



PHILADELPHIA PARKS...ENJOYMENT HIGH AND RISING

Heaps of broken concrete had spilled across Cobbs Creek Park. Chain-link fences were mangled in Hunting Park in North Philadelphia. West Philly's Rose Playground had rusted metal and chipped paint. Across Philadelphia, many parks had water fountains and restrooms that didn't work at all.

In the 44 parks inspected by the Philadelphia Parks Alliance in 2007 - a small portion of the city's system - 90 percent struggled with dumping and trash, the nonprofit advocacy group found. Nearly 75 percent had neglected grounds. But no more...

According to an analysis released in May by the Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit, Philadelphia has the 19th best park system among the 100 largest U.S. cities. Washington, D.C., was ranked No. 1, beating out Minneapolis, the three-time defending champion.

Philadelphia's ranking - or, its ParkScore - is significant because of how far it climbed: 11 spots in the annual rankings. The nonprofit attributed the jump to Mayor Jim Kenney's Rebuild program, a promised \$500 million investment in the city's parks, recreations centers, and libraries that, in part, is funded by the soda tax.

"The metrics that we keep track of in ParkScore are not that volatile - you don't often see a park system adding acreage. You don't see budgets double," said Owen Franklin, the Pennsylvania state director for the Trust for Public Land. "The [Rebuild] investment really does drive up [Philadelphia's] number to a level that is noticeable."

Plenty of research demonstrates why local parks are important. Green space has a significant effect on physical and mental health. Parks can be vital gathering spaces. Parks can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, minimize flooding, and cool urban hot spots - places in cities that tend to get hotter than other neighborhoods.

Plus, multiple studies show that people are willing to pay more for a house next to a park. Research from the University of Washington revealed that public green spaces can boost home values by 8 percent to 20 percent.

The Trust for Public Land's ParkScore rankings, now in their eighth year, award cities on four criteria: acreage, investment, amenities, and access. One of the nonprofit's guiding principles is that all people in America should have access to a high-quality park within a 10-minute walk of their home.

Philadelphia excels with park access, the nonprofit found, due to the more than 300 parks, recreation centers, and playgrounds that stretch citywide. About 95 percent of Philadelphia residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park, nearly double the national average of 54 percent. Philadelphia's access also is spread evenly among age, race, and income, the group found.

For decades, the now-merged Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department, like many local park agencies, suffered from underfunding and neglect. Often deemed by governments to be less essential than other municipal services, parks had long been a victim during budgetary shortfalls and recessions.

Former Mayor Michael Nutter, while a City Councilman in 2006, had been a vocal critic of the Mayor John Street administration's funding of Philadelphia's parks, questioning at a Council hearing what the vision for Fairmount Park was beyond "starving the park for resources."

Yet after his mayoral election the next year, Nutter wasn't able to do much better. Though he had earmarked \$19 million for the parks department, the recession got in the way.

Finally in 2012, City Council and Nutter approved an additional \$2.68 million for the department. It was a small start - enough to hire a few dozen employees - but it was the beginning of a cash infusion that Philadelphia's parks needed.

Even with that and Kenney's landmark Rebuild legislation, Philadelphia still struggles with park amenities, according to the Trust for Public Land. The city's playgrounds rank in just the 18th percentile. Its dog parks, in the 13th percentile.

The city does relatively well with providing basketball hoops and splash pads. And the recreation and senior centers - with two for every 20,000 people - rank among the highest in the nation.

Passed two years ago, Rebuild initially had a slow start. With more than half of the program's funding tied to the soda tax (some also came from grants, including from the William Penn Foundation), Rebuild could not begin until a challenge to the tax had worked its way through the courts.

Since the Supreme Court upheld the beverage tax last year and bonds were issued in November, Rebuild has more than 25 projects that are active or getting underway, the city said, representing about \$125 million in costs. That includes a \$14 million investment in the Vane Recreation Center in Point Breeze and \$12 million invested in the Cecil B. Moore Recreation Center in Strawberry Mansion.

In October, WHYY questioned whether Kenney was walking back his Rebuild promises after his self-released "First 1,000 Days" Report failed to specifically mention the \$500 million investment price tag. A city spokesperson told WHYY at the time that Kenney had not given up on the initial goal, and that, as a result of the lower-than-expected beverage tax revenue and rising interest rates, city officials were pursuing new funding sources.

Councilwoman Maria D. Quiñones-Sánchez this spring introduced a bill to change the soda tax. It's currently in committee. Even so, Kenney's administration has publicly maintained confidence in his legislation.

"Thanks to the leadership of our mayor and City Council, we are making a transformational investment in these cherished public spaces," Kathryn Ott Lovell, commissioner of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation, said in a statement. Rebuild, she added, is "a chance to re-engage residents in their communities, parks, and playgrounds."

(By Caitlin McCabe - The Philadelphia Inquirer - 6-2-19)



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