from $400,000 to over $3 million. The city and conservancy have agreed that private funding will not replace municipal funding, but the reality is that city contributions have not kept up with rising costs. Through extra fundraising efforts the conservancy now covers an estimated 85 percent of ongoing maintenance in Piedmont Park. "The city would really struggle to pay for park maintenance if it had to do it alone now," says former conservancy board chair Mike Semrau. But the organizational strain pushed the conservancy into a period of high staff turnover.

Prospect Park Alliance has also taken on an increasing maintenance burden. Although the Alliance started with a combination of major capital projects and ongoing maintenance, priorities shifted when New York's financial situation worsened in the late 1980s. Today, 80 percent of capital projects are paid for by public dollars and only 20 percent by private gifts brought in by the Alliance, while much of the ongoing maintenance of the park is covered by private fundraising. This arrangement is rare nationally, but it is more common in New York, where municipal budgeting rules make capital funding appear to be a "less expensive" way for the city to play a role in partnerships. (Capital construction bonds do not show up in the annual budget, while operations do.)

There is no single solution to the problem, but an excellent approach is to build in a long-term maintenance fee to the initial budget of each capital project—an upfront gift that becomes a permanent trust fund. That's the model used by the Central Park Conservancy, according to CEO Doug Blonsky. "We always raise enough money on capital projects to cover maintenance for the first four to five years at minimum," he said. "We have no fixed percentage but we develop a maintenance budget and fold it in." For other conservancies, a typical amount to support ongoing maintenance might be 25 percent.

That Other Partner – The City

Maintaining a balance of authority between the city and its nonprofit partner is not always easy. If, in the enthusiasm over bringing the private sector to the table the public sector finds itself without a seat, that's not a partnership—it's a replacement.

A marriage, even of agencies, requires respect and trust. When it comes to parks, this can require real attention, particularly if the very creation of the conservancy implies some kind of municipal failure. (Some city governments resist the creation of a conservancy for exactly this reason.) In one city, for example, a park director was under so much pressure to balance his budget he moved the weight of a premier park—including most of the landscape maintenance—onto the shoulders of the park's conservancy. "It was too much," a city observer says. "The conservancy couldn't raise all the needed money and, frankly, our city employees began to feel left out and even unwelcome in the park. In response, the ratio of workers was reconfigured to about 50:50, and tensions were repaired when the conservancy threw a Thanksgiving lunch party and invited all staffers to attend—public and private.

Very real issues can emerge when city and conservancy workers labor side-by-side since they may have different pay scales and work rules. One conservancy leader described acrimony between unionized city employees and their non-unionized conservancy coworkers. The infighting abated only after the conservancy organized a staff retreat to give a transparent explanation of pay and remuneration. Staff learned that when salaries, pensions, and benefits were taken into account, total compensation for city and nonprofit employees was approximately the same.

Similarly, in contracting for services a city may be constrained by rules and policies that do not apply to private conservancies. For example, there may be required levels of minority or female hiring or a mandated local sourcing of materials. The lack of these rules often allows conservancies to be more nimble and to cut costs, but it can also result in a backlash from groups no longer protected by city policies. On occasion, a private conservancy will smooth the process by agreeing to follow city practices even if it's not technically required to.

"It wasn't enough that both sides wanted the best for the park, or even that they both supported a public-partnership as the way forward," recalled one conservancy president. "We all had to compromise. The parks department and union had to be able to give up a little power, and the community had to learn to be more positive about and respectful towards government."

And a conservancy must always remember who owns the park. As Hermann Park Conservancy's Stoller puts it, "the City of Houston has allowed Hermann Park Conservancy to perform many duties on its behalf. But we can't lose sight of the fact that our work is 'on its behalf.'"

In establishing harmony, "don't underestimate the importance of the relationship between the heads of the agency and the conservancy," said George Dusenbury, former director of the Atlanta Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs. "I met with my conservancy

CASE STUDY

Olmsted Parks Conservancy, Louisville

In 1891, Frederick Law Olmsted was commissioned to design the parks of Louisville, Kentucky. What he and his son, John Charles Olmsted, created—nine pleasure grounds connected by parkways—is celebrated as among the greatest fully realized visions of an urban park system. By the mid-20th century, however, that system showed scars from inadequate upkeep and attention. The damage was exacerbated by both man and nature—Interstate 64 was routed through Cherokee and Seneca Parks in the 1960s, and a catastrophic tornado uprooted thousands of historic trees in 1974. The system's crisis led concerned citizen leaders to coalesce and form an advocacy organization, The Friends of Olmsted Parks. Fifteen years later, after deciding that political pressure alone would not save the Olmsted system, the group restructured with a much stronger fundraising mandate and changed its name to the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy. This evolution was strongly supported by Mayor Jerry Abramson.

