

Meeting on Atlanta's Greenspace

Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020-21, Atlantans took to parks, trails, forests, and our rivers and creeks, for refuge, fresh air and sunshine, and to combat social isolation (safely and at a distance). Parks and recreation centers further served essential functions as food distribution points, testing sites, and distance learning centers. These flexible urban spaces emerged as critical infrastructure—cornerstones of our community—that contribute to the resiliency of our city. As COVID-19 precautions have begun to relax, parks are once again on the front lines as places that people gather outdoors to connect with one another in greater numbers, to exercise on our trails and fields, and to adjust to social norms in free and open spaces.

Now more than ever, we recognize greenspace as a vital component of a healthy, equitable, resilient, and thriving future Atlanta.

Participating Organizations



Atlanta
BeltLine
Partnership



Greening Youth
FOUNDATION



THE
CONSERVATION FUND



THE
TRUST
FOR
PUBLIC
LAND



Meeting on Atlanta's Greenspace

Agenda

Welcome + Introductions

5 min

Why Are You the Best Candidate for Mayor?

5 min

Briefing Document Review + Discussion

40 min

Candidate Questions

10 min

To advance a sustainable future for Atlanta, we must focus attention on both our urban spaces and our natural spaces and resources. Atlanta's projected population growth of approximately 106,000 people (a 20.4% increase, or 2% per year) over the next ten years further stresses a current challenge: making intentional decisions regarding our use of land that support our local ecology, our economy, and our quality of life in equal measure.

Q: What role do you believe Atlanta's greenspaces and natural resources (such as our lush tree canopy, older growth forests, and proximity to rivers and creeks) play in making it a place where people want to live and businesses want to locate?

Q: Please share your thoughts on Atlanta's current park system and how it serves Atlantans.

By most national standards, the City of Atlanta park system is below average in terms of quantity of parkland available, park access, and how well parks are maintained. In fact, Atlanta fell from 40th to 49th place on The Trust for Public Land's ParkScore, a ranking of park systems in America's 100 largest cities.

Data shows that only 6% of Atlanta's land is dedicated to parks, far below the national average of 15%. Meanwhile, 28% of Atlanta residents do not live within a 10-minute walk of a park. Recent acquisitions like Lake Charlotte, the anticipated opening of Westside Park, and the continued development of the Atlanta BeltLine Trail are a step in the right direction, but the city needs significantly more parkland.

Q: What will you do to prioritize vitally important land acquisition and ensure we have the resources we need to meet crucial greenspace needs over the next four years and beyond?

Public parks and greenspace are essential to people and wildlife. Regular exposure and access to nature has been shown to have significant benefits for public health. In addition, healthy greenspaces reduce the heat island effect and increase our resilience to climate change. They also provide habitat for wildlife that, in turn, provide services necessary for our survival, such as pest control and pollination. As the City in the Forest, Atlanta has an immediate and critical obligation to create high-quality urban habitat to ensure the future health of people and wildlife.

The Atlanta City Design and urban ecology framework—adopted into the city charter in 2017—aims to protect and expand the ecological value of Atlanta's watersheds, forest, and habitat in the face of rapid urbanization and loss of our trees, greenspaces, and trail connections. It proposes additional large investments in new parks—the Chattahoochee River Park and the South River Park—as well as an approach to growth that focuses new development in appropriate areas, while protecting ecologically valuable areas as conservation corridors. Earlier this year, Atlanta city leaders proposed constructing a large city development project on one of the properties the Atlanta City Design identified as integral to one such proposed 1,200-acre greenspace corridor.

Q: Please share your thoughts on the Atlanta City Design and how your administration will use this framework over the next four years.

Throughout the pandemic, Atlantans turned to parks as places to exercise, play, and safely socialize, underscoring the important role that parks play for protecting and enhancing our health and wellness. Parks are not nice to have amenities; they are critical infrastructure. Unfortunately, this critical infrastructure does not get the attention and resources it needs.

Through the public engagement process for ActivateATL (the Department of Parks and Recreation's 10-year master plan), we learned that:

- 24% of City of Atlanta residents reported that park facilities are not well maintained. This is double the national average.
- Park maintenance and improvement-related issues are the #1 reason that prevents Atlantans from using parks and rec facilities.

