

Forming a *Friends of the Park* group is the first step in improving a public park. A group may start as civic association committee or begin with the sole purpose of improving a park. While friends of the parks groups can differ in terms of size, scope of work and influence they have many things in common:

A “Friends of the Park” Group has the following characteristics:

- a group
- of park users (often neighbors & community leaders)
- actively working
- to improve one or more parks (usually one)
- in a defined geographic area (usually a neighborhood)

Building Your Group

- **How Formal Should You Be?**

Informal groups that occasionally pick up trash and plant flowers can do a good job of beautifying a park without even giving their group a name. But if you have larger goals you need more structure to help your group stay organized, handle money responsibly, and keep track of important information.

- **Structure and Organizational Culture**

Organizational structure is what your group creates to achieve its goals, from leadership structure to communications. There are many models of organizational structures groups can adopt, such as conservancies, 501(c)(3) organizations, and formal coalitions. The structure you create and use helps define your organizational *culture*, so choose one that fits your group’s style. Here are some examples of organizational structures to get you thinking about creating an organizational culture for your group.

- ✓ ***Elected Leadership:*** Though members usually vote for the “natural leaders” anyway, elections ensure that your group is democratic versus having one person make all the decisions. Regular elections also mean that many members get opportunities to lead.
- ✓ ***Committees:*** Are a great way to delegate responsibility and find new leaders. By spreading out the work, responsibility, and credit among many people, committees let you get more done.

- ✓ **Official Memberships:** By officially recognizing and documenting members, you create a support group—people you send emails to, ask to volunteer and donate, and count as “members” when you are asking someone else for money.
- ✓ **A Name and a Logo:** A name makes your group official, while a logo creates your identity on flyers, email, letterhead and business cards.
- ✓ **Hold Regular Meetings:** So leaders can report to members and ask for their input. Meetings keep your organization from turning into a one-person show.
- ✓ **Regular Communications:** Keep members informed and engaged through email, website, Facebook and newsletters.
- ✓ **Records:** For your group to continue as leadership changes you need to retain and pass on letters you have written and received, newspaper articles, photographs, grant and legal documents and membership lists.

Suggested First Steps

- **Create a Core Group**

In the early stages of establishing a group, most of the work is done by a few people. This group should meet often to do the organizing, report their progress to—and get feedback from—the general membership.

- **Hold a General Interest Meeting**

To find people who care about the park, schedule a meeting in a public place, invite everyone you know, post flyers all over the neighborhood, and publicize the meeting any way you think will work. Use the meeting to discuss the park and what people want done there.

- **Continue Recruiting**

Use every opportunity to bring more people into your group. There is power in numbers.

Setting Your Goals

Setting goals is one of the first things you will do as a group. It is important to make a distinction between your group’s overarching mission and the steps that you will take to achieve it. Achieving a lofty mission requires taking small, tangible steps. These steps are your group’s **goals**. Your **mission** is most likely one or more of these things:

- **Physically Improving the Park** - From cleaning and planting to major renovations

- **Programming the Park** - Hosting regular and special events, from concerts to a day camp
- **Increasing Park Use** - Bringing children into a playground, or bird watchers into a natural area.

Remember to:

- **Decide as a Group what “improving the park” means.**

If you set goals without others’ input you might leave out something that is important to someone else, and lose their support.

- **Survey park users and neighbors to determine what they want.**

A survey can be done through email or by phone or paper. It can be a few or even a dozen questions. Consider using a program such as www.surveymonkey.com to build and analyze your web-based survey.

- **Be Realistic.**

You cannot completely renovate your playground next week, but you can host a cleanup. Start small and build, so people do not get frustrated and burn out.

- **Be Specific.**

If you clearly define your mission it will be easier to convince others to help you because they will know what your group does and how they can help. Think about how your neighbors can help with one-time volunteer commitments, donations, and roles for ongoing engagement on a committee, fundraising, or hosting park programming.