The conservancy's first action was to fully analyze the system's strengths, shortcomings, and needs. This led to a comprehensive master plan, which cost $250,000, took about a year to complete, and was approved by the city council in 1994. The plan laid out a 20-year program of repairs to buildings and landscaping in the nine Olmsted parks, at an estimated cost of $70 million.

Working in partnership with Louisville Metro Parks, the Conservancy has had many successes, from restoration of the Great Lawn in Shawnee Park to reconstruction of the drainage under Summit Field in Iroquois Park, from rebuilding of the Iroquois Park Amphitheatre and installation of a major stormwater handling system around its

OLMSTED PARKS CONSERVANCY

parking lots to restoration of the Barringer Hill vista in Cherokee Park and removal of large tracts of invasive bush honeysuckle throughout the system. Yet, 20 years after the master plan was published, only about $25 million has been raised—about one-third of the funding goal. Major projects remaining to be completed include Shawnee Park's Music Concourse gardens, the Northern Overlook in Iroquois Park, and the Hogan's Fountain vista in Cherokee Park. Why?

The answer is complex. For one thing, the full system of 18 parks, including three parkways, totals 2,087 acres—among the largest acreage supported by a city park conservancy. Most conservancies adopt only a single park; supporting multiple parks and large acreage is an extraordinarily difficult challenge. For another, most of the wealthier denizens of metro Louisville have moved to the outskirts of the city and have a less intimate day-to-day connection with the central-city Olmsted parks. Lastly, in 2005 a large and exciting effort to create thousands of acres of new parkland—21st Century Parks—sprang up on the other side of Louisville from the Olmsted parks. Inspired, ironically, by a speech given by the then-chair of the Olmsted Parks Conservancy, the new conservancy has raised $120 million and served as an unwitting competitor for philanthropic support from park-minded donors.

In an ideal world, says Olmsted Parks Conservancy CEO Mimi Zinniel, her organization would take charge of ongoing maintenance in the Olmsted parks, but current funding cannot support that level of work. With a staff of only ten, the Conservancy scrambles to raise enough money just to stay ahead of the normal deterioration of the huge acreage it has claimed as its bailiwick. This Sisyphean task doesn't leave much money for big capital projects, although recent modest successes have included the restoration of historic picnic pavilions, construction of new restrooms and splash zones to attract families, and the removal of invasive species by volunteers. The organization also pays allegiance to its advocacy roots—pressing for more public park spending, promoting Olmsted's vision for the parks, and speaking out against commercial encroachment along the Olmsted parkways. (In many cities, fundraising and advocacy are handled by different organizations.)

The Conservancy spends $1.5–$2.5 million annually, raised entirely from private donations and foundation grants. (Under city law, any park-generated revenue, such as picnic pavilion rental fees, must go to Metro Parks rather than to the conservancy.) The ongoing search for funding, says Zinniel, remains the conservancy's greatest challenge. "People love what you do, think it's great, then when you ask them for money they decline because they say they already pay taxes." The organization is preparing to launch a new capital campaign.

In some ways, the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy is the ideal model for a park-support organization—it has a broad view of park needs and collaborates closely with Louisville Metro Parks on planning and day-to-day work. In another way, the conservancy seems to have positioned itself in an unsatisfactory place. It has accepted

responsibility for thousands of acres of precious and historic parklands without enough money to do all the work, removing that burden from Metro Parks. The budget numbers confirm this. Metro Parks' spending per resident is approximately eight percent below the average for big-city park systems nationwide, with the conservancy's spending mostly covering that gap. If the city's maintenance spending were higher, the conservancy could invest in larger-scale capital projects. While the removal of invasive species is a valuable service, the focus on such projects has left some observers feeling as though the conservancy is simply treading water.

