

Atlanta Department of Parks & Recreation Assessment

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Executive Summary:

Atlanta, Georgia is a strong and vibrant city. For decades, the city and surrounding region have seen economic growth that is the envy of many other U. S. cities. An expanded park system exists thanks to the efforts of the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation (Atlanta DPR), political leaders, park advocates and philanthropic foundations. After periods of disinvestment in the 1970s through the 1990s, Atlanta added 40 percent more parkland and has grown the budget by 46 percent (with some peaks and valleys) in the last 17 years. Atlanta also added another 50,000 residents, not to mention increased numbers of daily commuters as well as annual visitors to the city.

Based on our benchmarking of the park system compared to eight other U. S. cities, Atlanta has 11.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, while the median for all benchmarked cities is 13.3 acres per 1,000 residents. Atlanta DPR spends \$109 per resident,¹ ranking it sixth out of nine, while the median for all benchmarked cities is \$113 per resident. While 71 percent of Atlanta residents have a 10-minute walk to a park, Atlanta ranks 6th out of the nine benchmarked cities, with the top five having between 90 and 98 percent of their residents within a ten-minute walk.

And yet, nonprofit partners, philanthropic organizations and Atlanta DPR continue to make great strides. Atlanta has seen new and innovative parks and trails constructed and opened in the past 17 years. When factoring in the most recent year's private investment, Atlanta's spending grows to \$146 per resident, which moves it only to fifth place among the nine benchmarked cities, but \$146 is also the median for all cities. However, Atlanta using private philanthropy to drive new park construction and existing park improvement is the exception to the rule based on our research. Private investment won't last forever. Atlanta DPR still needs increased public sources of funds for land acquisition, park construction, operations, maintenance, and programming.

More parks are soon to open, serving the traditionally underserved neighborhoods in Atlanta. With more parks come more people and a host of maintenance, programming and operations responsibilities. 36 new residents arrive in Atlanta every day. To put it simply, getting the Atlanta DPR budget to the median spending level of \$113 per resident requires another **\$1.9 million** a year, which would tie Austin's park spending. Getting to 3rd place Philadelphia requires another **\$14.8 million** a year. Getting to second place Chicago, **\$25.7 million** a year. Getting to first place Minneapolis, **\$113.6 million** a year.

This is not an impossible task by any means.

In fact, there are a wide range of actions available to Atlanta. Based on our analysis of the Atlanta Park system, benchmarking it against eight U. S. cities, and looking at the range of options available, we

¹ - Numbers include all public spending including land acquisition and capital spending, per our benchmarking analysis.

recommend a series of actions in three categories: (1) **Funding**, (2) **Collaboration in advocacy and citizen action**, and (3) **Collaboration in programming, operations and management**. While the recommended actions listed here are not organized in any particular order, we recommend that the Atlanta parks community pursue as many of these actions as possible. Doing so will help ensure that the Atlanta park system continues to grow and is increasingly able to meet the needs of Atlanta’s growing population through land acquisition, increasing desired amenities in parks, and providing for long-term maintenance and operations of healthy and well-managed parks. Here are the specifics:

1. Grow the Public **Funding** Base
 - a. **Funding: Increase the Atlanta DPR operating budget** beyond its 1.9 percent of the total city budget. For example, Atlanta would have to increase the DPR operating budget by 27 percent to match current Philadelphia parks spending, or 5 percent to match the current Austin park spending.
 - b. **Funding: Revise the park impact fee ordinance.** A city sponsored committee is hard at work reviewing and revising the ordinance which provides funds for park land acquisition while new housing is built, but the rates have not been adjusted since 1993. The fees should rise to ensure that land can be purchased, and parks can be built in a timely manner.
 - c. **Funding: Create a parks authority.** There are three in Georgia, as well as Minneapolis and Chicago. They allow the parks system to fund and govern itself, reporting to a board of directors. This effort requires city-wide advocacy and support of local elected officials as well local legislation passed by the Georgia legislature. You can learn more about park authorities in our recommendations section of this report (pages 37-40).
 - d. **Funding: Revise earned income practices.** In the last decade, public and nonprofit parks agencies in cities across the U.S. have revolutionized food, drink and sports equipment vending in parks. However, most city park systems continue with a low-bid, multi-year contract vending approach. A revised practice can yield increased revenue, new opportunities for local businesses and improved programming for park users.
 - e. **Funding: Revise facility rental and special events revenue practices.** Fees from rentals and usage are a park system’s bread and butter. More park agencies are keeping fees and re-investing those funds directly into parks, versus contributing them to the city’s general fund. Atlanta DPR has a great start, and it can be expanded.
 - f. **Funding: Leverage dollars from other public sources**, including local agencies like Watershed Management, Transportation and Invest Atlanta, as well as federal and state funding.
2. Grow **collaboration** in advocacy and citizen action to support the park system.
 - a. **Collaboration: Strong city-wide parks advocacy** is the key to better funded parks. There’s over a dozen parks nonprofit and many more “friends of parks” groups, assisted by Park Pride. Getting more funding will require unified voices, agreement upon goals and strong leadership. A solid base already exists in Atlanta, it just needs to grow.
 - b. **Collaboration: Continue to expand the park volunteer and friends of parks programs**, adding additional Park Pride staff to manage and grow the program. While volunteers

are not a substitute for well-trained and well-paid staff, they can help your parks look great, build community and instill increased pride and ownership in Atlanta's public parks.

3. Grow **collaboration** in programming, operations and management of parks and recreation sites.
 - a. **Collaboration: Integrate all Atlanta schoolyards into the parks and recreation system**, as demonstrated in the current pilot project. Atlanta DPR, Park Pride, Urban Land Institute, Atlanta Public Schools, The Trust for Public Land and numerous community members and volunteers are piloting an approach that has worked well in other cities. It needs public support and a lot more public funding.
 - b. **Collaboration: Pursue integrated approaches for sharing operations and maintenance duties**. Integrated staffing started at Central Park in the late 1970s and has spread to many other public-private park partnerships. It is very effective and plays to both organization and individual strengths. An integrated approach has been in place at Piedmont Park for many years. It should be improved upon and perhaps expanded to other conservancies. One recommendation would be a pilot approach to jointly fund a single position for an initial 3-year period to start up work in the new Westside Park.
 - c. **Collaboration: Zone management strategy for maintenance and operations in parks**, combining volunteers, public agency staff as well as parks nonprofit staff working together. Zone management is actually over a century old, begun in New York at Central Park and it emerged again in the 1990s and has spread to other city parks. It is also a great way to integrate dedicated volunteers.

The balance of this report gives you more of the story, including an introduction to the Atlanta park system, the benchmarking study of eight other city park systems compared to Atlanta, a primer of funding both public and nonprofit park agencies and expanded details on our set of recommendations. This is a tremendous opportunity for Atlanta parks to be counted amongst the top park systems in the United States.

Introduction:

The City of Atlanta continues to see sustained economic growth, adding thousands of new residents annually. While in the past decade, the Atlanta parks system has grown in park acreage, park amenities and park access (percentage of residents within a 10-minute walk), the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is increasingly challenged in keeping up with growing demand brought by more people enjoying their parks more frequently. The purpose of this report is to compare Atlanta to cities facing similar issues and challenges and provide a series of recommendations for Atlanta DPR to pursue to provide a broader array of funding mechanisms for acquisition, development, operations, maintenance and programming for a city that continues to grow and densify.

Through a series of prior commission studies and reports in the early 2000s, Atlanta identified the needs for more park land as well as enhanced amenities and ongoing maintenance and operations. While the great recession of 2007-2008 presented a tremendous obstacle in realizing many of those goals, Atlanta has made tremendous strides, thanks in part to periodic increases in public funding for parks, bond funding for capital projects (such as RENEW Bond funding), and public funding for watershed improvements and maintenance in parks from the city's watershed department, as well as strong support of active park nonprofit and generous local philanthropy partners. Overall, there's a demonstrated history of some funding from public sources (parks, watershed, transportation and infrastructure) as well as nonprofit partners through a host of philanthropic foundations based in Atlanta.

For example, while Atlanta had 3,147 acres of parkland in 2002, the system has 5,285 acres in 2019. In 2002, the department budget was \$22.7 Million, in fiscal 2020, the authorized budget is \$41.8 Million. In 2002, 3.7 percent of Atlanta was parkland, in 2019, 6 percent of the city is parkland.

But, in 2002, Atlanta had 423,984 residents. In 2019, Atlanta had 477,371 residents, with 36 new residents arriving every day. Many more people commute from outlying cities and towns for work. Further, the entire ten county Atlanta region continues to grow steadily.

A combination of parks nonprofit, including Park Pride, The Piedmont Park Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, The Conservation Fund and the Atlanta Beltline Partnership, work with Atlanta DPR to raise funds to acquire new parkland, construct new park facilities and improve existing parks. Atlanta DPR, largely through proceeds from general revenue bonds and ballot measures, such as the RENEW bonds approved by voters in the past decade, as well as funds from Atlanta Watershed Management, continues its efforts to design, build and open capital projects, with a focus on replacing and upgrading facilities across the city.

Given its continued population growth, Atlanta's challenges in operating and maintaining its park system are not unique. Other U. S. cities are seeing rapid growth, increased population and increased density. Austin, Dallas, Denver, Houston and Nashville are facing similar challenges and developing both similar and different approaches to addressing them.

For several decades, Atlanta’s philanthropic community has made significant investments in Atlanta’s park system – and the City’s maintenance of these investments has been an ongoing concern. For its part, The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation has provided consistent, large grants to support the City of Atlanta’s park system - including a recent grant of \$17 million to help build the City’s largest park, Westside Park (which has received other substantial philanthropic funding). Given this significant, longstanding investment, The Blank Family Foundation has asked The Trust for Public Land to research and analyze the Atlanta DPR funding, focusing on addressing the following issues:

- Analyze the state of the parks and recreation system, benchmarking it against comparable and aspirational city park systems.
- Make a specific set of recommendations to be considered as new planning efforts are initiated (including a system-wide comprehensive plan for parks and recreation) and new parks (namely, Westside Park) are developed.
- Review funding sources and opportunities for both public and nonprofit parks agencies across the United States.
- Review methods to increase the budget for parkland acquisition as well as parkland development. While Atlanta DPR does have access to some public park bonds, a small outlay of property tax, some public forestry funds, and an impact fee ordinance last updated in 1993, these funds are still inadequate for helping keep pace with the needs of a growing city like Atlanta.
- Review methods to increase operation and maintenance funds that the Atlanta Parks and Recreation system needs and will need more of as the system grows in acreage, amenities and usage.
- Discuss the pros and cons of different funding mechanisms to be considered.

To address each of these deliverables, The Trust for Public Land drew upon staff with experience in analyzing and evaluating city parks systems from its Research and Innovation team. The team is responsible for the annual City Park Facts and ParkScore Indexes, which provide comparable data as well as rank the park systems of the 100 largest U. S. cities on an annual basis. They have also completed a number of “fee-for-service” projects on city parks, including challenges and opportunities. Recent work includes park system analysis and funding opportunities for Dallas, Texas, a healthy parks initiative for three counties in central Texas, specific analysis for four park projects for AARP and analysis of parks and open space in Northern Maine.

Our thanks to the following for making this report possible:

- Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation Commissioner John Dargle.
- The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation: Suganthi Simon, Senior Program Officer, Westside.
- Park Pride: Michael Halicki, Executive Director.
- The Trust for Public Land, Georgia State Office: George Dusenbury, Regional Director.
- Our interviewees: Mark Banta (Piedmont Park Conservancy), Jennie Blake (Cox Foundations), Rob Brawner (Atlanta BeltLine Partnership), Matt Bronfman (CEO, Jamestown), Chas Cannon (County Administrator, Colquitt County), Chas Cannon (Atlanta DPR), Steve Card (Georgia Recreation and Park Association Inc), Linda DiSantis (former city attorney), Elise Eplan (The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation), Frank Fernandez (The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation), Stacy Funderburke (The Conservation Fund), Larry Hanson (Georgia Municipal Association), Meghan Injaychock (Atlanta Beltline, Inc.), Erik Johnson (Robert W. Woodruff Foundation), Al Kelley (Bainbridge Decatur County Recreation Authority), Dr. Eloisa Klementich (Invest Atlanta),

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Benchmarking the Atlanta Department of Parks & Recreation

A key factor in determining how well Atlanta DPR is doing in providing park services is to compare the department to the performance of other municipalities. While national averages are sometimes used to draw comparisons, it can be more instructive to make comparisons to cities that have been specifically selected based on certain criteria. For this exercise, eight cities were selected and agreed upon by Atlanta DPR officials and The Trust for Public Land staff. These cities were selected based on characteristics such as population, size, density, and governance type. In addition, the list was also designed to include “aspirational” cities known for their excellent park systems which can serve as a model for Atlanta. These include Washington, D.C. and Minneapolis, both of which rank highly in The Trust for Public Land’s ParkScore® Index. All park system and expenditure information are collected annually by the Trust for Public Land and comes directly from the park agencies.

The comparison cities that we benchmarked are:

- Austin, TX
- Chicago, IL
- Denver, CO
- Houston, TX
- Minneapolis, MN
- Nashville, TN
- Philadelphia, PA
- Washington, D.C.

In the following pages, specific metrics on park system characteristics such as acreage and size of parks are compared across these cities to set the context for the Atlanta Parks and Recreation system. Financial metrics are then compared, namely operating and capital expenditures by the park department and spending by local parks nonprofits. This analysis aims to provide a direct comparison of peer municipalities in order to understand more about both the successes and needs of the Atlanta Parks and Recreation Department and the park system it manages.

Summary of findings from the benchmarking study:

- Atlanta is **less population dense** than most of the benchmarked cities.
- Atlanta has 11.1 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, less than five benchmarking cities and above three. This is also slightly **lower than the overall national median of 13.3 acres per 1,000 residents²**.

² <https://www.tpl.org/2019-city-park-facts>

- With 71% of residents within a 10-minute walk, **Atlanta has better park access than three of the comparison cities but falls below five**, all of which have more than 90% of their population living within a 10-minute walk to a park.
- **Atlanta is consistently in the mid- to low range in all spending** types among comparison cities, despite increases in public budgets in recent years as well as philanthropic investment.
- The city’s operating spending for fiscal year 2018 is low, but in looking at a five-year average Atlanta’s operational spending falls behind only three cities and ahead of five.
- Five-year trends for both total spending and operating spending show that **FY 2018 spending is at or below average for Atlanta**.
- **nonprofit (philanthropic) investment makes up more than one-third of all spending** on parks and recreation in Atlanta, more than all comparison cities, with Houston spending more money, but at a lower percentage (29 percent).

Park System

Tables 1 through 6 provide information on the City of Atlanta, the comparison cities, and their park systems. These metrics are useful to keep in mind when considering the spending information provided in tables 7 through 18. While park usage cannot be accurately measured without directly counting users and activity levels within parks, factors such as population, density, and population per acre can suggest the amount of potential use a park system may get.