Make your short-range goals simple and easily achievable (your long-range goals can be more complicated). For example, the first step to taking your park back from crime may be painting over graffiti and meeting your police officers, while it will take more time and effort to form a citizens’ patrol. The lists below are divided into goals for your park and goals for your group. Remember that you are not just helping your park you are growing a community group. As your group gains experience and sophistication, your effectiveness will grow too.

✓ ***Short-Range Goals – Examples for the Park***

- Removing trash and graffiti
- Planting flowers
- Hosting a concert or other event
- Removing invasive species from a natural area

✓ ***Short-Range Goals – Examples for the Group***

- Meeting with the park supervisor and district maintenance supervisor
- Holding regular well-attended meetings

- Creating a membership contact list
 - Introducing your group to elected officials, civic associations, schools, and churches
 - Becoming a member of the neighborhood planning unit (NPU) committee that deals with parks
- ✓ ***Mid-Range Goals – Examples for the Park***
- Hosting regular clean ups
 - Buying tools and supplies
 - Buying and planting shrubs and trees
 - Regularly weeding and watering planting areas
 - Conducting regular birding tours
 - Increasing police presence
 - Hosting a festival, sports tournament, or other larger event
- ✓ ***Mid-Range Goals – Examples for the Group***
- Expanding your membership
 - Sending out a mailing
 - Holding elections
 - Developing strong working relationships with parks, the police, elected officials, merchants, other civic associations, schools, churches, etc.
 - Writing your by-laws
 - Opening a bank account or becoming A Park Pride fiscal partner
 - Receiving a small grant
 - Soliciting contributions from local neighborhood businesses
 - Getting publicity in local media
- ✓ ***Long-Range Goals – Examples for the Park***
- Attracting regular programming by local or citywide organizations
 - Hosting a youth summer program
 - Hosting regular environmental education/restoration projects
 - Creating a citizens safety patrol
 - Raising money for a major renovation or redesign
- ✓ ***Long-Range Goals – Examples for the Group***
- Hosting a small fundraising event
 - Recruiting a board of directors
 - Building long-term relationships with funders and supporters
 - Getting 501(c)3 tax-exempt status (not needed for Park Pride fiscal partners)
 - Compiling an archive of your accomplishments (photographs, newspaper articles, newsletters and flyers, etc.)
 - Linking with other groups in your neighborhood to work together on larger projects

Delegating Responsibility

An effective park group cannot be just one person, but a democratic group that allows for many voices and talents, yet many groups struggle to grow their membership beyond a core group of a few dedicated volunteers. How can you avoid this? Delegating tasks to different group members lets them develop a sense of responsibility and ownership and takes the load off the core group and also builds leadership skills within the membership, cultivating that future president or treasurer.

- **Tips for Effective Delegating**

- ✓ ***Generate tasks collectively.*** People have more ownership of tasks they help identify. Before taking on a new project, brainstorm with the group the list of things that need to be done. Then, have people volunteer for tasks.
- ✓ ***Break down tasks into concrete, manageable parts.*** Be realistic about deadlines and time commitments. Say, "This will require at least two evenings a week," not "this shouldn't take much time."
- ✓ ***Delegate tasks to people who are able to do them.*** As you get to know members, you will identify their skills. Do not put people into a situation in which they are likely to fail.
- ✓ ***Be realistic about what people are able to do.*** No task is too small!
- ✓ ***Use a positive approach when seeking help.*** "I want you for this job; you have the skills we need to..." instead of, "I don't suppose you'd be interested..."
- ✓ Once you have delegated a job, ***be available for help or questions but do not interfere***—let people do things differently than you might.
- ✓ ***Praise people's efforts in public;*** offer constructive criticisms in private.
- ✓ ***Be open to criticism;*** do not get defensive when your leadership is challenged or criticized

Recruiting and Engaging Members

Attending an event or a meeting does not guarantee that someone will be drawn into your group. Keeping members engaged is challenging but necessary.