Olmsted Parks Conservancy	
2,087 acres (18 parks)	**Park size**
1880	**Park created**
1989	**Conservancy founded**
$1,953,275	**Expenditures***
$1,782,767	**Revenue***
99%	**Contributions and grants as portion of total revenue***
2%	**Earned revenue as portion of total revenue***
21	**Employees**
5,000	**Volunteers**
36	**Voting board members**
6-member executive committee, 30 general directors, 6 ex-officio**	**Board structure**
Yes	**Conservancy manages operations/maintenance?**
Yes	**Conservancy conducts capital projects?**
No	**Conservancy programs park?**
No	**Conservancy created master plan?**

*Annual, 2009-2012 average
**Ex-officio: Parks Director, 2 Mayoral appointees, and 3 neighborhood representatives

director monthly, and our mid-level staffers did so two or three times as often. And I always made sure to show up at conservancy board meetings—there is no better way to stave off misunderstandings or false rumors and nip problems in the bud."

Of all the innovations coming out of New York's early experience with conservancies, none was more daring than combining the positions of park administrator and conservancy president—in Betsy Barlow Rogers for Central Park, in 1980, and Tupper Thomas for Prospect Park, in 1987. In each case, the leader's salary came half from the city, half from the conservancy. And each reported to two bosses—the park commissioner and the chairman of the conservancy board. It was an innovative and risky approach. But the administrators showed that it was possible to thread their way through political minefields, balance the interests of the city and the private sector, and stay on the good side of the mayor, parks commissioner, and a hard-charging board of directors. The arrangement requires the right mix of personalities, and tensions have occasionally arisen when the two bosses didn't see eye-to-eye. Despite that occasional friction, this dual administrative structure has become standard for New York City park conservancies (although, due to its unconventionality, it has not been adopted by other cities).

Who Really Owns the Park?

Regardless of the legalities between the city and the conservancy, the real owners of the park are the people who use it. They are the ones who write letters to the editor, call in to radio talk shows, gossip with friends, post pictures on the internet, and generally establish the park's reputation as a "sacred space," "hall of shame" or something in between. Ultimately it's the community that decides. Engaging park users and residents of surrounding neighborhoods is essential to the success of any conservancy.

"It's important that the final authority for policy, permitting, and capital improvements rests with the city," says Betsy Smith. "People feel better about private conservancy contributions when the government retains control. There should never be a 'pay to play' mentality—the government must still ultimately decide how the space is used."

Neglecting to properly engage the community has tripped up some conservancies. "We made the mistake of relying on our board members or allied community members to disseminate ideas," lamented one conservancy director. "It wasn't enough to counter suspicions that we were privatizing the park." The conservancy had to step back, greatly ramp up its outreach to neighbors and park users, and offer much expanded programming before it could embark on its capital campaign.

Jesse Brackenbury of the Kennedy Greenway Conservancy put it succinctly: "Only when you've hosted more community meetings than you think you can take have you been thorough enough." He prefers over-communicating to leaving anyone out.

It's not just talking, it's also doing. For many conservancies programming is an essential part of community outreach. Park activation projects —such as regular musical concerts, large group

exercise extravaganzas, children's arts and crafts festivals, and more—require fewer resources, have a shorter timeline, and convey a higher profile and more populist message than capital improvements. After meeting initial resistance from local residents, one conservancy turned to programming to build up political good will and cement its relationship with the parks department and citizens. Outdoor concerts, food truck festivals, fitness classes, and movies drew new attention to the park and the conservancy. "We retreated and were licking our wounds," said its director. "Focusing on programming was a great way to increase our visibility."

One good way to know what's important to park users and neighbors is to ask. In the 1990s, Atlanta's Piedmont Park Conservancy conducted extensive research on how the park was perceived, who was using the space, and what community members wanted from it. The conservancy learned that concerns over public safety were limiting the park's appeal to families and seniors, and also that the public wanted the conservancy to expand its focus to include both design and maintenance.

"We never would have done the marketing research but for the fact that a foundation required us to do it," says longtime conservancy leader Debbie McCown. "It was a real eye opener for us, and we continue to update the information every few years. It's one of the strongest guiding tools for our work today, and has helped us maintain the park in a world-class manner."

One of the most emulated community-outreach models comes from Prospect Park Alliance. After trying several approaches, the conservancy established a Community Committee of more than 50 members, including elected officials and representatives from more than 50 local stakeholder groups. The committee handles tough day-to-day park issues, including the establishment of dog areas and the regulation of cars. The essential mindset, says former administrator Tupper Thomas, was seeing the organization as "not just a public-private park partnership, but as a park-community partnership."