Table 1. Population and density

City	Population	Population density, people per acre
Chicago	2,768,416	19.0
Philadelphia	1,591,765	18.5
Washington, D.C.	688,642	17.6
Minneapolis	419,897	12.2
Denver	714,708	7.3
Houston	2,358,708	6.1
Atlanta	477,371	5.6
Austin	969,733	5.1
Nashville	684,946	2.3

Table 2. Parkland per 1,000 residents

City	Acres of parkland	Parkland acres per 1,000 residents
Nashville	33,997	49.6
Austin	17,568	18.1
Houston	40,727	17.3
Minneapolis	5,072	12.1
Washington, D.C.	8,232	12.0
Atlanta	5,285	11.1
Denver	6,242	8.7
Philadelphia	11,034	6.9
Chicago	13,563	4.9

Table 3. 10-minute walk access to parks

City	Percent of the population living within a 10-minute walk to a park
Chicago	98%
Washington, D.C.	98%
Minneapolis	96%
Philadelphia	95%
Denver	90%
Atlanta	71%
Austin	59%
Houston	58%
Nashville	42%

Table 4. 2019 ParkScore® Index, rank and score

City	Score	Rank
Washington, D.C.	83.8	1 st
Minneapolis	83.2	3 rd
Chicago	75.4	10 th
Philadelphia	66.7	19 th
Denver	60.9	29 th
Atlanta	53	42nd
Austin	52.8	43 rd
Nashville	45.1	59 th
Houston	35.5	85 th

Table 4 lists the rank and score for each city according to the Trust for Public Land’s 2019 ParkScore® Index³. ParkScore analyzes four key aspects of a city park system: park acreage, access to parks, investment in parks, and recreational amenities. A score is provided out of 100, and cities are ranked according to these points. While ParkScore analyzes park systems as a whole and does not have a specific metric for park quality, a high score indicates a high-quality park system. This provides additional useful context for this benchmarking study, as the highest scoring cities (Washington D.C., Minneapolis, and Chicago) are also shown later in this study to be among the highest spenders.

Table 5: Atlanta ParkScore total point and rank data, 2012-2019

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Points	42.5	45	44	47.5	51	51	53.2	53

³ <https://www.tpl.org/parkscore>

Rank	26 / 40	31 / 50	42 / 60	48 / 75	51 / 100	50 / 100	43 / 100	42 / 100
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Just as important is to look at Atlanta’s results in all eight years of the ParkScore Index in Table 5. While Atlanta’s rank has slipped as the number of cities grew from 25 in 2012 to 100 in 2016, the total points awarded to Atlanta has steadily climbed from 42.5 to 53. Further, when measured against all 100 cities beginning in 2016, Atlanta has climbed in rank from 51 to 42.

Table 6 breaks out how much of the park agency’s land is designed for heavier active use compared to more natural or passive acreage. Designed parkland includes parks that are more landscaped or designed for active use, such as play areas and athletic fields, and heavily manicured green spaces. Natural parkland, by comparison, includes acreage that is less heavily managed and may be left in a primarily natural state, such as preserves. Designed acreage costs much more to maintain due to high levels of use and more elements requiring care. The numbers in Table 3 should be kept in mind when considering the expenditure information included later on in the report.

Table 6. Percent of agency acres that are designed or active

City	Designed or active park acreage	Natural or passive acreage	Percent of total park acreage that is designed or active
Minneapolis	4,536	536	89%
Washington, D.C.	806	127	86%
Chicago	6,886	1,947	78%
Atlanta	3,836	1,264	75%
Denver	4,597	1,645	74%
Austin	10,572	6,266	63%
Houston	11,023	9,727	53%
Philadelphia	5,131	5,344	49%
Nashville	5,461	9,714	36%

Table 7 shows how much parkland in each city is managed by the primary city agency compared to the entire system. This is important context because this benchmarking analysis examines only the park acreage and spending of the city park department, and in a few cases that reflects only a portion of the park system. For example, In Washington, D.C. the system is almost entirely managed by the National Park Service. Nashville and Houston benefit from state park units that manage significant amounts of land inside city limits.

Table 7. Park acreage managed by the primary city parks agency.

City	Park acres managed by city agency	Percent of park system total
Minneapolis	5,072	100%
Denver	6,242	100%
Austin	16,838	96%
Atlanta	5,100	96%
Philadelphia	10,475	95%
Chicago	8,833	65%
Houston	20,750	51%
Nashville	15,175	45%
Washington D.C.	933	11%

Park System Spending

This section details park and recreation related expenditures by the main park agencies in each city. It reflects actual expenditures, not budgeted amounts, for the fiscal year indicated (in most cases FY 2018). It also reflects only parks and recreation related spending and does not reflect spending on attractions such as zoos or stadiums for which many parks departments are also responsible.

It is worth noting that Minneapolis and Chicago are consistently the top spenders in this study. The parks systems of these cities are funded by separate park districts, allowing the agencies to utilize a combination of property taxes, issues bonds, charge user fees and pursue earned income in support of parks and recreation.

Table 8 shows total spending (both operating and capital dollars) spent by the city in FY 2018. It also lists the amount spent per resident, which is a useful way to look at expenditures as it reflects the potential number of users (in number of residents) that a park system could have. Atlanta spent \$109 per resident in FY 2018, placing it towards the bottom of the comparison cities although ahead of Denver, Nashville, and Houston in per resident spending. Atlanta spends less than a third of what Minneapolis does.

Table 8. Total spending for fiscal year 2018, per resident

City	Total city agency spending	Spending per resident
Minneapolis	\$145,690,546	\$347
Chicago	\$450,879,903	\$163
Philadelphia	\$239,415,153	\$150
Washington, D.C.	\$88,746,987	\$129
Austin	\$109,138,976	\$113
Atlanta	\$51,888,266	\$109
Denver	\$74,391,447	\$104
Nashville	\$64,296,362	\$94
Houston	\$124,493,948	\$53

Table 9 again shows total agency spending for FY 18, but this time broken out by spending per acre. It should be noted that spending per acre figures can be a suggestion of the dollars going into park maintenance and improvement, but in reality, these dollars can end up being concentrated in the most high-profile parks. Different types of parks (i.e. regional parks, pocket parks, parks with athletic fields and heavy active use) can require varying amounts of investment as well.

Atlanta again ranks above three of the benchmarked cities and below five. Washington D.C. is a major outlier in the per acre metrics because Department of Parks and Recreation manages a fairly small amount of parkland (933 acres). This is only 11 percent of the city's parkland with the rest being managed by the National Park Service. Chicago and Minneapolis are again high spenders.

Table 9. Total spending for FY 2018, per acre

City	Total city agency spending	Spending per park acre
Washington, D.C.	\$88,746,987	\$95,120
Chicago	\$450,879,903	\$51,045

Minneapolis	\$145,690,546	\$28,724
Philadelphia	\$239,415,153	\$22,856
Denver	\$74,391,447	\$11,918
Atlanta	\$51,888,266	\$10,174
Austin	\$109,138,976	\$6,482
Houston	\$124,493,948	\$6,000
Nashville	\$64,296,362	\$4,237

Table 10 shows only operational spending by the city park agency for the most recent fiscal year, per resident. Operational spending includes all spending for operations and maintenance of parkland, including administrative spending like salaries, as well as programming-related expenditures. This includes recreation spending as well as any operational dollars spent on events and other programming. Operational spending can be a good indicator of the general maintenance standards of a park system, as it encapsulates routine care such as mowing, trash removal, and landscaping. Atlanta’s operational spending per resident is in the lower range of this comparison, below five cities and above three. Minneapolis and Chicago are again the highest spending comparison cities.

Table 10. Operating spending FY 2018, per resident

City	City agency operating spending	Spending per resident
Minneapolis	\$93,749,110	\$223
Chicago	\$381,827,000	\$138
Austin	\$93,087,932	\$96
Denver	\$62,877,981	\$88
Washington, D.C.	\$56,951,255	\$83
Atlanta	\$39,344,421	\$82
Philadelphia	\$61,160,153	\$38
Houston	\$65,437,789	\$28
Nashville	\$18,385,911	\$27

Table 11 again shows FY 2018 operational spending, but this time broken out by acre. Atlanta falls in the middle of the comparison cities here, though spends less than half of what each of the top three spending cities invest per acre.

Table 11. Operating spending for FY 2018, per acre

City	City agency operating spending	Spending per acre
Washington, D.C.	\$56,951,255	\$61,041
Chicago	\$381,827,000	\$43,227
Minneapolis	\$92,776,055	\$18,292
Denver	\$62,877,981	\$10,073
Atlanta	\$39,344,421	\$7,715
Philadelphia	\$61,160,153	\$5,839
Austin	\$93,087,932	\$5,528
Houston	\$65,437,789	\$3,154
Nashville	\$18,385,911	\$1,212

Table 12 lists capital spending for the most recently completed fiscal year. These dollars include both land acquisition and capital improvement projects.⁴ Philadelphia is the highest spender in this regard due to the current Rebuild Philadelphia Initiative⁵. Atlanta falls in the middle of the comparison cities, below four and above four, though their capital spending is significantly lower than the top cities.

Table 12. Capital spending FY 2018 per resident

City	City agency capital spending	Spending per resident
Philadelphia	\$178,255,000	\$112
Minneapolis	\$46,200,967	\$110
Nashville	\$45,910,451	\$67
Washington, D.C.	\$31,795,732	\$46
Atlanta	\$12,543,845	\$26
Chicago	\$69,052,903	\$25
Houston	\$59,056,159	\$25
Austin	\$16,051,044	\$17
Denver	\$11,513,466	\$16

Table 13 shows capital spending for the most recent fiscal year per acre. Philadelphia’s Rebuild spending is again reflected, with D.C., Minneapolis, and Chicago appearing as typically high spenders again as well. Atlanta is low in comparison, spending more per acre in capital investment than only Denver and Austin.

Table 13. Capital spending for FY 2018 per acre

City	City agency capital spending	Spending per acre
Washington, D.C.	\$31,795,732	\$34,079
Philadelphia	\$178,255,000	\$17,017
Minneapolis	\$52,914,491	\$10,433
Chicago	\$69,052,903	\$7,818
Nashville	\$45,910,451	\$3,025
Houston	\$59,056,159	\$2,846
Atlanta	\$12,543,845	\$2,460
Denver	\$11,513,466	\$1,845
Austin	\$16,051,044	\$953

Table 14 places the spending information in historic context, showing total spending (operating and capital dollars combined) over the past five fiscal years. Population growth is an important factor for cities and parks departments to consider; parks and recreation related spending should ideally keep up with population growth in order to continue providing a certain level of service.

Atlanta has spent a median of \$109 per resident over the past five years. This is mid-range: above three cities and below five others. It is less than half of what Minneapolis’s five-year median spending is.

⁴ - The Trust for Public Land collects a combined number for land acquisition and capital construction in our annual surveys. We sadly, cannot break out the two for our benchmarked cities.

⁵ - Rebuild is funded through a combination of soda tax revenues and private philanthropy and represents a unique public-private partnership: <https://www.phila.gov/programs/rebuild/>

While Atlanta’s FY 2018 spending is an increase over FY 2017, FY 2018 spending is only average for the city and is lower than some prior years.

Table 14. Total city agency spending (operating & capital spending) per resident over the past five years

	FY 18	FY 17	FY 16	FY 15	FY 14	Median
Minneapolis	\$347	\$266	\$240	\$228	\$230	\$240
Chicago	\$163	\$164	\$170	\$169	\$172	\$169
DC	\$129	\$152	\$154	\$157	\$160	\$154
Denver	\$104	\$120	\$116	\$125	\$104	\$116
Austin	\$113	\$115	\$101	\$93	\$110	\$110
Atlanta	\$109	\$88	\$118	\$135	\$97	\$109
Nashville	\$94	\$79	\$108	\$100	\$98	\$98
Philadelphia	\$150	\$121	\$37	\$42	\$50	\$50
Houston	\$53	\$34	\$31	\$36	\$34	\$34

Table 15 again shows five-year trend, in this case for operational dollars. Atlanta moves up slightly in the comparison when looking at just operational spending, falling below four cities and above four others. Atlanta shows an upward trend – adding \$5 dollars per resident over the past five years in operational spending and \$12 in total spending. However, FY 2018 spending is just at the five-year median for Atlanta and is lower than expenditures in FY 2016 and FY 2015.

Table 15. City agency operating spending per resident for the past five years

	FY 18	FY 17	FY 16	FY 15	FY 14	Median
Minneapolis	\$221	\$207	\$190	\$191	\$177	\$191
Chicago	\$138	\$141	\$137	\$131	\$129	\$137
Denver	\$88	\$94	\$90	\$94	\$86	\$90
DC	\$83	\$98	\$85	\$84	\$78	\$84
Atlanta	\$82	\$75	\$106	\$107	\$77	\$82
Austin	\$96	\$98	\$77	\$67	\$64	\$77
Nashville	\$27	\$56	\$51	\$50	\$47	\$50
Philadelphia	\$38	\$31	\$37	\$42	\$39	\$38
Houston	\$28	\$22	\$28	\$29	\$29	\$28

Table 16 shows the percentage of all parks and recreation related spending within each city that is provided by nonprofit organizations. Note that in this table, total park spending includes agencies other than the city park agency, though the rest of this study examines only the city park agency financials. The nonprofit groups that are contributing to the \$30 million in nonprofit spending reported in Table 17.

Notably, the highest spending cities, Chicago and Minneapolis, have the lowest percentage of private dollars supporting the park system, they are also primarily funded through park districts.⁶ Conversely,

⁶ - For the purposes of this report, park districts in Seattle, Minneapolis and Chicago and park authorities in the state of Georgia are functionally the same. Both types of funding districts are defined and explained later in this report.

low-spending Houston is heavily supported by private dollars. A flourishing park system is typically well-supported by both public dollars and nonprofit groups, but public funding should provide the majority of the investment for all spending categories including acquisition, capital improvements, operations, maintenance and programming. nonprofit park organizations and philanthropic partners are critically important: they foster a sense of ownership and pride in the park system and thereby create strong advocates for increasing public funding. They are not a substitute for continued and robust public realm support. While Atlanta’s generous philanthropic scene provides a large portion of the 37 percent of private funding, this isn’t a sustainable, long-term model for Atlanta.

Table 16. Nonprofit park agency spending

City	Total nonprofit spending ⁷	Nonprofit spending as percent of total park spending*
Houston	\$63,427,753	29%
Atlanta ⁸	\$30,105,371	37%
Washington, D.C.	\$25,518,780	15%
Philadelphia	\$34,135,144	12%
Austin	\$10,510,879	9%
Minneapolis	\$8,382,867	5%
Chicago	\$14,108,609	3%
Denver	\$1,612,358	2%
Nashville	\$1,544,261	2%

Table 17. Atlanta parks nonprofits⁹ (continues on next page)

Organization	Expenditure, most recent fiscal year
Ansley Park Beautification Foundation	\$174,283
Atlanta Beltline Partnership	\$8,078,135
Atlanta Memorial Park Conservancy	\$178,580
Candler Park Conservancy	Not reported
Chastain Park Conservancy	\$2,472,618
Conservation Fund (Atlanta Work)	\$2,374,164 ¹⁰
Freedom Park Conservancy	\$70,000
Grant Park Conservancy	\$141,375
Historic Fourth Ward Park Conservancy	\$20,000
Historic Oakland Foundation	\$1,129,948
Olmsted Linear Park Alliance	\$258,118

⁷ - *As reported to the Trust for Public Land or collected from the most recently filed Form 990.

*Includes spending by all parks and recreation agencies in the city, not just the city parks department.

⁸ - This is an adjusted amount including TPL, Conservation Fund and Trees for Atlanta totals. Trees for Atlanta includes spending on public rights of way and on private property in underserved neighborhoods. Excluding Trees for Atlanta, the total amount would drop to \$25.6 million. Previously reported numbers for Atlanta (ParkScore 2019) was \$17,587,624 or 25 percent of total park spending.

⁹ - Candler Park Conservancy is due to launch a capital campaign in 2020, a parks conservancy for Westside Park is expected to be formed in 2020 as well.

¹⁰ - In 2019, the Conservation Fund spent \$1,067,588 in their Parks with Purpose Program (Working with Park Pride on Kathryn Johnston Memorial Park) and \$5,637,376 to acquire 215 acres of high priority forest, with \$4,330,800 coming from the city’s Tree Trust Fund. So, excluding city funds, they spent \$2,374,164 in 2019 in Atlanta Parks.