Talk to people

Speak to members of your group and others in the community about their interests and hopes

for the park. Personal connection makes people more likely to stay involved and engage in projects that match their interests.

Create a newsletter*

A newsletter is a good way to remind people of your presence and what you do. The more people who receive news of your activities and goals the more who will be aware and supportive of you. If you do not have time create a newsletter, write an article about your group and ask a related group to publish it in their newsletter. A school or community newsletter is a good place to start.

Attend other organizations' meetings

By attending other group's meetings, you can not only share good ideas, but also invite new people to be part of what your group is doing.

Meet regularly

Set the date of your next meeting at the end of the previous one, so people have advance notice of the meeting. Your group might decide to hold meetings at the same time every month, so people can plan months in advance

Make your meetings and group events fun

Adding a social aspect to your events, making them about more than park clean-ups brings more people into the group. Remember that your group is about community-building as much as about taking care of the park. End meetings on a positive note that inspires members.

Stage small events

Large event planning may take months. You can use that time to generate activity by planning some easy events with your active members.

Stay in Touch

Using email and social media is an easy way to keep the members of your group involved and connected. Even if you put up flyers and send emails, the best way to get people to do something is to call them and get a commitment. Update your distribution list regularly.

Publishing a Newsletter*

A newsletter (printed or electronic) benefits your park by raising awareness. It makes people aware of your plans and activities and gives your group—and park—presence in people's minds. A newsletter describing your activities makes you a recognized entity to community members, politicians, and potential donors. A newsletter helps you:

- ❖ find new members
- ❖ publicize activities
- ❖ reach a wider audience
- ❖ create ties to local businesses

❖ gain neighborhood recognition for your group

- **Ideas for Items**

- ✓ Stories about park activities, gardening, and neighborhood news
- ✓ Promoting your next meeting, event or clean-up
- ✓ Membership/Donation information—let people know how they can join and that you need donations to improve the park.
- ✓ A list of your group’s officers with contact information
- ✓ Relevant contact information for your Park Supervisor, the local police precinct, etc.
- ✓ Advice column—have a member who knows about gardening or dogs, for example, give advice about their area of expertise.
- ✓ A history of your park
- ✓ Information of interest to young people

- **Share the Work**

Form a newsletter committee; have each member choose the job he or she wants to do. Invite guest columnists to write about relevant issues (dog care, gardening). Excerpt (with permission) parks-related articles from local newspapers.

- **Paying for it**

To fund a printed newsletter, ask local businesses to donate in exchange for advertisements. Businesses will often support community newsletters if they get something in return.

- **Distribution**

Well-distributed newsletters help you reach people and let them know what you are doing

- ✓ Print copies of your newsletter and leave stacks in local businesses.
- ✓ Post them on neighborhood bulletin boards.
- ✓ Email newsletters to members and encourage them to forward
- ✓ Include contact information so people can reach you if they want to get involved.

Getting People Involved/Recruiting Volunteers and Members

Method	Benefits	Challenges/Considerations
Bulletin Boards	Can be installed at park for high visibility	Cost/effort to install, maintain
Email	Free Easy way to reach many	Need to create/maintain list
Social media (e.g., Facebook)	Free Easy way to reach many	Expectation that content will be updated frequently Volunteer to commit to posting
News media	Free Reaches many	Need to write compelling article and contact the right media at right time

		Need to create and maintain contacts
Posters/fliers	Easy to produce	Effort required to effectively distribute
Neighborhood newsletters/newspapers	Free publicity	Need to provide timely, relevant content Publication schedule may not coincide you're your desired message
Website	Ability to reach large numbers of people	Driving traffic to website Updating information Requires dedicated volunteer
Newsletter/brochures	Communicates lots of information in a tangible format	Requires relevant, timely content Requires dedicated volunteers with talent to create