Combatting Fearfulness

In many cases, fear is the underlying reason for starting a conservancy—the public's fear of the park. Rundown and neglected parks can give the feeling that no one is in control, attracting anti-social and even criminal activity. This atmosphere pushes families out of the park, making it difficult to build up a cadre of donors and activists with a vision to improve and restore the facility.

Thus, an early task for many conservancies is establishing patrols, implementing varied and frequent programs to fill the park with activity, and the enforcing rules that may have long been ignored.

Simply getting people back into an improving park helps publicize and build on a conservancy's successes, so a multiplicity of volunteer opportunities is particularly important. (Best is connecting with existing networks through congregations, businesses, associations, or other specific user groups so that individual volunteers already have the support of friends.) Every conservancy should have an energetic, enthusiastic, and welcoming coordinator of volunteers.

Flashpoints

As with their urban park department partners, conservancies inevitably face issues that can cause discord. Solving them will not only improve the park experience for all users, it will go a long way toward building a conservancy's reputation for thoughtfulness, commitment, and fairness. Among common challenges are:

Dogs. Most conservancies establish one or more off-leash dog areas and then strive to be strict about enforcing leash laws in the rest of the park. Dogs are heavy users of parks, and they provide many enjoyable moments (even for non-owners), but they also present problems, including waste, smell, noise, and fear. Best is to have an active canine committee (including at least one non-dog owner) to handle day-to-day conflicts. That way, the conservancy board (and the city) need only deal with matters that rise to the level of a major policy consideration.

Music. For some people, nothing is nicer than a concert in a park; for others, loud music fractures nature. Obviously, it's best to provide both ambiances, either by geography (in large parks) or by time (in plazas and squares). Even personal boom boxes can be disruptive and might need to be banned in certain locations or perhaps regulated by time of day. For conservancies that host weddings and parties in their park, noise conflicts can be even more significant since these are emotional and costly gatherings. Clear policies and appropriate signage are necessary.

Cars. Many older parks have been damaged over the years by the addition of roadways and parking, and a conservancy may be called upon to figure out a rebalance. Those that have instituted auto restrictions (by location or time) have invariably gained total users through an increase in walkers, runners, cyclists, skaters, and families. But they have also been excoriated by drivers. In recompense, some conservancies have sought to establish transit connections or have set up shuttles. Some have resorted to building structured garages or charging for parking. The issue of autos is too fraught to be decided solely by the conservancy; it requires a full-fledged policy decision by the city itself. However, the conservancy is often called upon to raise enough money to pay for whatever solutions are devised.

Bicycles. Most people consider bicycles benign, but, like cars, they can also reach speeds and density levels that diminish the park experience for pedestrians, seniors, small children, and people pushing strollers. In Central Park, with 40 million annual visitors, cyclists are permitted on all the original roadways but have been banned from foot trails and paths. Other heavily used parks are following similar rules. As cycling continues to increase in urban America, more focused attention is needed on park regulations governing bike speed, parking, and etiquette—and conservancies are likely to be taking the lead.

Giving the Grass a Rest. No lawn can withstand millions of users without an occasional breather, and conservancies must decide between protecting plantings and allowing unfettered human access. (For most cities this is a new situation, since most municipal agencies without conservancies lack the manpower to fence lawns and enforce their closure.) Scheduling the level of lawn use and enforcing closures through explanatory signage—and, in some instances, public service announcements—is one of the tougher jobs that a conservancy must face.

The fearfulness problem is more acute in low-income neighborhoods. Yet, like trying to start a campfire with no available wood, it's almost impossible to establish a conservancy for a park surrounded by poverty. To deal with this challenge, wealthier conservancies in several cities are stepping up by sharing resources with less fortunate neighborhoods. Most notable is the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. Originally proposed as a conservancy for only Schenley Park, the institution broadened its mandate to all four of the city's regional parks under the suggestion and prodding of then-mayor Tom Murphy. Since then the organization has scrupulously rotated capital improvements among the four parks and has recently expanded support to some smaller neighborhood parks, too.

Philadelphia's Fairmont Park Conservancy also consciously reached out beyond the city's signature greenspace, throwing itself into revitalizing 87-acre Hunting Park in hard-hit North Philadelphia. In New York, the Central Park Conservancy has established outreach and training programs for groups assisting parks in Harlem and other less affluent northern Manhattan neighborhoods. In Atlanta, Debbie McCown of Piedmont Park Conservancy has mentored several fledgling conservancies, helping with management and governance issues.