Park Pride	\$2,630,000
Piedmont Park Conservancy	\$2,860,715
The Trust for Public Land	\$6,147,435 ¹¹
Trees Atlanta	\$3.57 million ¹²

An important note on Table 17 is that this spending reflects the most recent year of funding, and it reflects several extraordinary sums for specific projects (such as The Trust for Public Land and the Conservation Fund). Further, the amounts from Trees Atlanta reflect work done outside of parks.

Tables 18 and 19 indicate that even with the significant contributions by the parks and recreation nonprofit organizations within Atlanta, the city's spending is still only mid-range in comparison to the benchmarking cities, considering both per resident and per acre metrics.

Table 18. Combined city agency (operating and capital dollars) and nonprofit spending per resident

City	City agency spending combined with nonprofit spending	Per resident
Minneapolis	\$154,073,413	\$367
Philadelphia	\$273,550,297	\$172
Atlanta ¹³	\$81,993,637	\$171
Chicago	\$464,988,512	\$168
Washington, D.C.	\$114,265,767	\$166
Austin	\$119,649,855	\$123
Denver	\$76,003,805	\$106
Nashville	\$65,840,623	\$96
Houston	\$187,921,701	\$80

Table 19. Combined city agency (operating and capital dollars) and nonprofit spending per acre

City	City agency spending combined with nonprofit spending	Per acre
Washington, D.C.	\$114,265,767	\$122,471
Chicago	\$464,988,512	\$52,642
Minneapolis	\$154,073,413	\$30,377
Philadelphia	\$273,550,297	\$26,115
Atlanta ¹⁴	\$81,993,637	\$16,077
Denver	\$76,003,805	\$12,176
Houston	\$187,921,701	\$9,056

¹¹ - The Trust for Public Land spent \$6,147,435 in funds building out Cook Park in 2019.

¹² - Trees Atlanta plants and maintains trees in public parks, street rights of way and even front yards in neighborhoods across greater Atlanta. We were not able to determine the amount spent solely in parks; the organization is working to calculate that amount.

¹³ - This is a revised spending total and revised spending per resident including TPL, Conservation Fund and Trees for Atlanta. Previous total reported in the ParkScore 2019 Index was \$69.7 million. Previous spending per resident was \$146.

¹⁴ This is a revised spending total and revised spending per acre including TPL, Conservation Fund and Trees for Atlanta. Previous total reported in the ParkScore 2019 Index was \$69.7 million. Previous spending per acre was \$13,681.

Austin	\$119,649,855	\$7,106
Nashville	\$65,840,623	\$4,339

Summary of benchmarking analysis: Overall, when compared with eight other cities, Atlanta falls, in most categories, in the middle of the pack. That said, Atlanta is well supported by both nonprofit partners as well as generous donors, showing that its citizens and philanthropists do care.

Summary of budget trends for the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation

Overall, Atlanta DPR's budget is 1.9 percent of the annual city of Atlanta budget.¹⁵ The general fund that supplies the majority of funds for all expenses is allocated and approved through the annual city budget process. Close to 100 percent of the actual FY18 budget for Parks & Recreation (\$39.3 M) came from the general fund with an additional \$7.3 M for capital projects coming from bond funds and related revenues.¹⁶

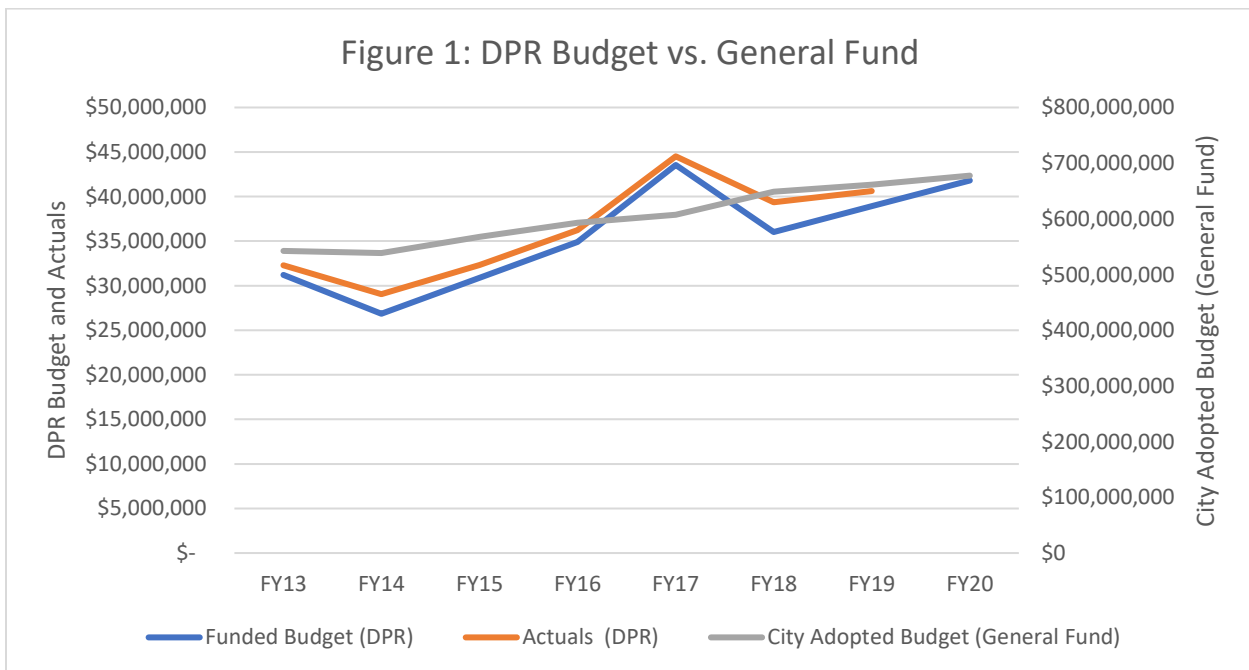
Like most city parks and recreation agencies, Atlanta DPR collects fees for reservations and rental of facilities as well as fees for recreation programs. A total of \$7,754,797 (in additional to the annual Atlanta DPR budget) was collected in FY2019. Of that, \$545,817 was contributed to the City of Atlanta general fund. The balance of \$7,208,980 was allocated to 25 different trust accounts, which allow Atlanta DPR to fund specific park improvements, programs, operations and improvements directly or in cooperation with a nonprofit park partner, each with specific circumstances and conditions. The complete list of accounts and amounts collected in FY2019 is shown in Table 20.

Table 20 (continues on next page)

Table 20: Atlanta DPR Trust Fund Revenue Report (for FY2019)	Revenue (USD)	
	Total	
600080-Golf Services	\$	2,760,616.33
600239-Youth Athletics Program	\$	1,383,900.92
600359-Ground & Site Improvements	\$	859,755.88
600384-Centers of Hope	\$	606,943.69
600372-Chastain Trust	\$	343,212.07
600418-Piedmont Park Improvements	\$	336,030.01
600355-Summer Program	\$	207,811.57
600363-Citywide Park Furniture	\$	155,651.85
600231-Summer User Fees	\$	140,204.57
600394-Salary Surcharge & Security	\$	139,445.26

¹⁵ - Data from the City of Atlanta Budget documents and reports - <https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/departments/finance/budget-fiscal-policy>

600249-Bitsy Grant Tennis Center Pro	\$ 63,075.74
600240-Chastain Park Tennis Center Operations	\$ 49,756.74
600023-Piedmont Park Restaurant	\$ 36,669.78
600228-Athletics Operations	\$ 32,321.92
600081-Special Events	\$ 18,130.99
600365-Oakland Cemetery	\$ 17,520.00
600229-Piedmont Tennis Court Operations	\$ 13,589.74
600079-Atlanta Arts Alliance, Inc.	\$ 10,980.42
600376-Snowmobile	\$ 8,300.00
600035-Day Care Operations-Southside94/18-8/31)	\$ 7,500.00
600370-Piedmont Park Arts Festival	\$ 5,062.50
600299-Employee Incentive Program	\$ 4,801.53
600282-Recreation Program Activities	\$ 3,970.41
600250-Mcghee Tennis Center Pro	\$ 2,152.74
600261-Washington Park Tennis Center	\$ 1,575.74
Grand Total, all trust accounts:	\$ 7,208,980



In recent years, Atlanta DPR has generally fared well in the city’s budget process. The budget has grown by 34% over the eight-year period shown above, while the city’s general fund has grown by just 25% over that same period. Likewise, the average annual growth rate for Atlanta DPR for this period is 5%,

compared to 3% for the general fund. The department experienced only two decreases during this period: FY14 and FY18. The FY14 decrease is an anomaly caused by the Cultural Affairs budget being relocated from DPR to the Mayor’s Office, and the 2018 dip only exists due to a \$6.5 million spike in FY17 due to a one-time expense. It is also likely that Atlanta’s capital spending will be increasing further in the next two years.

How public and nonprofit parks agencies fund themselves.

In this next section, we seek to provide a complete catalog of methods through which both public as well as nonprofit parks agencies fund themselves by addressing the following questions:

So, what are the range of funding mechanisms that parks systems can use to fund themselves?
Are there certain mechanisms only open to public agencies? nonprofit agencies?
Can you give us an overview and tell us what’s available to Atlanta?

The Trust for Public Land has collected data, analyzed and reported on the challenges, opportunities and trends of park and recreation systems in the 100 largest U. S. cities for nearly twenty years. Through a combination of special reports (such as *The Excellent City Park System*¹⁷ and *Public Spaces, Private Money*¹⁸), as well as the annual City Park Facts and the ParkScore Index, we’ve been able to spot challenges and opportunities in different cities and work to provide advice on how park systems can learn from one another. While many U. S. cities were seeing shrinking population and thus struggling to sustain park systems when our collective research first began, a number of cities have been experiencing tremendous rates of growth, including Atlanta.

Key trends have emerged in the ways we fund land acquisition, construction, operation, maintenance and programming of parks and recreation systems in growing cities. These trends are from both the public and the private or nonprofit realms.¹⁹ A combination of public and nonprofit approaches work best in collaboration to fund parks systems. That said, such a joint effort requires the support of an informed citizenry, as well as support from local political leadership.

We’ll first look at the big funding picture for public parks agencies in our cities. Table 21, below, details the overall funding picture for parks systems – from public parks agencies, as well as nonprofit parks agencies. This table includes funds that can be used for capital projects (including land acquisition, design, construction and revitalization), park operation and maintenance (daily service, horticulture and hardscape maintenance) and park programming (activities, events, programs, recreational programs and more). We’ve organized this table to show the most common forms of funding at the top of the table to fewer common forms of funding at the bottom of the table.

¹⁷ - <https://www.tpl.org/excellent-city-park-system>

¹⁸ - <https://www.tpl.org/public-spacesprivate-money>

¹⁹ - We’ use the term “nonprofit” in this report instead of “private.” We think “nonprofit” is a more accurate term, better representing how groups like Park Pride, Piedmont Park Conservancy and other park foundations and friends group operate and fund their efforts.

We should note that the best funding is one that combines many different types, as every funding category has both strengths and weaknesses. But, most importantly, most funding comes from public sources, namely “general fund” dollars. In 2019, the Trust for Public Land reported that the 100 largest U.S. cities spent \$7.1 Billion of public funds to construct, operate and maintain and program their park systems. Having said that, 181 nonprofit parks agencies operating in about two-thirds of the 100 largest cities spent an additional \$597 million. Over half of these nonprofit park organizations have been established since 2000 and their primary focus is to supplement the work of the public park agencies. The key to success is collaboration, which we’ll speak to in greater detail later in this report.²⁰

Following Table 21, we’ve provided definitions as well as explanations of each of the funding types, their relative importance (in terms of scope of total funding available) and if they can be used to fund more than one type of spending. Restrictions on what types of funds can be spent on which activities is largely a function of both federal and state laws, which give municipal governments the ability to levy and collect taxes and fees. We’ve also noted which funds Atlanta DPR uses and to what extent.

Table 21: funding for public and nonprofit parks agencies (from most common to least common)

Public Parks Agencies			Nonprofit Parks Agencies			Frequency
Capital	O&M	Programming	Capital	O&M	Programming	Frequency
General Fund	General Fund	General Fund	Donations	Donations	Donations	Most Common
Bonds	Usage Fees	Usage Fees	Funds from Government Agencies	Sponsorships	Sponsorships	Most Common (Bonds, usage fees)
Federal, State Grants	Volunteers	Volunteers	Volunteers	Volunteers	Volunteers	Common
In-Kind Donations	In-Kind Donations	In-Kind Donations	In-Kind Donations	In-Kind Donations	In-Kind Donations	Common
Parkland Dedication Ordinance	Revenue (concessions, ticketed events)	Revenue (concessions, ticketed events)	Revenue (concessions, ticketed events)	Funds from Government Agencies	Funds from Government Agencies	Less Common
TIF/TIRZ	BID, PID	BID, PID	Gov't or foundation grants	Usage Fees	Usage Fees	Less Common
BID, PID				Revenue (concessions, ticketed events)	Revenue (concessions, ticketed events)	Least Common

²⁰ - The basis for this research is the 2015 Trust for Public Land report: “Public Spaces, Private Money: The Triumphs and Pitfalls of Park Conservancies.” See: <https://www.tpl.org/public-spacesprivate-money>

Park District, Authority	Park District, Authority	Park District, Authority				Least Common
Hotel Occupancy Tax						Least Common
Dedicated, property tax, dedicated Sales Tax	Dedicated Sales Tax	Dedicated Sales Tax				Least Common

Funding Types for Public parks agencies defined and explained:

(This section describes the range of funding mechanisms from most common to least common, based on annual reviews of the 100 largest city park systems by The Trust for Public Land.)

1. **General Fund** dollars come from a combination of property taxes, sales taxes and any other non-specific destination revenue collected by a city, county, state or combination thereof. The General Fund is the biggest pot of funds for a local government and is distributed through the annual budget process driven by the three common forms of municipal government.²¹ Most General Fund dollars go to public safety (Police, Fire, EMS) and education, the latter if the municipality has direct ownership of the school district. General Fund dollars can be used for capital, O&M and programming and it’s the single largest source of funds for nearly all public park agencies with the exceptions being parks districts, which are primarily funded through property tax assessments, bonds and fees via separate state granted authorities. *Nearly all of Atlanta’s DPR budget is allocated through the annual city budgeting process from the General Fund. Atlanta DPR, overall, has seen a 5% increase (versus 3% for General Fund) in the past eight years.*
2. **Bonds** are dollars that come from two sources: General obligation (G. O.) bonds are usually approved by the voters in a public election. General revenue (G. R.) bonds backed by specific revenue generation, usually from water or electric utilities and usually authorized by a governing municipal body. For park funding, G.O. bonds are common, G.R. bonds are rare (They are used for projects like capital mitigation work in a park for water or electric utility needs.) Bond funds can only be used for capital projects. *Atlanta uses general obligation bonds to pay for capital projects in parks and recreation. Funding has also come from aligned Atlanta government departments and related ballot measures including MOST (Municipal Option Sales Tax) in supporting green infrastructure parks, the last TSPLOST²² in supporting the Atlanta Beltline*

²¹ - Most common forms of municipal government are one of the following: (a) Strong Mayor/Weak City Council, (b) City Manager/Strong City Council, or (c) County Commissioners Court.

²² - A TSPLOST is a Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax that is collected by the City of Atlanta for a variety of transportation improvements.

acquisition and RENEW Atlanta dollars in supporting the construction of the new MLK natatorium.