Q: How would your administration address the system-wide dissatisfaction with the state of our parks and lack of adequate resources for park maintenance?

Data provided through a special assessment of Atlanta's park system by The Trust for Public Land (and commissioned by the Arthur M. Blank Foundation) indicates that 37% of total park spending comes from park conservancies, philanthropic, and private funders, a far larger percentage than in other peer cities included in the study.

While greater public investment is necessary to build and maintain a world-class park system, private dollars are being left on the table. The philanthropic community has expressed to its nonprofit partners an interest in additional investment in greenspace if the City committed additional dollars to maintenance. Additionally, the Department of Parks and Recreation's concerns about losing control or setting precedent often diminish (or completely eliminate) the potential for park conservancies and Friends of the Park groups to fundraise for needed park improvements.

Q: How would you approach funding the city's park maintenance budget to best leverage support from park conservancies, "Friends" groups, and the philanthropic community to ensure all available dollars are utilized for a better park system?

Disparities in minority unemployment and income plague the United States, where unemployment among African Americans can be nearly twice that of the community overall. Recent data from the 2019 American Community Survey supports this assertion. It reported that while unemployment for Atlanta residents over age 16 was 5%, unemployment among African American residents over 16 was 8.2%.

Considering the multitude of new parks coming online, the infrastructure challenges of existing greenspaces, and the chronic understaffing of the Department of Parks and Recreation, green job training and workforce development presents an opportunity to increase employment (particularly amongst youth of color aged 16-25 who are not college bound) while also addressing the needs of Atlanta's parks department and park system.

Q: Would your administration explore opportunities to support green job training programs that lead to public sector employment opportunities, thereby reducing unemployment (specifically amongst Atlanta's youth of color) while also meeting a critical need across city departments (e.g., Parks and Recreation, Watershed Management)?

The 2014 canopy assessment measured Atlanta's Urban Tree Canopy (UTC) cover at 47.1%—the highest among large cities in the country. Six years prior in 2008, the UTC was 47.9%. While we wait for the results of the latest canopy study, the pace of development in Atlanta accelerates and more trees are being destroyed across the city. Sustainability strategies consistently include trees as a necessary part of successful city planning, but Atlanta loses more trees each year.

Trees in yards can reduce flooding events and land erosion. Mature trees can intercept 25 to 35 percent of the rainwater that falls on them, greatly lessening the strain on our stormwater infrastructure. Trees capture fine particulate matter and act as sound barriers, meaning residents near roadways are better protected from air and noise pollution. More trees help to cool air temperatures which is important because heat is currently the leading weather-related killer in the United States.

With all these benefits of more trees for Atlanta, we struggle to slow the loss of mature trees and increase the planting of new. It's been two decades since Atlanta's Tree Protection Ordinance was first adopted in 2001, and for the last three years, there has been an effort to rewrite it so that we can better enforce the protection of trees from illegal and unnecessary removal.

Q: How would you address the issues of enforcement of the current and future tree ordinance?

Impervious surfaces like roads, parking lots, and roofs prevent rainwater from soaking into the ground. When it rains in an urban area like Atlanta, flooding can occur which may lead to property damage, a degraded natural environment, and even become a threat to public health and safety. Additionally, because Atlanta's stormwater infrastructure is aging, an increase in flooding is expected to cause damage to the City's water treatment facilities.

A Stormwater Utility would fund the operation of a stormwater management program. It is considered the most equitable method for funding a stormwater program because of three features. First, the fees charged are based on a property's contribution to the need for stormwater management. Second, all users of the system pay to use the program. Third, all collected fees are spent only on operating and administering the stormwater management program. Stormwater utility user fees will provide the City with much needed revenue for maintenance and construction of new "gray" and "green" infrastructure projects. Credit and payment assistance programs (like the City's existing *Care and Conserve* for water bill assistance) are methods to promote equity for unique conditions within a given stormwater utility's rate structure.

Q: How do you think the city should best manage stormwater? Do you support the establishment of a Stormwater Utility in the City of Atlanta?