Then there is the Bronx River Alliance. While not really a conservancy *per se*, the alliance, founded in 2001, brings multiple resources to public green space in low-income and immigrant neighborhoods in New York City, and its model could become influential. In addition to improving parks and working to connect them through a greenway, the Alliance's broad mission includes environmental education and the improvement of water quality and wildlife habitat along the 23-mile-long Bronx River.

With an annual operating budget of $1.1 million, the Alliance helps New York City's parks department care for 12 parks totaling about 450 acres. The Alliance's executive director also serves as the city's Bronx River Administrator and reports to both the nonprofit's board and the city parks commissioner. As of 2014, the Alliance had raised and spent more than $140 million to create and restore parks and trails— nearly all of it from government and foundation grants rather than from corporate or individual donors. Because much of its operating revenue comes from the parks department, the Alliance is more like a nature-oriented community development organization than a traditional conservancy.

CASE STUDY

Overton Park Conservancy, Memphis

Overton Park, the 342-acre queen of Memphis's park system, has long benefitted from citizen advocacy. When the State of Tennessee planned to bisect the park with Interstate 40 in the 1960s, midtown Memphians fought the proposal all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Their landmark 1971 victory in *Citizens to Protect Overton Park v. Volpe* has had national repercussions, not only in park protection but in strengthening the role of environmental impact statements everywhere. (Today, the spot where the freeway was stopped is marked by "Bike Gate," a euphoric entry arch made from hundreds of bicycles.) But eventually the city's fiscal problems led to decades of inadequate maintenance in Overton Park, leading some Memphians to ask, "We diverted a freeway for *this*?"

By the mid-2000s, the surrounding neighborhoods were rebounding from the freeway battle and urban decay. The Levitt Foundation had renovated Overton Park's historic band shell, and concert-goers joined the stalwart runners and dog walkers who were already there. But the park faced new threats, too. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the already-stretched Memphis Parks Department budget was tightened. At the same time, two land use battles erupted over the Greensward, Overton Park's central meadow. The Memphis Zoo proposed paving part of the meadow for overflow parking, while the city proposed installing a large stormwater retention pond to reduce flooding in nearby Lick Creek.

These threats served to energize park advocates, who helped turn back both proposals.

OVERTON PARK CONSERVANCY

Suddenly, nearby residents felt the time had come for a new institution to support the park. Spearheading the push were two key local leaders (and users of the park's golf course)—Gary Shorb, CEO of Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare and George Cates, a real estate executive and philanthropist. Tina Sullivan, who would become executive director of the new Overton Park Conservancy (OPC), calls the effort "a buildup of need and want all directed at one half square mile of Memphis."

Like many other central parks, Overton Park is home to a collection of major institutions, including the zoo, the golf course, and several institutions of learning. Sorting out the roles these institutions might play in a new conservancy took some time, and the nonprofit wasn't launched until late 2011. Under its 10-year agreement with the city, the conservancy oversees daily operations and capital improvements on 184 acres, or just over half the park.

Before bringing the idea to the public, Cates, Shorb and other park champions scouted existing conservancies, solicited advice from local foundations, and honed their explanatory pitches. Thanks to that networking, the recruitment of a powerhouse board chaired by Cates, and quiet but effective fundraising, the conservancy launched on a strong note with more than $6 million in seed money. "We were a tight organization before we even formed," says Sullivan.

The young conservancy quickly scored two great successes, creating Overton Bark, a large and popular off-leash dog area, and revamping the Rainbow Lake Playground, an adventure space for young children. But the founders soon discovered that they had neglected to formulate a prioritized list of improvements. Sullivan says that when she took the helm five months after the conservancy's founding she inherited a program that more closely resembled the board members' wish list than something based on a master plan. Three projects were in the design phase without having gone before the public for comment and without any financial or staging guidance. "Everything was seen as most important," says Sullivan. "One of the first things I had to do was establish a hierarchy of need."