3. **Usage Fees** are dollars collected for use of specific park amenities, primarily reservable facilities including picnic areas, pavilions, recreation or arts centers for special events. Usage fees are commonly collected for marinas (boat slips) and boat ramp usage as well. Usage fees are collected from individuals or groups, primarily for family and group events. In most cases, usage fees are paid into the city's *general fund* for allocation during the annual municipal budget process. Exceptions are fees and memberships collected specifically by and for golf courses and some tennis centers which can be deposited into a specified maintenance fund or trust account, common in Atlanta, but not all cities. Atlanta DPR does have a number of trust accounts in which usage fees are collected and can be used for specific park and recreation related projects, as shown in Table 20. Usage fees (via the general fund) are used for capital, O&M and programming. Trust accounts have a varying number of restrictions as to where and for what purposes collected funds can be used, similar to donations received by parks nonprofit during a capital campaign. *In fiscal year 2019, Atlanta DPR collected \$545,817 in fees that went directly into the City's general fund. An additional \$7.2 million in fees went into two dozen trust accounts, ranging from golf and tennis to summer programs and recreation.*
4. **Federal, State Grant funds** are requested via application processes for specific uses. They can be dollars for land acquisition, capital improvements or reinvestment. The application and approval process take time, often a year or more. In nearly all cases, grant funds are for land acquisition or capital projects (exceptions are public health-oriented programming or studies, but these are rare in public agencies.) While competition for grant funds is more competitive than ever, there is recent good news at both the Federal and State level. The Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) was re-authorized by Congress in 2019, but still does not have a sustained, perpetual funding allocation, relying on Congress to appropriate funds for every fiscal year. Recent passage of the state-wide Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act²³ with 83 percent of vote will provide an additional \$34 million in funding in the first year and at least \$20 million in funding annually²⁴ for land conservation and regionally significant park-improvement projects across the state, any public parks agency is eligible to apply for funds. *Atlanta does take advantage of federal and state grant funding, primarily for land acquisition, capital construction and recreation projects.*
5. **Volunteers** are a source of both skilled and unskilled labor for operations, maintenance and programming. Increasingly, volunteering is a key program of public and nonprofit parks agency offerings with dedicated staff, training programs, job descriptions and recognition programs. In 2019, TPL reported that the 100 largest US cities saw 17.6 million volunteer hours donated to parks & recreation, worth \$503 million, according to time value calculations by Independent Sector.²⁵ Volunteers are not a substitute for dedicated public park agency staff and effective volunteer program require dedicated staff to develop, organize and manage a volunteer program. *Atlanta, primarily through a number of nonprofit partners, led by*

²³ - <https://gadnr.org/gosp>

²⁴ - The Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act is committed to provide at least \$20 million per year for the next ten years. In the first year, the amount is \$30 million, but is considered an anomaly and is not likely to be achieved in subsequent years.

²⁵ - <https://independentsector.org/value-of-volunteer-time-2018/>

Park Pride, takes advantage of volunteers, recording over 34,409 hours with Atlanta DPR reporting an additional 17,000 volunteer hours. A better measure that we'll use is hours per resident, in this calculation, Atlanta recorded .10 hours of volunteer time per resident.²⁶ See the Recommendations section for more information and recommendations for expanding city-wide volunteering.

We should note that there are few public parks agencies in the 100 largest U. S. cities that have truly effective and integrated volunteer programs, but this is changing as public and nonprofit agencies are increasingly joining forces to provide volunteer opportunities, training, support and recognition across a city park system. Los Angeles, Jacksonville, New York and San Francisco report large annual number of volunteers working with their public and nonprofit parks agencies as well as total hours donated. That said, a quarter of the 100 largest cities still do not report volunteer hours.²⁷

6. **In-Kind Donations.** Increasingly, businesses are donating goods and services to public parks and recreation agencies, ranging from skilled professionals for planning, design, construction and landscape work to trees, plants, mulch and park amenities. These donations can be used in capital, operations and maintenance projects as well as programming areas. *Atlanta does receive in-kind donations and services from a wide variety of businesses and organizations.*
7. **Parkland Dedication Ordinance or Park Impact Fees.** This is a flat fee levied on new housing or hotel units that is paid into a city fund by a housing or hotel developer. The funds must be spent on park land acquisition or capital improvements for new parks within a specific radius of the paying housing or hotel developer. Parkland dedication funds can only be spent on capital projects, including land acquisition, park design & construction as well capital improvements in existing parks. Over one-third of the 100 largest U. S. cities have parkland dedication ordinances, Dallas was a recent addition in the 100 largest cities. *Atlanta does have city impact fees in place that help fund some park acquisition, but not a parkland dedication ordinance like in a number of our benchmarked cities that funds both acquisition, capital improvements and capital replacement. Further, the fees set for parkland acquisition and development have not changed since they were first enacted in 1993. The ordinance is currently being studied by a city council mandated task force with advice and guidance from a consultant and is expected to issue recommendations for changes. Changes include fee level increases, housing types subject to impact fees, and critically, the ability to use funds for land acquisition and capital improvements. Recommendations by the committee and subsequent action by City Council is expected later in 2020.*
8. **Earned Income Revenue** is a category that includes concessions like food, drink, sports equipment rentals²⁸ as well as ticketed events, which are often called special events. Trending examples in city park systems include food truck vending, ticketed events, and “locally made” craft fairs. The growth and acceptance of food trucks and other mobile concessions in parks and

²⁶ - We should note that the Trust for Public Land just receives a total reporting of hours and not detailed breakouts. Experience tells us that a majority of hours reported by public agencies are hours supporting recreation, youth and other after-school or summer programs, as well as sports league play.

²⁷ - City Park Facts 2019 Report: <https://www.tpl.org/2019-city-park-facts>

²⁸ - Sports equipment rentals include canoes, kayaks, stand-up paddles, bicycles and related safety equipment.

other public spaces in the past decade has greatly changed how contracts and agreements are created, how fees are collected, and the duration that a vendor can occupy a specific location.

This is in stark comparison to traditional approaches for concessions in public parks, which are often multi-year and with limited seasons in a given year. Fees are usually a percentage of total sales and government agencies have the right to audit the concession vendors books to ensure the correct percentage is being paid.

The City of Atlanta has an outdoor events policy and fee schedule, which is managed through the Mayor's office via an Office of Special Events.²⁹ Certain park locations or venues don't require a permit from the city, these are managed directly by Atlanta DPR or a parks nonprofit partner.³⁰ There are a small number of concessions in selected parks in the Atlanta DPR system, the Piedmont Park Conservancy manages a small number directly. We cover earned income opportunities in the recommendations section.

9. **TIF (Tax Increment Financing)** - Often called a TIF district or TAD (Tax Allocation District), this is an agreement between one or more government entities to allocate a portion of present and future property taxes to be dedicated to pay for public realm improvements. The assumption behind establishing a TIF is that property values (and hence revenues) will rise on private properties in the TIF district over time, resulting in increased tax revenue by the time the TIF district expires. Improvements can range from flood control, streets and streetscapes, parks and public transportation to smaller incremental services. Usually, these improvements are funded through GR bonds issued by the municipality and is paid back through TIF allocations over a period of 10, 25, 50 or more years. In Texas, there is a specific type of entity called a TIRZ (Tax-increment reinvestment zone), which is used in Houston and Harris County and has some additional features, which have been used to fund park improvements, notably for Memorial Park. *Atlanta has utilized local TIFs, locally referred to as Tax Allocation Districts (TADs) in a growing number of key projects, including the Beltline TAD³¹ and the Eastside TAD³², with both providing numerous park and public space improvements.*

10. **BIDs and PIDs** known as business improvement districts or public improvement districts are defined geographical areas established to provide specific types of improvements, operations a maintenance, programming, and safety programs. These efforts are financed by assessments against the property owners within the area. The district is created by a vote of City Council, following the agreement of a majority of the property owners in the proposed district to opt-in. Depending on the state laws governing the creation and operations of BIDs, they may require a re-authorization by property owners or city council every number of years, as mandate by state and municipal laws. Generally, BID/PID funds can be spent on capital, operations and

²⁹ - Atlanta Office of Special Events: <https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/mayor-s-office/executive-offices/office-of-special-events>

³⁰ - Park venues managed by Atlanta DPR or nonprofit park partner:
<https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/mayor-s-office/executive-offices/office-of-special-events/does-my-event-require-a-permit>

³¹ - <https://www.investatlanta.com/developers/opportunities-incentives/tax-allocation-district-financing/atlanta-beltline>

³² - <https://www.investatlanta.com/developers/opportunities-incentives/tax-allocation-district-financing/eastside>

maintenance and programming expenses, including parks and recreation facilities and programs within their boundaries.

In Atlanta, there are a number of organizations working in partnership with member businesses, civic organizations and the City of Atlanta. They take advantage of both property and business owner membership as well as business improvement district revenue. **Central Atlanta Progress (CAP)** is a 501c4 that has been operating since 1941 in downtown Atlanta. CAP spent about \$5.5M in most recent year, and the membership-based organization collected \$1 million a year from members.³³ In 1995, CAP formed the 120-block **Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID)** to make Downtown cleaner, safer and more hospitable. Funded through a business improvement district fee collected from property owners, ADID spent \$10 M in functional expenses in its most recently completed fiscal year. CAP and ADID share the same CEO and some economy of scale in terms of staffing and services rendered between the two. The organizations support a number of park and public space projects, including Woodruff Park, Centennial Olympic Park and “the Stitch³⁴” a proposed highway cap project. CAP/ADID have staffed and improved Woodruff Park through donations as well since 2013.

Liveable Buckhead,³⁵ a community non-profit, has developed a parks master plan for the area and has been working on local parks and trails for many years. They partnered with the **PATH Foundation**³⁶ on PATH 400 trail³⁷, served as a fiscal partner for Mountain Way Common and are supporting Louridans Park, Old Ivy Park and others.³⁸

The **Buckhead Community Improvement District (CID)**³⁹ has been working on the “Park Over 400” or Hub 404, now with a separate organization and board of directors that proposes to build a nine-acre greenspace over the connections of the Georgia State Highway 400, several major streets and the MARTA Buckhead Station.

The Midtown Alliance⁴⁰ has been active in placemaking around transit stations and a supporter of Piedmont Park. In Midtown, there is also a major cap the connector project in midtown that is being backed by Dan Cathy and led up by Paul Morris and Stacy Patton, both formerly of the Atlanta Beltline, Inc.

Finally, there’s the **Georgia World Congress Authority**, which owns and operates 3.8 million square feet of Convention Center facilities, stadiums, arenas and Centennial Olympic Park on behalf of the State of Georgia. Centennial Olympic Park provides public park amenities (fields, gardens, seating, shade, restrooms, interactive fountains) but also hosts private events in conjunction with conferences taking place at its other facilities as well as ticketed events (such as concerts and music festivals) that the general public can purchase to attend. Thus, the park is

³³ - <https://www.atlantadowntown.com/cap/about>

³⁴ - <https://www.atlantadowntown.com/initiatives/the-stitch>

³⁵ - <https://livablebuckhead.com/about/our-organization/>

³⁶ - <https://pathfoundation.org>

³⁷ - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqYVIEHbYk8&feature=emb_title

³⁸ - <https://livablebuckhead.com/programs/greenspace/>

³⁹ - <https://www.buckheadcid.com>

⁴⁰ - <https://www.midtownatl.com>

subject to private and ticketed events superseding public access for part or most of the park from time to time.

11. **Park Districts** (known as **park authorities** in Georgia) are specific governmental entities created through state legislation and specifically enacted for specific geographic cities, towns and counties or a combination of the three. Park districts are most common in Minnesota, Ohio, Illinois, Washington state, and there are three park authorities in Georgia. Park Districts are governed by an appointed or elected board of directors, the specific make-up varies according to the enabling legislation and municipal government make-up. Boards can be appointed by a Mayor (Chicago), publicly elected by voters (Minneapolis) or can be made up of the mayor and city council (Seattle). These entities can collect sales tax or property taxes to fund capital construction, operation and maintenance as well as programming. *Atlanta does not currently have a park authority, but we should note that the Atlanta Fulton County Recreation Authority (AFCRA)⁴¹ does exist, differing from the other authorities. AFCRA is primarily a public stadium authority, established in 1960, that manages several stadiums and arenas and a few public park properties, including Zoo Atlanta. They do provide some funds to Atlanta and Fulton County parks in the form of discretionary grants. We cover details about park authorities in Georgia in greater detail at the end of the Recommendations section of this report.*
12. **Hotel Occupancy Tax (HOT)** are often called “hotel-motel” taxes. A small but growing number of cities are allocating a portion of hotel room taxes for public capital projects that benefit tourism, including some projects in parks, like historic preservation work. Hotel occupancy tax usage regulations are approved by state legislatures and are subject to conditions and regulations placed on them. They are subject to local approvals by city/county governments as well. Georgia state law has a number of specifics for levying and usage which should be studied carefully.⁴² *Atlanta does have a HOT ordinance and uses the funds for tourism related projects, but not park projects at this time.*⁴³
13. **Dedicated Sales Tax** – a percentage of sales tax collected by local city/county that is dedicated for usage by a public parks and recreation agency. Sales tax propositions are usually placed on the ballot by mayor/city council and must be approved by a majority of voters. They can be used for capital, operations and maintenance and programming. Denver passed such a tax in November 2018, but generally, these dedicated sales taxes for parks are very rare. *Atlanta does not have such a dedicated sales tax. In addition, Atlanta is close to the maximum sales tax threshold, given current state and local transportation allocations. A recent effort to fund a one-tenth sales tax for the arts in Atlanta failed in 2017.*
14. **Dedicated Property Tax (Mill)** – A variation of dedicated revenue is a dedicated property tax, which is often associated with a parks district or parks authority, but not always. In the case of Atlanta, the city has the ability, via ordinance to collect one-half mill for the express purpose of parks and recreation projects. (The definition of a mill is \$1 per \$1,000 of property valuation, so one-half of a mill is 50 cents per \$1,000 of property valuation) *In Atlanta, a portion of the funds helps pay down public capital park bonds, approved by voters in the past decade and set to be*

⁴¹ - <https://www.afcra.com>

⁴² - <https://www.gacities.com/What-We-Do/Service/Revenue/Hotel-and-Motel-Tax-Recovery-Service/Other-Resources/Hotel-Motel-Taxes-and-Tourism-Q-A.aspx>

⁴³ - <https://www.atlantaga.gov/home/showdocument?id=6826>

paid off in 30 years (2045). For FY2020, the total budget is \$14.5 million. Of that, \$8.1 million is used for Atlanta DPR direct expenses and the remaining \$6.4 million is used to pay off the remaining park bond debt. Given that the City of Atlanta has this already in place, this could be used in combination with the creation of a parks authority as one possible source of funding.

Here’s the specific authorizing language from the City of Atlanta general code: “(b) For the purpose of raising revenue for permanent improvements in the parks of the city, and for facility maintenance, repair, replenishment, enhancement, and the purchase of equipment for such parks, the governing body shall have full power and authority to provide by ordinance for the assessment, levy, and collection of an ad valorem tax on all real and personal property, which, under the laws of this state, is subject to taxation within the corporate limits of the city, in the amount of one-half mill on each dollar of assessed valuation thereon; such tax, when collected shall be used as follows: 90 percent exclusively for permanent improvements to the zoo, golf courses, recreational, and other park facilities of the city, and ten percent for park facility maintenance, repair, replenishment, enhancement, and the purchase of equipment. In the event that any part of the tax so collected cannot be used in any one year, it may be invested in short-term securities until such time as the use of said funds becomes necessary or possible. The tax provided for herein shall be in addition to all other taxes authorized by this Charter.” (City of Atlanta General Code: Article 6. Revenue and Fund Administration, Chapter 1, Revenue, Section 6-101. General Power of Taxation.)

Summary: So how does the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation (Atlanta DPR) measure up?

As we previously mentioned in Benchmarking section summary, the Atlanta DPR budget is 1.9 percent of the annual city of Atlanta budget, with the bulk of the public budget provided by the city’s general fund, and with fees collected for facilities usage, events and recreation programs providing an additional \$7.7 million for a number of trust funds as well as Atlanta DPR’s contribution back to the city general fund.

Atlanta DPR does draw on bond funding as well as proceeds from the dedicated park property tax to fund land acquisition and park development, but private spending really fuels new park development, with an additional \$17.58 million spent by an array of nonprofit park organizations in the most recent fiscal year. This amount boosts the total annual spending in Atlanta parks by 25 percent, only Houston has a higher percentage in our benchmarked cities. That said, park advocates and philanthropic funders alike are seeking to increase public spending in parks and recreation given continued growth in Atlanta park acreage and facilities as well as increased park usage.

Table 22 gives an overview of all sources of funds for each of the benchmarked cities for all public agencies:

Table 22: Operations & Maintenance Funding for Public parks agencies

City / Funding	General Fund	Usage Fees	Volunteers	In-Kind Donations	BIDs	Park District	Dedicated Sales Tax	Dedicated Property
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								Tax ⁴⁴
Atlanta	X	X	X	X	X			X
Austin	X	X	X	X	X			
Chicago		X	X	X		X		X
Denver	X	X	X	X			X	
Houston	X	X	X	X				
Minneapolis		X	X	X	X	X		X
Nashville	X	X	X	X				
Philadelphia	X	X	X	X	X		X ⁴⁵	
Washington, DC	X	X	X	X	X			

Funding Types for Nonprofit park agencies defined and explained.

There are some additional funding categories that are unique and best suited for nonprofit parks organizations to pursue. *(Again, these are listed from most common to least common.)*

1. **Donations** from individuals, groups and companies are the “bread and butter” of funding for nonprofit park agencies and the single largest source of funds. They can be used for capital, operation, maintenance and programming expenses. Generally, a form of tax-benefit is given to the donor in exchange for the donation via IRS guidelines, which do restrict the use of donations for certain expenses. Limited or restricted uses of donations include direct lobbying of government agencies and actors, as well as funding political campaigns. In most cases, nonprofits are better suited to soliciting donations compared to public parks agencies, who may have restrictions based on local, state or federal law. That said, the best system of soliciting donations is one where nonprofits are working in parallel with public agencies, who are pursuing plans and different sources of funding in parallel. *Atlanta park nonprofits are well versed in obtaining donations and have strong relationships with both national and local donors.*

A recent example provides shows how private donations might leverage greater public resources. The Atlanta Botanical Garden and Piedmont Park Conservancy have partnered with the Atlanta DPR on a major park expansion. The estimated cost of the expansion is \$100 million. The City passed legislation in 2019 supporting a public commitment of \$20 million that will unlock the anticipated \$80 million needed from philanthropic and other sources. This example of an up front, public commitment has generated speculation that model might be similarly explored for other major capital park expansion projects. (The \$20 million in public funding came from an interesting array of public sources including Impact Fees, TSPLOST, among others).

⁴⁴ - Atlanta has a dedicated property tax (Mill) that helps fund capital improvements and pays debt service on publicly approved bonds. Chicago and Minneapolis have larger property tax levies through their enabling park district legislation.

⁴⁵ - Philadelphia levies a soda tax that is matched with philanthropic donations to fund the Rebuild Philadelphia effort, focused on libraries, recreation centers and parks in the most underserved areas in the city. Visit <https://www.phila.gov/programs/rebuild/>

2. **Funds from Government Agencies** - As more nonprofit park agencies tackle park projects, Government agencies are continuing to fund a portion of costs related to capital projects, operations and maintenance and programming. Generally speaking, funds come from specific fund sources for specific projects and the receiving nonprofit parks agency is raising (or matching) government funds with additional funds. In nearly all cases, all improvements, operation and maintenance or programming are for public benefit and on public park lands. Atlanta park nonprofits have obtained public funds for a variety of park projects. *Atlanta has a number of trust accounts (covered in the public funding section above) in which fees generated from usage, programming and rentals of park facilities and recreation programs are held for use by specific parks or programs. Examples for Atlanta include golf, tennis, recreation and summer youth programs.*
3. **Sponsorships** are generally restricted dollars obtained from businesses to support a specific type of programming in public parks as well as supporting volunteer efforts in operation and maintenance. Examples include movie nights in the park, annual benefit events or annual volunteer workdays, such as It's My Park Day in Austin or Love Your Park Week in Philadelphia. Funds are used to support programming or related operations and maintenance needs. Atlanta park nonprofits solicit and receive sponsorship funds.

Sponsorship for capital improvements, operations and maintenance efforts in parks usually focuses on large scale, recurring volunteer events, such as Love Your Park in Philadelphia, It's My Park Day in Austin or national volunteer days such as National Trails Day or National Public Lands Day. Sponsorships are also used to allow companies to become a sponsor of the nonprofit park agency and receive benefits, including the ability to have a team of their staff (during work hours on a weekday) come out and work with nonprofit staff on a specific horticulture or maintenance project. Funds are used to help pay for nonprofit agency staff time, materials, tools and more. We should note that volunteers are not a substitute for trained public agency staff and both public and nonprofit parks agencies need dedicated staff to organize and manage volunteer programs.

4. **Volunteers** - are a source of both skilled and unskilled labor for operations, maintenance and programming. Beginning 40 years ago, nonprofit parks agencies saw volunteers as a strategic way to build their capacity and demonstrate community engagement and commitment for the given parks that they adopted. Now, volunteer programs are seen by both public and nonprofit parks agencies as a key function working with staff, training programs, job descriptions and recognition. In 2019, TPL reported that the 100 largest US cities recorded 17.6 million volunteer hours donated to parks & recreation, worth \$503 Million, according to Independent Sector.⁴⁶ We should note that hours are reported by both public and nonprofit agencies and totals may vary by city, TPL works to ensure that there is no double counting of hours and focus on the total number of cities by city versus public and nonprofit totals.

Table 23 shows the volunteer hours reported by each of the benchmarked cities as part of the 2019 ParkScore and City Park Facts survey conducted by The Trust for Public Land. While we've looked at total hours per city, a better measure to compare the benchmarked cities is hours per resident. Using that yardstick, Atlanta ranks **fourth out of nine**, just behind Austin. Park Pride currently has two full time staff members dedicated to the organization's volunteer program

⁴⁶ - <https://independentsector.org/value-of-volunteer-time-2018/>

and two full time staff members dedicated to their friends of parks efforts. The degree of Park Pride staffing helps to explain why Atlanta accrued more nonprofit volunteer hours than any other city in the study.

The Trust for Public Land has found that a city-wide coordinated volunteering in parks program, usually integrated with a city-wide adopt-a-park program is best when managed jointly between the city parks department and a city-wide parks advocacy organization. We cover best practices of volunteer programs later in this report and highlight several cities (New York, Austin, Philadelphia) that have such a model. The best practice is when the city-wide nonprofit manages the program on behalf of the city and the nonprofit. Park Pride has largely assumed this role, but is maxed out capacity wise, working with Atlanta DPR as well as the Atlanta Beltline Partnership to offer these efforts and opportunities in a growing number of parks. Over 74 Friends of Parks groups are working with Park Pride in Atlanta parks, with more in DeKalb County Parks. The Friends of Parks program provides training, support, grants and coordination in exchange for a multi-year` renewable agreement. As we mentioned before, volunteering isn't "free," requiring dedicated staff to organize and manage these programs and offerings, as evidenced by the Park Pride staff dedicated to their ongoing efforts. Dedicated funding could expand Park Pride's capacity to grow this important programming.

Table 23: Comparison of volunteer hours and value, by benchmarked city.

City:	Nonprofit Hours	Public Agency Hours	Total Volunteer Hours	Independent Sector hourly value	Total Value of Volunteer Time	Hours per resident
Washington, DC	17,000	435,352	452,352	\$41.72	\$18,872,125	.65
Minneapolis	1,200	134,623	135,823	\$28.15	\$3,823,417	.32
Austin	24,646	123,953	148,599	\$25.10	\$3,729,834	.15
Atlanta	35,409	17,000⁴⁷	52,409	\$27.50	\$1,441,247	.10
Philadelphia	20,000	79,458	99,458	\$24.94	\$2,480,482	.062
Nashville	--	42,209	42,209	\$22.67	\$956,878	.061
Denver	150	38,645	38,795	\$28.02	\$1,087,035	.054
Houston	20,700	48,948	69,948	\$25.10	\$1,748,164	.029
Chicago	7,884	37,200	45,084	\$26.89	\$1,212,308	.019
Median	18,500	48,948	69,948	\$27	\$1,748,164	

- In-kind donations.** Increasingly, businesses are donating goods and services to nonprofit parks agencies, ranging from professional services from planning and design firms to construction and

⁴⁷ - Atlanta DPR volunteer hours are from 2017, we did not get updated volunteer hours for the most recently completed fiscal year.

landscape work. Physical donations of trees, plants, mulch and park amenities, often for a specific park project, are increasingly common. Again, like monetary donations, parks nonprofits are better suited to soliciting and managing in-kind donations and ensuring that they are directed to the right places and acknowledged in a timely fashion. *Atlanta DPR and its nonprofit partners receive donations of services and products for their parks on a regular basis from a wide variety of local and national businesses, civic organizations and funders.*

6. **Earned Revenue.** Food trucks and other mobile concessions have greatly changed how concessions contracts and agreements are created, how fees are collected and the duration of a contract for a specific location. In general, we have found that non-profit park agencies have piloted and have demonstrated that more flexible contracts that focus on a rental fee per day for the vendor versus the traditional “percentage of sales” model is more effective for both parties, resulting in higher earned revenue as well as easier to manage contracts. Earned revenue can be managed in a competitive way that yields more revenue but also safeguards public space from being over commercialized. *Atlanta does see some earned revenue in its parks, Piedmont Park Conservancy earns some as well, but the overall impact is very small.*
7. **Government or foundation grants.** Competitive grants are offered by a variety of city, state and federal government agencies as well as private non-profit foundations for a variety of capital improvements, programming and in some cases, operations and maintenance. Restrictions, requirements, timeframes and the work necessary for the non-profit to submit and follow-up on grants can be big and taxing on many smaller non-profits. Usually, foundation grants are given primarily to non-profits, while the majority of government grants go to public parks agencies. Recent passage of the state-wide Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act⁴⁸ with 83 percent of vote will provide an additional \$30 million in funding for land conservation projects across the state. *Atlanta non-profits are well versed in obtaining grants from foundations as well as city, state and federal government.*
8. **Usage Fees** are dollars collected for use of specific park amenities, such as reservable facilities including picnic areas, pavilions, recreation or arts centers for special events. Generally, for a nonprofit parks agency to collect usage fees for a given park or parks, there must be a set of agreements between the public parks agency and the nonprofit agency governing revenue sharing, restrictions of types of events, the total number of occurrences in a given season, month, or year or other thresholds that must be met can limit the funds that may result for capital improvements, programming or operation and maintenance. *In Atlanta, the Piedmont Park Conservancy collects usage fees for use of specific fields and facilities to help pay for improvements as well as maintenance.*

Table 24 shows sources of funds for nonprofit parks agencies for each of the comparison cities. The mix of funding varies from nonprofit to nonprofit and from park to park, not all nonprofits obtain and utilize revenue from all of the sources listed. In most cases, a combination of usage fees and revenue from concessions are common to parks nonprofits in a few key cities, namely New York and Boston. Further, revenue is received only from the park or parks that the nonprofits specifically manage, and they may need to give a percentage back to the city as part of their partnership agreement, which is the case in New York.

⁴⁸ - <https://gadnr.org/gosp>

Table 24: Nonprofit parks agencies funding for operations and maintenance *(continued on next page)*

City:	Number of Parks Nonprofits ⁴⁹	Donations	Sponsorships	Volunteers	In-Kind Donations	Usage Fees	Revenue from Concessions ⁵⁰
Atlanta	14	X	X	X	X	X ⁵¹	X
Austin	5	X	X	X	X		
Chicago	9	X		X	X		
Denver	2	X		X	X		
Houston	9	X	X	X	X	X	X
Minneapolis	3	X		X	X		
Nashville	3	X		X			
Philadelphia	3	X	X	X	X	X	X
Washington, DC	8	X	X	X	X		X

Summary on funding for public and nonprofit parks agencies. As we’ve shown, there is a wide variety of funding sources for both public and nonprofit agencies to tap into. While most common are general fund revenues and general obligation bonds for public agencies and donations and foundation grants for nonprofits, the better strategy is a broad array of funding mechanisms and strategies to ensure both a broad base of funding. This approach can insulate park agencies in both good and challenging economic times as well as ensuring the ability to adequately engage in all aspects of public park work: land acquisition, capital projects, operations, maintenance and programming. This is challenging to fully flesh out, but public and nonprofit working together on a shared strategy as well as tackling funding efforts best suited to their abilities is key. In order to understand more about what nonprofit partners can do help their public park agencies, we’re going to look at national best practices next.

Recommendations for the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation

As noted in the benchmarking analysis of spending of eight city parks systems, Atlanta is in the low to mid-range for all spending classifications but is the second highest city in nonprofit spending and investment for parks. This shows that the broader community, organized by nonprofit park partners and funded by a number of very supportive philanthropic foundations, sees the park system as a community priority and wants to see a strong, well-funded parks department.

⁴⁹ - Nonprofit parks agency data collected by the Trust for Public Land or from the organization’s most recent Form 990 and reporting spending in their most recently completed fiscal year, there are generally additional parks nonprofits operating, either under a separate nonprofit umbrella or more informally.

⁵⁰ - Earned income revenue collected by nonprofits is still fairly rare but has the potential for signature parks as well as downtown or central business district-based parks with high foot traffic or other forms of visitation. See Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy: https://www.rosekennedygreenway.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2019_Budget_Presentation.pdf

⁵¹ - Piedmont Park Conservancy collects usage fees that help fund the conservancy’s operations.

Based on our interviews, research, and analysis; we find that the top priority for the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation is to ensure that a supply of well-planned parks and recreation facilities are acquired, and constructed and then programmed, operated and maintained. Given that Atlanta DPR is nearly entirely dependent on general fund revenue, and like many other city parks systems will see sharp decreases in spending when the next economic downturn takes place, we recommend pursuing a multi-pronged approach for increasing public sources revenue.

Given Atlanta's continued growth and increasing density, existing parks are seeing increased use by more people. Current funding, especially for operations and maintenance staffing, is not adequate to keep up with these increased demands now.⁵² Given that additional parks will be opening in historically underserved neighborhoods in 2020,⁵³ we recommend key efforts that advocate for, build community support for and help fund operations and maintenance in the park system. Our recommendations fall into three broad categories of (1) Grow the public **funding** base, (2) **Collaboration in advocacy and citizen action**, and (3) **Collaboration in programming, operations and management**. The categories and the individual efforts are not organized in any particular order. We describe each of these in a bit more detail below, then expand our discussion of each in this section.