While the conservancy built a strong war chest for its first capital projects, it faces a looming challenge in developing a sustainable funding stream in a city without a lot of private wealth. For one thing, there is another major park conservancy in Memphis – the one for Shelby Farms Park, on the city's wealthier east side. Compounding this challenge, Overton Park Conservancy has agreed to take on a heavy proportion of park management. Under its most recent agreement with the city, signed in 2012, the conservancy pays for virtually all of the park's costs, including utilities and insurance, beyond the city's annual contribution of only $150,000 toward operations and $15,000 toward utilities. (The city also agreed to provide approximately $100,000 per year towards capital improvements, but only through 2016.) Therefore, the conservancy is focused on further developing its board, expanding fundraising events, and increasing opportunities for corporate giving.

As an additional trial the conservancy must balance the competing interests of the park's users and its cultural institutions. The Memphis Zoo, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and Memphis College of Art generate heavy car traffic, with the zoo alone frequently claiming fully one-third of the central Greensward for overflow parking. (Funding for a much-needed zoo parking garage has proven elusive, while Citizens to Protect Overton Park has increased the countervailing pressure by launching a campaign called "Get Off Our Lawn!")

With an underfunded city park system and a dramatic explosion of private-sector enthusiasm for parks, Memphis is clearly a city to watch. Only time will tell if its conservancies can lead a park renaissance that has eluded the public sector in recent decades.

Overton Park Conservancy	
184	**Acres managed (of 342-acre park)**
1901	**Park created**
2011	**Conservancy founded**
$1,210,906	**Expenditures***
$2,456,492	**Revenue***
100%	**Contributions and grants as portion of total revenue***
0%	**Earned revenue as portion of total revenue***
5	**Employees**
33	**Volunteers**
38	**Voting board members**
29 general directors, 9 ex officio**	**Board structure**
Some	**Conservancy manages operations/maintenance?**
Yes	**Conservancy conducts capital projects?**
Yes	**Conservancy programs park?**
No	**Conservancy created master plan?**

*Annual, 2012
**Ex-officio: Parks Director, Zoo, College of Art, Museum of Art, Levitt Shell, Rhodes College, Lick Creek Stormwater Coalition, Citizens to Protect Overton Park, Evergreen Historic District Association, and Park Friends.

Conclusion

Throughout much of the country, this is a golden age for signature urban parks. From Boston to Houston, New York to San Francisco, Atlanta to Pittsburgh to St. Louis to Detroit, beautiful old destination parks are being renewed, and some great new ones are being created.

In an age of abundant private wealth and a constrained public sector, parks seem like a logical area of the public realm to benefit from private support—more circumscribed and easier to manage than programs to solve homelessness and poverty, or improve education. Is it any wonder that a park conservancy seems like a good idea to philanthropists and mayors alike? As for the general public, who wouldn't want to be given what sounds like a free park?

Of course, assumptions aren't always correct. Parks are much tougher to manage than they appear. Donations from the wealthy often come with strings attached. Public sector budgets are not uniformly constrained. And the general public is complacent only until a controversy arises.

In short, conservancies are not guaranteed winners. Some have been wildly successful, others have struggled valiantly, and a few have faltered—just like the array of government agencies they partner with. Conservancy leaders must constantly be aware of the environment in which they are functioning—not only ecological but also financial and political. Money can be hugely distorting, politics can bring nasty surprises, and few city institutions are as passionately "owned" by the public as iconic parks.

The lessons from the urban park conservancy experience thus far have been clear. Conservancy operations need to be transparent, conservancy boards must be broad-based and representative of the public, conservancy input and decision-making must be carefully paced and well-publicized, conservancy staff must be treated as well as workers in the public sector, and communication with the public must be outstanding—from press releases to signage. In many ways, a conservancy must do everything that a city park agency does, while also generating a lot of donations. Although conservancies can sometimes operate with greater freedom and latitude than city agencies, they must take care not to commit the abuses that prompted government rules in the first place.

With this in mind—and with a generous, well-connected, hard-working board of directors and a savvy executive—a conservancy can raise a park up to heights it hasn't seen in decades, if ever. On the other hand, a conservancy that is casually constructed or inadequately nurtured can run into the same set of problems that led to a park's decline under its original, all-government management structure. We hope this report helps city park lovers of every stripe reap the benefits and steer clear of the pitfalls.

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FLICKR/LAUREN PARKER

Shelby Farms Park Conservancy reinvigorated Memphis's largest park, a former penal farm. Among the new features is the 3.5-acre Woodland Discovery Playground, which the conservancy built and now maintains.

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