1. Grow the Public **Funding** Base

- a. **Funding: Increase the Atlanta DPR operating budget** beyond its 1.9 percent of the total city budget. For example, Atlanta would have to increase the DPR operating budget by 27 percent increase to match current Philadelphia parks spending, or 5 percent to match current the Austin park spending.
- b. **Funding: Revise the Park Impact Fee Ordinance.** A city sponsored committee is hard at work reviewing and revising the ordinance which provides funds for park land acquisition while new housing is built, but the rates have not been adjusted since 1993. The fees should rise to ensure that land can be purchased, and parks can be built in a timely manner.
- c. **Funding: Create a Parks Authority.** There are three in Georgia, as well as Minneapolis and Chicago. They allow the parks system to fund and govern itself, reporting to a board of directors. This effort requires city-wide advocacy and support of local elected officials as well local legislation passed by the Georgia legislature. *See pages 37-40 for specific recommendations for parks authorities.*
- a. **Funding: Revise Earned Income Practices.** In the last decade, public and non-profit parks agencies in cities across the U.S. have revolutionized food, drink and sports equipment vending in parks. However, most city park systems continue with a low-bid, multi-year contract vending approach. A revised practice can yield increased revenue, new opportunities for local businesses and improved programming for park users.
- d. **Funding: Revise facility rental and special events revenue practices.** Fees from rentals and usage are parks systems bread and butter. More park agencies are keeping fees

⁵² - In the benchmarking section, we looked at operations and maintenance funding amounts, versus number of staff positions in operations and maintenance.

⁵³ - Parks due to open in Atlanta in 2020 include Cook Park, additional trail segments on the Beltline, as well as the first phase of Westside Quarry Park.

and re-investing those funds directly into parks, versus contributing them to the city's general fund. Atlanta DPR has a great start, and it can be expanded.

- e. **Funding: Leverage dollars from other public sources**, including local agencies like the Watershed Management, Transportation and Invest Atlanta, as well as federal and state funding.
2. Grow **collaboration** in advocacy and citizen action to support the park system.
 - a. **Collaboration: Strong city-wide parks advocacy** is the key to better funded parks. There's over a dozen parks non-profits and many more "friends of parks" groups, assisted by Park Pride. Getting more funding will require unified voices, agreement upon goals and strong leadership. A solid base already exists in Atlanta, it just needs to grow.
 - b. **Collaboration: Continue to expand the park volunteer and friends of the park programs**, funding additional Park Pride staff to manage and grow the program. While volunteers are not a substitute for well trained and well-paid staff, they can help your parks look great, build community and instill increased pride and ownership in Atlanta's public parks. Park Pride, working with Atlanta DPR, private funders and other non-profits, has a great track record, but they need more funding and capacity to help support a larger number of groups and their efforts.
3. Grow **collaboration** in programming, operations and management of parks and recreation sites.
 - a. **Collaboration: Integrate all Atlanta schoolyards into the parks and recreation system**, as demonstrated in the current pilot project. Atlanta DPR, Park Pride, Atlanta Public Schools, The Trust for Public Land and numerous community members and volunteers are piloting an approach that has worked well in other cities. It needs public support and a lot more public funding.
 - b. **Collaboration: Pursue integrated approaches for sharing operations and maintenance duties**. Integrated staffing started at Central Park in the late 1970s and has spread to many other public-private park partnerships. It is very effective and plays to both organization and individual strengths. A pilot effort to fund a position or function for the Westside Park through a combination of public and private funds is recommended.
 - c. **Collaboration: Zone management strategy for maintenance and operations in parks**, combining volunteers, public agency staff as well as parks non-profit staff working together. Zone management is actually over a century old, begun in New York at Central Park and it emerged again in the 1990s and has spread to other city parks. It is also a great way to integrate dedicated volunteers.

1. Grow the Public Funding Base.

As we've mentioned earlier in this report, the City of Atlanta has added 2,138 acres of parks and recreation facilities in the past 17 years. Atlanta has also added 50,000 residents, who live in both single-family as well as multi-family residences, in addition to the tens of thousands who commute into and out of Atlanta daily. Thanks to partnerships with parks nonprofits and generous funders, more parkland is being developed and will be opening for use in the coming year. While Atlanta DPR's budget is

growing, its only 1.9 percent of the city budget, and is always competing for general fund dollars especially with public safety departments as well as other compelling needs.

A. Funding: Increase the share of the General Fund

While Atlanta DPR has seen increases from the City general fund for most of the last eight years, its total budget is still only 1.9% of the entire budget for the city. Increasing the budget by 27 percent for example, would bring spending in line with that of Philadelphia, and would make a huge impact, especially with regard to adequately programming, operating and maintaining parks and recreation facilities in all neighborhoods. While Atlanta DPR's ability to collect fees into trust accounts for specific activities (golf, tennis, summer recreation, etc.) has increased, park acreage as well as park usage has increased, but funding, compared to the benchmarked cities in this report, is still in the low to mid-range. Both nonprofit leaders and philanthropic foundations have told us that they are pleased to work alongside Atlanta DPR and work to meet the needs of a still growing Atlanta, but there needs to be a concentrated effort to grow the Atlanta DPR budget to ensure that existing parks as well as new parks opening soon can be adequately programmed, operated and maintained. City staff should partner with a strong, citywide parks advocacy network (See Recommendation 2a) to outline unmet needs and challenges on an annual basis. The public, through citywide park advocacy, can expand current efforts to grow the operating budget. This is a near-term goal that can draw on the public support of the Atlanta parks system that is already present in Atlanta, led by more than 13 parks nonprofits and dozens of philanthropic foundations already working together.

B. Funding: Revise the Park Impact Fee Ordinance

Atlanta's Mayor and city council have initiated a review of the 1993 Impact Fee Ordinance in fall of 2019, authorizing a five-member committee to study and provide recommendations for not only applying the fee structure to more housing types, but looking to increase fees for parks and what they can be used for.⁵⁴ This is great news and through citywide park advocacy, parks nonprofits, funders and advocates should work with Atlanta DPR to understand their needs and campaign for a revised impact fee ordinance that provides adequate funds for park land acquisition as well as park development to ensure that new parks are opened in a timely fashion to meet the needs of a growing population.

The general concept of a parkland dedication fee (or park impact fee) is that in order to adequately parks and recreation facilities for new residents of newly built housing (or guests of newly built hotels and motels), the fairest way is to assess the developers of new housing and new hotels. This is accomplished through city ordinance by the Mayor and City Council. According to research and analysis done by Dr. John Crompton of Texas A&M University,⁵⁵ a parkland dedication ordinance doesn't result in increased prices for new housing. Prevailing market rates drive prices that buyers pay, so additional costs (just like

⁵⁴ - <https://saportareport.com/atlanta-city-council-presses-forward-on-impact-fees-to-fund-parks-mobility-more/>

⁵⁵ - Dr John Crompton of Texas A&M University is one of the key experts on parkland dedication ordinances and writes and speaks on the subject regularly. A recent overview was given at the NRPA Annual conference in Indianapolis, IN in September 2018: <https://s23.a2zinc.net/clients/NRPA/NRPA2018/Public/SessionDetails.aspx?FromPage=Sessions.aspx&SessionID=658&SessionDateID=12>

labor, materials, fees) are either “eaten” by the developer or costs in housing construction are reduced in other ways.⁵⁶

A good example of a modern parkland dedication ordinance is that of Austin, TX last amended in 2016. The ordinance provides a model for calculating the dedication of park land or payment of a fee in lieu of dedicated parkland, where the funds must be spent (within 2 miles of the development project) and when they must be spent by (within 5 years).

The complete details of the ordinance are on Austin’s website,⁵⁷ but Austin’s 2016 revised ordinance was developed over two years in consultation with developers, property owners and residents. The fee-in-lieu calculation specifically incorporates both a land fee and a park development fee, shown in table 25 which is the best practice as articulated by John Crompton at Texas A&M University.⁵⁸ This allows for enough funds to be collected to acquire parkland and develop the park within the five-year timeframe by which the funds must be spent.

Table 25: Austin’s Parkland Dedication Ordinance Fee-in-lieu charges.

Austin 2020 Fee	Fee in-lieu of land fee	Park development fee	Total fee per unit
Low density fee (less than 6 units per acre)	\$1,677.74	\$834.43	\$2,512.17
Medium density fee (6 to 12 units per acre)	\$1,318.22	\$655.63	\$1,973.85
High density fee (more than 12 units per acre)	\$1,018.63	\$506.62	\$1,525.25
Hotel/motel fee	\$787.40	\$391.62	\$1,179.02

The formula that governs current park impact fees charged in Atlanta have not changed since implementation in 1993. Currently, this \$410 for a single-family home on the Northside and \$246 for a single-family home on the Southside and Westside districts. In addition, Atlanta charges \$987 for transportation and \$114 for Fire/EMS for any single-family home built in Atlanta. Overall, that’s between \$1,347 and \$1,511 for all impact fees.

Further, while in the past, impact fees were spent on parkland acquisition, Atlanta DPR switched to an approach during the last mayoral administration that allowed for park improvement in addition to parkland acquisition. Given that fees are still at 1993 levels, this has the result of reducing the amount of funds available for parkland acquisition. Unless expressly allowed in future ordinance language, this policy should be discontinued.

⁵⁶ - See above presentation, slides 18-19.

⁵⁷ - <http://www.austintexas.gov/department/parkland-dedication>

⁵⁸ - See:

<https://s23.a2zinc.net/clients/NRPA/NRPA2018/Public/SessionDetails.aspx?FromPage=Sessions.aspx&SessionID=658&SessionDateID=12>

Our specific recommendations for revising the park impact fee ordinance are to ensure that funds raised are spent on parkland acquisition (as the current ordinance allows) as well as parkland development. The funds should be sufficient, based on current costs of land as well as park development, to ensure that new parks can be constructed and opened within a timely manner. Further, consideration should be given to the fact that the city has not collected fees at an adequate level for park land acquisition and development for some time. Are there ways to help Atlanta DPR to catch up from last 26 years of development. As we noted earlier, park impact fees can only be used for land acquisition and capital projects, and not operations, maintenance or programming.

C. Funding: Create A Parks Authority

We recommend that City of Atlanta pursue the establishment of a **parks authority** through legislation passed by the Georgia state legislature. If approved through the Local Legislation Pathway,⁵⁹ it would be the fourth authority established in the state of Georgia.⁶⁰ Park authorities have been established in Valdosta-Lowndes County,⁶¹ Pike County,⁶² and Moultrie-Colquitt County⁶³ in Georgia, providing a dedicated source of funding (millage) that can be combined to existing sources to increase funding for programming, operations and maintenance, as well as land acquisition and capital projects. This has put the three existing park authorities on a path to fully supporting their existing systems as well as expanding to meet the needs of their growing communities.

Across the country, Parks Authorities are a fairly common structure through which cities and counties manage their park systems. Like Housing Authorities and Development Authorities, Parks Authorities are more active participants in general commerce than traditional municipal and county departments. Distinguishing features include:

1. Irregular and specific financial transactions with individuals (registration fees, entrance fees, rentals, etc.)
2. Operation of diverse facilities (parks, recreation centers, athletic facilities, event space) designed to host the public
3. Frequently negotiating third-party contracts for programming, rentals and events
4. Significant H.R. demands stemming from large amounts of seasonal hiring (park maintenance, lifeguards, summer camps)
5. Engaging thousands of volunteers to meet a wide range of needs (coaches, mentors, park volunteers)

The structure of an authority, as opposed to a traditional government agency, provides Parks Authorities increased flexibility and nimbleness to meet residents' needs and provide quality services while providing traditional public-service benefits to employees.

⁵⁹ - <https://www.accg.org/locallegislation.php>

⁶⁰ - The parks authority legislation that has been approved for the three parks authorities in Georgia is unique for each but could be used as the basis for Atlanta legislation. See the funding for public parks agencies later in this report.

⁶¹ - <http://www.vlpra.com>

⁶² - <http://pikecorec.org>

⁶³ - <https://www.mccpra.com>

This is not the first report to recommend that Atlanta pursue a park authority, having been flagged as a missing piece in analyses stretching back nearly 20 years. Several of those analyses explored parks authorities for Atlanta DPR but owing to a lack of (then) funding models as well as challenges with both public and political support, Atlanta dropped its pursuit of legislation.

A critical piece to understanding parks authorities is that the organization has the means, as authorized by specific legislation (and with the backing of Georgia state law) to utilize an expanded variety of funding options to pursue (including property taxes, user fees, special event permitting, and the ability to issue bonds while retaining the public oversight necessary to ensure public support), as a city or county park and recreation department usually has through elected officials representing a city or county.

Unlike other sources of funding, including municipal bonds or parkland dedication / impact fees, property taxes allocated to a parks authority can be used for operation and maintenance of park and recreation facilities as well as for programming and capital projects. Having a source of revenue that can be used to operate and maintain the parks system is key to the success of some of the most highly ranked parks systems, including Minneapolis, Chicago and Seattle, as noted in our benchmarking section of this report. That said, successful park authorities have the authority to use a wide range of funding mechanisms, from bonds to earned income to special events fees while retaining citizen and community oversight that is critical for any public agency through a separate, independent board of directors.

Funds raised through property taxes⁶⁴ as well as bonds issued by the authority can be used for land acquisition, capital investment, maintenance and operations as well as programming. Such funds raised should be added to existing sources of Atlanta DPR funding, not as a replacement or substitute for general fund, trust accounts, current mill levy or impact fees. A net increase of funding is essential to build, operate and maintain the growing number of parks in increasingly dense neighborhoods across the city. Special consideration should be given to which governance structures might be best for an Atlanta parks authority. Each of the three existing park authorities in Georgia have independent appointed/elected board of directors who represent governing jurisdictions, key stakeholder groups and residents of the area that the park authorities support. The board of directors ensures accountability and follow-through on the allocation and spending of public funds, much like a city council or county commissioners court does.

To gain a better understanding of park authorities in Georgia, the Trust for Public Land interviewed park authority representatives and influencers and compiled the following best practices:

In the last decade, three park and recreation authorities have been created in the state of Georgia with the express purpose of obtaining more funds for programming, operations, maintenance and even capital costs for smaller cities and county parks and recreation systems. In each of these cases, legislation was written and approved for a specific authority, usually combining the parks and recreation departments of both a small city and county to form a single operating entity. The legislation was considered and approved in the Georgia State Legislature using the local legislation pathway⁶⁵ which follows a set of rules and notification guidelines to be considered. As one authority representative

⁶⁴ - Again, the City of Atlanta already has the authority to collect half of mill of property tax for Atlanta Parks and Recreation. This is a great start.

⁶⁵ - See <https://www.accg.org/locallegislation.php>

noted: “Once they (local house and senate legislators) know that the city and county have agreed to it, it is just a formality.”

In our research and interviews, we generally found strong support for pursuing a park authority in Atlanta, as it would dedicate a revenue stream in addition to revenues from other sources, including the general fund and general obligation bonds. That said, discussions and negotiations would need to take place to ensure that the resulting parks authority would not end up with the same or less funding than it currently has but would achieve a more balanced funding model based on multiple sources of funds, drawing on the options presented earlier in this report.

Feedback from the existing park authorities was that overall, the process was a success and has resulted in more funding for a growing parks and recreation system. They were able to hire staff, build or enhance facilities and operate and maintain facilities at a higher level. A few notes of caution were also noted:

- You need to ensure buy-in and agreement from all local political as well as key economic leaders, such as business improvement districts, local chambers of commerce, etc.
- A broad coalition made up of non-profit parks agencies, funders, key political leaders and city staff is critical to ensuring success. If state legislative representatives representing Atlanta see broad agreement locally, they can introduce the legislation via the local legislation pathway in the Georgia state legislature.

Some of the key takeaways from existing Georgia-based park authorities include the following:

- Most parks authorities create boards of seven members. Having an odd number of members helps to avoid ties. Since the Georgia park authorities are joint ventures between a city and a county, each governing body chooses three members, with the seventh roving seat alternating between the city and the county.
- City managers and county managers frequently serve as non-voting, ex officio members of the board. This helps with transparency and buy-in.
- Parks authorities also ensure transparency by performing annual audits, making audits and budgets available to the public, and doing annual presentations to local government and monthly meetings that are open to the public.
- The most challenging aspects of creating existing parks authorities were not related to approval from the state legislature (which was simple and straightforward), but rather merging city and county governance, as they were combining departments of two political bodies. These challenges were generally related to HR (shifting health insurance, the inability to guarantee to same position or salary, etc.). Existing authorities reported losing staff members during this process. For this reason, it is important to reduce uncertainty among staff to avoid attrition. This likely would not be an issue in Atlanta, as Fulton County does not have a functioning parks department.
- New park authority boards should be composed of members who have a positive outlook, believe in the vision of the authority, and bring diverse experience to the board.

- Submit proposals to form an authority the state by October or November, prior to the start of the session in January.
- It is important to give the authority sufficient time to establish itself. Appointing a board and handling internal management issues like hiring, benefits, and book-keeping all take time. Moultrie-Colquitt County Parks and Recreation Authority was forced to be operational within six months of approval and reported that the process was extremely rushed.
- Set the new authority up for success by adequately funding it. Do not revert to the same budget that the department of parks and recreation had if it was not sufficient. There will be additional costs associated with forming the authority that would have been previously handled by city or county government, such as accounting, annual audits and human resources expenses.
- If possible, convince the state to agree to forego sales tax on the authority. This can be a significant additional cost for new parks authorities, according to some of the officials that we spoke to.
- One benefit of establishing an authority is that its budget naturally grows. As property taxes increase due to higher values and new construction, the value of the millage increases over time.

One final recommendation is to incorporate any lessons learned into the language of the bill authorizing the park authority and addressing a few of the issues that representatives from several authorities brought up, namely any additional costs related to accounting and financing (audit, etc.) as well as the need to change sales tax.

D. Funding: Revise and Expand Earned Income Practices

Revising and expanding earned income practices and securing revenue for park operations and maintenance from earned revenue opportunities in parks is a longer-term strategy. Earned income efforts can help program parks, offering food and drink, but also seating, shade, and the ability to rent equipment to enjoy the park (bikes, kayaks, skates, etc.). Vendors can serve as “eyes on the park” offering reports on parks activities, flagging issues and notifying park staff of needed repairs. Atlanta should take advantage of the best practices from nonprofit and public parks agencies in cities using more flexible “rental fee per day” rates and seasonal contracts that provide “best value” versus the traditional multi-year “lowest cost bidder” contracts that public park agencies define as the “norm.”

Historically, park concessions are governed by public agencies that yield long term contracts for minimal services through very highly regulated processes. The usual outcome is a multi-year contract to the lowest bidder, requiring oversight from the public agency and a high degree of financial disclosure by the vendor. In this highly regulated model, the standard fee is “percentage of proceeds” paid to the public parks agency which has the “right” to examine the vendor’s profit and loss statements or “books.” Sweetheart deals are often obtained and renewed by long-standing vendors that have political or other connections and have “a legacy.” Traditional concessions usually offer very standard park food

and drink⁶⁶ or equipment rentals, such as canoes, kayaks or bicycles. Traditionally, concession income generated for a public park agency is underwhelming, as few low-bid vendors are provided the incentives to be innovative, given the focus on costs and compliance practices required. Finally, income often just is returned to the general fund versus staying with a park or facility through a trust account, as we discussed earlier in the report.

Concessions operated by parks nonprofits in New York City challenged this traditional approach in the 1990s, when the Central Park Conservancy began to manage concession contracts under city agreements. These new agreements ensured a split of the proceeds between city and nonprofit in exchange for a freer hand in bidding out concessions for good fits in location, food and other offerings. The first Shake Shack in Madison Square Park⁶⁷ in midtown Manhattan really fueled interest by restaurant businesses that wanted to be located in a popular park. The next wave of change was the rise of mobile food vendors (trucks, trailers and carts) setting up in vacant parking lots in downtowns of cities across the United States in the 2010s. Mobile food vendors rented space from private landowners paid a flat rental fee per day. In cities like Boston, parks nonprofits adopted this model and ran with it.

The Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy in Boston has built a robust earned revenue model with seasonal and year-round mobile food vendors. Through an annual request for proposal (RFP) process, they bring a combination of 35 trucks, carts and trikes out weekly to the Greenway. Vendors agree to a specific spot at a specific price (rental fee per day) and are billed monthly. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue is generated annually, with a full-time earned revenue manager handling not only this program, but the operation of a custom carousel, opportunities for companies to do sampling and promotions of products and services as well as two seasonal beer and wine gardens.⁶⁸

The Greenway's experience is matched in a growing number of parks and parks agencies focusing on "best value" versus "lowest cost bidder." So far, where nonprofit parks organizations have seen success, public agencies do as well. The Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board now has unique food and drink (including beer and wine sales) concessions at a growing number of its historic park venues.⁶⁹

E. Funding: Revise facility rental and special events revenue practices

Both facility rentals and special events are two additional areas that result in additional revenue but need to be approached carefully. While they may yield higher revenues over time, if Atlanta DPR isn't allowed to retain earned revenue to fund park projects and programming, there is limited value for Atlanta DPR in pursuing changes to either of these efforts. That said, we wanted to offer some examples for special events that take place in parks in other cities as examples for how Atlanta could proceed with regard to special events. The key in both "daily" rentals of park facilities as well as the licensing of special events is transparency. Rules, regulations and fees should be revised annually and disclosed via Atlanta DPR.

Regular rental of park facilities is a tried and true (but generally not well leveraged) strategy for park revenue. Park facility rental is usually governed by a city ordinance, setting rental fees, damage deposits, cancellation terms and more. To be most effective, the fees should be reviewed on an annual basis and

⁶⁶ - We think of standard park food as hot dogs, burgers, chips, sodas and ice cream.

⁶⁷ - <https://www.madisonsquarepark.org/mad-sq-food/shake-shack>

⁶⁸ - <https://www.rosekennedygreenway.org/visit/food/>

⁶⁹ - https://www.minneapolisparcs.org/parks_destinations/food_drink/

should be competitive with other nearby park systems. To be fair, care should be given in charging fees in lower income communities as well as giving priority for neighbors to reserve their local picnic shelter at their neighborhood park. Again, Atlanta DPR has a set of trust accounts that allow fees collected to be reinvested back into parks and programming. That said, while revenue into the existing trust accounts is growing, the overall number of trust accounts is not. Traditional examples are Golf and Tennis fees. Summer recreation program fees are another example. Fees for usages of fields and facilities in Piedmont Park go into a trust fund for Piedmont Park improvements and conservancy operating costs.

Special Event Revenue – A small but growing number of cities, including Atlanta are hosting large special events – usually ticketed in parks on an annual basis. The most common examples are large, multi-day concerts, food and art festivals or other events, like the Shaky Knees Festival in Atlanta. As a rule, these can be very tricky and difficult to manage and careful consideration should be given to neighborhoods and businesses close to the park / venue, partners, terms of what is paid and where the money goes to, where funds collected go and much more.

The most well-known examples that generally have positive benefits for their park systems are Lollapalooza⁷⁰ in Grant Park in Chicago and the Austin City Limits Music Festival (ACL)⁷¹ in Zilker Park in Austin, TX. Both are owned and managed by C3 Presents, Inc. (C3) an Austin-based affiliate of Live Nation since 2014.⁷²

In terms of benefits, each event has a contract between the vendor and the public agency that details revenue, benefits, damages and more. The latest contract for Lollapalooza and Chicago Park District was signed in 2012 and runs through 2021. The parks district receives 13.75 percent of the admissions revenue this year, plus 5 percent of all sponsorship revenue in excess of \$3.25 million, and 5 percent of all food and beverage revenue in excess of \$3 million. While C3 is entitled to keep all profits from the event after those costs, it is responsible for all cleanup and damage in the park. From 2012 through 2016, the Chicago Parks District has collected \$19.73 million in payments, fees and fines for park damages from Lollapalooza, or about \$4.9 M annually.

The Austin Parks Foundation is the presenting sponsor of the Austin City Limits Music Festival through an agreement with C3 and receives a percentage of ticket sales to the two three-day festivals held on two adjoining weekends in the fall. In the 13 years of ACL, the festival has contributed \$35 million for Austin parks, largely through the Austin Parks Foundation. In 2018, the festival contributed \$5.1 million directly to the Austin Parks Foundation for park projects across the City of Austin parks system.

Other large concerts or events in city parks make a donation to the public parks agency or a parks nonprofit as part of their community benefit effort. That said, fees should be sufficient to ensure that adequate restoration and repair can be made to the parks where the events take place, this is a key part of the agreements in both Chicago and Austin.

Again, while large events are challenging to manage, they can result in proceeds that can be used to improve the park event venues as well as benefitting other parks in the system that need improvements. Such is the case in Austin for well over a decade.

⁷⁰ - <https://www.lollapalooza.com>

⁷¹ - <https://www.aclfestival.com>

⁷² - Live Nation owns 51 percent of C3 Presents.

F. Funding: Leverage funding from other public sources, including Watershed, Transportation, Invest Atlanta, school districts, State funding sources and more.

Atlanta DPR works with a number of other public agencies, other departments in the city, such as Watershed and Transportation, as well as separate government entities, such as the Atlanta Independent School District to collaboratively fund park improvements, infrastructure repairs and environmental restoration projects. These public-public partnerships seem like no-brainers at first glance but given that different departments have different sources of funding and different audiences that they serve, it is not as common as one might think. In recent years, Atlanta DPR has sought and received assistance from different departments for drainage issues, environmental restoration and active transportation needs and we encourage them to continue to look for opportunities to solve challenges in this creative way. Most public funding comes from bonds, either general revenue (watershed, transportation if backed by rate payers) or general obligation (parks, schools, transportation) so another department providing park or recreation specific improvements may not be permitted.

However, if temporary or permanent access to parkland is needed for work to repair a water line or sewer, provide lay down space for contractors or restore a stream bank, Atlanta DPR may be able to collect a fee. A growing number of cities have a charge per day for temporary use of parkland for both public agencies as well as private utilities, including cellular network providers or power companies. There's a fee-schedule for permanent use of parkland (such as the installation of electrical substation, utility vault or a cellular network).

Finally, Atlanta DPR should continue to pursue funding opportunities from both Federal and State agencies and programs, such as the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act.

2: Increase collaboration in advocacy and citizen action to support the park system.

A. Grow city-wide parks advocacy.

Strong city-wide parks advocacy is the key ingredient to ensuring long-term success of a vibrant parks system. Public agencies, nonprofits, volunteers and funders are key partners in the effort to make park need essential in the minds of citizens, elected officials, and businesses. Atlanta already has an amazing network of players with Park Pride, Atlanta's city-wide parks nonprofit, a growing number of park specific nonprofits (Atlanta Beltline Partnership, Piedmont Park Conservancy) national nonprofits working in Atlanta (The Trust for Public Land and The Conservation Fund) and local funders who have funded park projects (including the Blank Foundation, Woodruff Foundation, and Coca Cola Foundation.) We believe that Park Pride should play the key role as convener for sustained city-wide park advocacy, based on best practices demonstrated in other cities.

With a stronger, unified effort focused on city-wide parks advocacy, the 14 or more nonprofit parks organizations⁷³ as well as dozens of friends of parks groups in Atlanta can help push for increasing funding for Atlanta DPR in ways both large and small. Increasing the annual budget, improving park impact fees and lobbying for the establishment of a parks authority are each large efforts that require **coordination, communication** and agreement on **strategy, messaging and goals**.

Examples already in place are **collaborations** like the **Atlanta Schoolyards** project,⁷⁴ the newly opened Kathryn Johnston Memorial Park and the **annual Parks & Greenspace Conference**. A more formal coalition should be created with Park Pride serving as the convener and regular meetings set up to explore an annual agenda and overall goal setting. Austin, TX is a good example of how such a coalition can work, with the city-wide Austin Parks Foundation taking the lead, working with the city and a dozen local and national nonprofit partners to help fund and pass a new long-range master plan⁷⁵ for the parks system as well as campaign for protecting the parkland dedication ordinance.⁷⁶

Austin Parks Foundations similarly serves as a model for how a citywide parks nonprofit can collaborate with a city parks department to raise funds for city park priorities. The relationship between the city and the foundation reflects consistent collaboration and coordination. For example, the city and the foundation work to address gaps where park additions or improvements should be made, the foundation contributes funds to underfunded projects, the city parks department approves all projects, including designs and materials, as well as participating in the construction monitoring and has final approval of completed projects before they are handed over to the City for operation and maintenance.

Finding the proper structure in Atlanta must focus on what role Park Pride would like to play and what role Atlanta DPR would like Park Pride to play. Are both comfortable with Park Pride's philanthropic role and strategy expanding into this space, or would the City be better served by creating a foundation more closely aligned with the City? Those questions should be explored based on which structure makes the most sense and the scenario that is most palatable to philanthropic funders.

B. Continue to expand the parks volunteer and friends of parks programs.

Park Pride currently supports over 150 volunteer park groups working in parks across Atlanta, as well as running a large-scale volunteering program. They have 2.5 full-time staff dedicated to these efforts in Atlanta and run a variety of support services including park grants, ability for friends' groups to fundraise under their umbrella for local park projects and helping with technical expertise, tools and training. As a result of the hard work of Park Pride as well as many of the other park nonprofits, Atlanta sees **.10 hours per resident** donated to Atlanta parks annual, which ranks its **fourth** of the nine city park systems we benchmarked Atlanta against.

⁷³ - TPL counts parks nonprofits as separate 501c3 chartered organizations that reported spending via an IRS Form 990. We know that they are many more parks nonprofits, friends' groups and others that work with Park Pride through its park and volunteer programs.

⁷⁴ - We should note that TPL is one of several partners in the schoolyards program, with Park Pride taking the lead in working with Atlanta DPR, the Atlanta Independent School District and community groups to design and implement pilot schoolyard projects.

⁷⁵ - <http://www.austintexas.gov/austinfutureparks>

⁷⁶ - <https://austinparks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Parks-Orgs-PLD-Recommendation-2019.pdf>

However, like we've recommended in other areas of funding land acquisition, park construction as well as daily maintenance and operations, there needs to be more "public" in this partnership. Atlanta DPR should consider having one or more dedicated employees assigned to work with Park Pride on volunteer efforts. Atlanta DPR staff would (1) identify priority projects or needs for which it would like volunteer support, (2) collaborate with Park Pride staff on the development of scopes of work for volunteer workdays, and (3) marshal public resources such as materials, permits and skilled workers to support volunteer efforts.

Atlanta DPR provides \$90,000 (plus office space) annually to Park Pride, but it should consider funding an expansion of the volunteer program. To date, the philanthropic and corporate communities (in addition to individual donors) have provided the lion's share of support for Park Pride's ongoing efforts (as well much of the capital costs for a growing number of new or expanded parks). An exploration of increased public investment in Park Pride programs could build upon Park Pride's ability to expand capacity and impact.

Currently, Park Pride provides the following services:

- Runs a park volunteering program in parks across Atlanta.
- Manages the "friends of parks" program for larger parks, with 74 groups currently active inside the Atlanta.
- Manages an "adopt a park" program, focused on supporting 72 parks (and their volunteers) under one-quarter acre.
- Provides day-to-day management (via fee-for service contract) of the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership's Adopt-the-Atlanta BeltLine program, which allows individuals and groups to care for BeltLine parks and trails on an ongoing basis.
- Provides a fiscal partner program, allowing friends of parks groups to raise funds under the Park Pride non-profit umbrella for improvements to their parks.

The work of Park Pride mirrors the successful efforts that we are seeing in other U. S. cities. Volunteering in parks has seen tremendous growth in the past 20 years and got an unexpected boost from the Great Recession of 2007-2008, when public parks agencies experienced sharp cuts in their budgets for up to 9 years.⁷⁷ Park conservancies and friends' groups, including Park Pride as well as other Atlanta park conservancies, continued to form and grow and tackle more and more projects, helping depleted city parks departments manage parks that saw dramatically increased usage regardless of hard economic times. The efficacy of these new and emerging groups was significantly increased by the rise of volunteerism in parks.

This surge in volunteerism is part of a national trend, with tremendous growth across the United States. Per the Corporation for National and Community Service, about 62.6 million Americans (over 25 percent of the adult population) gave 7.8 billion hours of volunteer service worth \$184 billion in 2015.⁷⁸

While citizen volunteers are well understood as a strategic resource in general, understanding a specific set of roles that volunteers can fill in parks can be more challenging. Often volunteers will need to work with a myriad of people, including unionized government staff, nonprofit park conservancy staff, private sector design and construction staff, and a wide variety of funders. Some volunteer programs have

⁷⁷ - "The Great Recession's Profound Impact on Parks and Recreation" - <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2018/february/the-great-recessions-profound-impact-on-parks-and-recreation/>

⁷⁸ - Corporation for National and Community Service, <http://www.nationalservice.gov/vcla>

mastered these challenges, though. The National Park Service Volunteers-in-Parks program saw, in 2018, over 300,000 volunteers contributing more than 7.2 million hours, valued at \$179 million.⁷⁹

More funding from Atlanta DPR yields more staff and resources at Park Pride to continue to grow the adopt-a-park and volunteer programs to allow volunteers to easily and effectively work with Atlanta DPR and other park conservancy staff to support the parks system. More committed volunteers and adopter groups results in stronger support for the Atlanta parks system and yields for more advocates for increased funding.

We also like to offer two other recommendations for consideration as part of growing the volunteer and adopt-a-park programs in Atlanta.

First is a **unified volunteering platform and tracking system** for all volunteering opportunities. There are a number of examples in use now, such as the GivePulse platform.⁸⁰ Again, additional funding – ideally public funding, to help fund increased first staffing for managing volunteer programs is key. That said, a system like GivePulse isn't overly expensive, given its pricing strategy to serve nonprofit communities as a whole.⁸¹

Park Pride is the ideal candidate to manage this system and make it available for use by all nonprofits, friends of parks group as well as Atlanta DPR staff working with volunteers in any park or greenspace in Atlanta. It can provide the ability to expand capacity, as volunteer leaders can organize, manage and promote their own events, while the system automatically tracks hours, provide smart based check-in at events and help drive recognition. GivePulse is widely used in a growing number of cities, the Austin Parks Foundation has seen tremendous success in standardizing on it and seeing it used across the city.

Second is the success of annual or bi-annual citywide volunteering and awareness days, like **It's My Park Day** in Austin⁸² or **Love Your Park** week in Philadelphia⁸³. These events bring thousands of volunteers out to parks, working on a range of projects from simple to complicated. More importantly, these events build relationships between neighborhoods in public spaces and encourage collaboration and relationship building. Cities like Austin and Philadelphia continue to see participation rise each year and more importantly, the events serve as an introduction to the adopt-a-park and "friends of parks" services that the nonprofit organization agencies provide.

These city-wide events are, however, a big lift. Additional funding from a combination of public and philanthropic partners is needed to adequately staff the preparation and logistics of such an event and we strongly encourage that unified volunteering platform be implemented prior to attempting such an event. We liken the city-wide events to running dozens to up hundreds of concurrent volunteer projects, requiring sponsorship, training, willing volunteer leaders and addressing a host of logistical challenges. Finally, Hands on Atlanta organizes an annual MLK Day of Service program that works across the city of Atlanta and is not just limited to parks.

⁷⁹ - <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1207/npsawards2019.htm>

⁸⁰ <https://www.givepulse.com> – See <https://austinparks.givepulse.com/event/117615-Open-Volunteer-Opportunity-Green-Campus-improvements-at-Barrington-School-Park> for an example.

⁸¹ - <https://www.givepulse.com/pricing> - their Platinum pricing for nonprofits is just under \$1700 a year, with nominal fees for

⁸² - <https://austinparks.org/events/its-my-park-day-fall-2019/>

⁸³ - <https://loveyourpark.org>

3: Increase collaboration in programming, operations and maintenance of parks and recreation facilities.

A. Collaboration: Integrate all Atlanta schoolyards into the parks and recreation system, as demonstrated in the current pilot project.

Schoolyards as Parks: Push for full integration of Atlanta Public Schools yards and playgrounds into the Atlanta Parks system. Through both public and nonprofit investment, all school grounds should be open and accessible to the public after school hours and on weekends. As noted, this would grow the percentage of Atlanta residents within a 10-minute walk from 71% to 79% immediately. The Trust for Public Land has produced substantial data, coming out of the ParkServe platform, showing how needs can be met by effectively utilizing schoolyards in cities across the United States.⁸⁴ Further, both the Trust for Public Land and the Arthur M. Blank Foundation are funding a growing community schoolyards program, in conjunction with Park Pride, Atlanta Urban Land Institute (ULI) and Atlanta Public Schools.⁸⁵ This effort seems to be gathering steam in Atlanta, but public funding is needed to fully implement this strategy beyond the currently funded set of pilot schoolyards.⁸⁶

For further information, please refer to The Trust for Public Land's legacy of on-going work in New York,⁸⁷ Newark, Philadelphia, Camden, Dallas,⁸⁸ Boston, the San Francisco Bay area and the Greater Los Angeles area.⁸⁹

B. Unified or collaborative operations and maintenance practices shared between public parks agencies and parks non-profits.

Just as critical should be an initiative to pursue **integrated approaches for sharing operations and maintenance duties** between multiple public agencies (public-public partnerships, like Atlanta DPR and Atlanta Public Schools), as well as public and nonprofit agencies. New York City has a long, successful track record of dual role park administrator functions, where the Executive Director/CEOs of parks conservancies report to the Public Agency Parks Director as well as to their board of directors and both public agency and nonprofit staff work jointly day to day. Further, more and more cities are sharing responsibility for parks with city-wide park foundations and organizations. Examples include other parks in New York, including Prospect Park, as well as the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, the Austin Parks Foundation, and the Buffalo Olmsted Park Conservancy.

⁸⁴ - <https://www.tpl.org/media-room/opening-schoolyards-public-during-non-school-hours-could-alleviate-problem-park-access>

⁸⁵ - <https://www.tpl.org/media-room/atlanta-community-schoolyards-program-pilot-schools-announced>

⁸⁶ - While TPL is a partner in the schoolyards project and has been granted funds to pursue efforts in other cities, our approach is one of many. As shown in other cities like New York, public funding and leadership by public agencies is critical.

⁸⁷ - <https://www.tpl.org/blog/200-new-york-city-playgrounds-later-were-still-greening-strong>

⁸⁸ - <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2019/08/19/dallas-is-transforming-school-playgrounds-into-city-parks-and-it-couldnt-come-at-a-more-crucial-time/>

⁸⁹ - <https://www.tpl.org/keywords/playgrounds>

Beginning with the development and opening of Central Park in the 1860s, parks have periods of great investment, often followed by declines in investment and with that ongoing programming, operations and maintenance. While this has happened in many cities, Central Park in New York has seen the full cycle of boom and bust and provides a unique narrative for looking at the rise of public and nonprofit parks partnerships.

From the 1960s with the continuing “white flight” from cities, coupled with the movement of industrial and manufacturing businesses into the suburbs and beyond, funding continued to drop, and parks become less visited, more overgrown, and sadly ill-maintained. Residents of cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia began to organize to see what they could do to shore up some of the worst parts and work with both resource-strapped city governments, as well as individuals willing to invest money, time and expertise to start bringing parks back. In New York City, city parks staff had dropped to 199 by 1977 and the reduction in staffing led to a spiral of disrepair.

Betsy Barlow Rogers, an architect and nearby resident, volunteered her services and began to work with interested citizens to assemble a plan to restore Central Park. She and fellow experts dug out the original plans by Olmsted and Vaux and began to look at what could be restored and how much it would cost. They proposed a new management structure that would bring together City parks staff and a newly formed nonprofit conservancy to raise funds and to rebuild, operate, and maintain the park moving forward. The plan was ambitious and not without controversy, given that this was the first public-private partnership proposed for a public park. In addition to laying the plan for rehabilitation, they established a set of stewardship requirements that included the following:

- An adequate revenue stream;
- Multiyear planning;
- Accountable personnel;
- Equitable resource distribution;
- Responsiveness to changing demands; and
- Entrepreneurial management.⁹⁰

While these stewardship requirements seem to be the height of common sense in public-private parks partnerships now, they were radical when proposed. The organizers thought they were necessary to assure both the public and government officials alike that the focus was on bringing Central Park back to its former glory.

In 1978, Rogers was appointed administrator of Central Park by Mayor Koch in addition to her role as executive director of the Central Parks Conservancy. In this unique joint role, she served as overall manager of the park, overseeing both City parks staff and Conservancy staff, who worked together to implement the plans that the Conservancy had laid out. A key focus early on was the hiring of horticulture staff that returned to the Zone Gardening philosophy laid out many years before by City Landscape Architect Herman Merkel.⁹¹ Further, key responsibilities of the horticulture staff were to ensure that their zones were free of litter and graffiti daily, in addition to their weeding, planting, mulching, and watering duties.

⁹⁰ - Lopate, Phillip. Legacy. 164-165.

⁹¹ - Lopate, Phillip. Legacy. 75. See The zone horticulture recommendation later in this report.

For the 36 years from 1980 to 2016, the Central Parks Conservancy has invested \$875 million on the park. The conservancy now privately raises 75% of the park's \$67 million annual budget, has a current staff of 380⁹², and manages 3,000 volunteers contributing nearly 55,000 hours (involved in horticulture care, maintenance and programming).⁹³

While it is unrealistic to assume that any other conservancy or nonprofits can raised that amount of money, the shared staffing approach practiced at Central Park, together with the concept of zone management (detailed further in the next section) are excellent examples to pursue. While there are many ways to coordinate, looking to pilot collaboration between Park Pride staff coordinating volunteer efforts, or Piedmont Park Conservancy staff coordinating improvements in Piedmont Park, there a few steps in consider taking, even in a pilot approach in one or several parks, including:

- Daily communication and collaboration between public and non-profit staff. Start with a quick regular stand-up meeting to ensure each team knows what the other is up to. Let appropriate staff know if there's an issue that the other team needs to address. Follow-up on previous days' issues and let them know they were handled.
- Play to organizational strengths. If a public agency can handle mowing and a conservancy has a horticulturist that can plant and weed landscape beds, divide and conquer and communicate results and challenges via the regular meetings.
- Wear consistent uniforms: both public and non-profit should be attired in a similar fashion and should be approachable by any member of the public for questions or to address an issue. Staff should respond consistently to questions and requests from the public, regardless of the agency that they work for, working from a shared set of protocols.
- Look for potential ways to address issues that are on neither team's scope of work. Are there ways to pilot an approach for something new? Follow-up and see how the pilot approach works. Adjust as needed.
- The goal of any pilot effort should be to create a longer, more permanent partnership, sharing tools, resources, management and more.

We recommend that Atlanta DPR, working with Atlanta parks nonprofits and Atlanta based funders fund a pilot effort for collaborative operations in Atlanta. A new Westside Park Conservancy position or function should be funded for an initial three-year period, with 50 percent of the funds from Atlanta DPR and 50 percent of funds from local Atlanta funders. The focus of this function would be on programming, volunteering and operations and maintenance efforts for the first phase of the park when it opens to the public.

The position or function should be housed in an existing parks nonprofit, such as Park Pride or the Atlanta Beltline Partnership to allow for maximum time to be spent on Westside Park and taking advantage of existing policies, procedures and services (donations, payroll, insurance, etc.) that an organization like Park Pride can offer. This recommendation is consistent with how both Central Park Conservancy and the Prospect Park Alliance began in New York City, with the City Parks department funding 50 percent of the dual role of Park Administrator and Executive Director for the first few years.

⁹² - Lout, Maura, personal communication with the author.

⁹³ - Central Park Conservancy: Annual Report 2015: <http://www.centralparknyc.org/assets/pdfs/annual-reports/2015-Annual-Report.pdf>

C. Zone management strategy for maintenance and operations in parks, combining volunteers, public agency staff as well as parks non-profit staff working together.

Hand in hand with increased collaboration between public and nonprofit partners is the need to pursue **zone management**⁹⁴ for maintenance and operations in larger parks as a pilot project to gauge opportunities, effectiveness and integration of more volunteers into the mix.

The concept, especially for large urban parks is not a new one, beginning in New York City's Central Park over 90 years ago. The approach was in response to decline of Central Park's landscape following World War I, following the investment and neglect development cycle of American urban parks New York's Central Park has seen since the late 1860s.

This decline was detailed in a 1927 report by Herman W. Merkel, the Parks Department Landscape Architect in the city of New York. His recommendations to turn around the deterioration included, among other things, the assignment of an individual supervisor to Central Park and the subdivision of the park into seven or eight sections, with a foreman and gardening crew assigned to each section. The Zone Gardener model has been re-instituted several times since this period, with the Central Park Conservancy using it in stages and different locations since its establishment.⁹⁵ A number of other parks in New York, Boston and other cities now use, often in combination with a shared staffing mode, that has a coordinated management structure that coordinates the day-to-day activities of both public agency as well as park nonprofit staff working in the park.

We should also note that even a part-time zone program is an excellent way to begin. For example, several parks, like Brooklyn Bridge Park as well as the Rose Kennedy Greenway have staff assigned to work in their zones one to two days a week. In season, they are joined by a regular (recurring) volunteer that works through the season with the same staff person every week. During the other days, staff may work on other projects in other portions of the park as assigned or may coordinate staff working in their zone. With zone work, fewer issues or to-dos are missed and both staff and volunteers develop a strong sense of ownership to the park zone. This results in a better, more well-maintained park.

In addition to (a) piloting a part-time zone program, we recommend (b) an initial focus on horticulture for zone work, with (c) monitoring and flagging any issues with more maintenance functions, including paths, seating, lighting, and other elements that may require more specialized tools and expertise.

Conclusion

As seen from our examination of the many variants of funding available to both public parks agencies, park funding is an increasingly complicated picture. The last 18 years have seen a number of challenges presented to most U. S. cities and Atlanta is no exception. Earlier in this report, we tried to highlight the full range of funding options from most common to least common, available to both public and nonprofit agencies. Atlanta is similar among many parks and recreation systems in that it relies primarily

⁹⁴ - Park zone management: <http://www.centralparknyc.org/about/blog/zone-management.html>

⁹⁵ - Lopate, Phillip. Legacy: the preservation of wilderness in New York City parks: 75.

on general fund revenue, largely drawn from property and sales tax revenue distributed by the City through its general fund annual budget allocations.

Atlanta, however, is unique. It is a strong and vibrant city. It has seen economic growth that is the envy of many other U. S. cities. An expanded park system exists thanks to the efforts of the Atlanta Department of Parks and Recreation (Atlanta DPR), political leaders, park advocates and philanthropic foundations. After periods of disinvestment in the 1970s through the 1990s, Atlanta added 40 percent more parkland and has grown the budget by 46 percent (with some peaks and valleys) in the last 17 years. Atlanta has added another 50,000 residents as well, not to mention increased numbers of daily commuters as well as annual visitors to the city.

It's time for Atlanta to take their efforts to expand, improve as well as maintain their park system at a level rivaling their benchmarked competitors, like Philadelphia, Chicago and even Minneapolis.

With the recommendations of (1) **Grow the public Funding** base, (2) **Collaboration in advocacy and citizen action**, and (3) **Collaboration in programming, operations and management**, we foresee a great future for the Atlanta parks system.