



Capacity Building Proposal

SUMMARY

City parks and open space improve our physical and psychological health, strengthen our communities, and make our cities and neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work. Numerous studies have proven the amazing social, environmental, economic, and health benefits parks bring to a city and its people.

The City of Akron maintains 161 parks encompassing over 3800 acres. Although the City's budget provides for basic parks maintenance, the parks still lacked the TLC needed to thrive. The City of Akron was faced with the dilemma of how to reenergize the parks, making them attractive, inviting spaces while engaging the communities that frequent them.

In Spring 2018, the City of Akron Mayor, Dan Horrigan, authorized the City's Office of Integrated Development (OID) to partner with Friends of the Metro Parks to create the Akron Parks Collaborative. The Akron Parks Collaborative would be tasked with identifying ways to engage the community in creating a sustainable model of maintaining Akron parks that are clean, inviting and engaging public spaces.

Since the organization's formation, the City of Akron and Akron Parks Collaborative have launched the Akron Parks Challenge as well as the first annual Akron Parks Week. As a result, FIVE parks are undergoing major improvements through community led design, THREE Friends of Parks stewardship groups formed, \$600,000 of committed City funds leveraged an additional \$113,000 in private funds and numerous residents throughout the City are engaging with their parks.

The Importance of Parks:

- Reimagining the Civic Commons has measured the positive impact of improved public spaces (with community ownership), showing growth in civic engagement, socioeconomic mixing, environmental sustainability and value creation (<http://civiccommons.us/success/>)
- Studies show that parks benefit cities by improving our physical and mental health while making our cities and neighborhoods more attractive places to live and work. ("The Benefits of Parks, Trust for Public Land")
- Research shows the benefits of exposure to parks for the entire population. It reduces stress, positively impacts infant birthweight, and improves overall health. (Green Cities: Good Health, <https://depts.washington.edu/hhwb/>)

Everyone deserves quality parks within a 10-minute walking distance to reap these benefits. The growth and well-being of our city depends on it.

ABOUT AKRON PARKS COLLABORATIVE

Mission

The mission of the Akron Parks Collaborative is to engage the community around the creation and sustainability of vibrant public spaces within City of Akron parks. We work with Akron Parks Challenge recipients to engage their community and decide how to spend city funds to improve parks. We also foster and support affiliated Friends Groups around single city parks and support programs that engage residents in city parks.

Need

Over the years, city resources have dwindled and parks have suffered. The current administration sees the importance of public spaces in revitalizing neighborhoods: that quality spaces are essential for the health and well-being of our neighborhoods. However, the City does not have the resources to fix the problems alone.

Nonprofit Park Groups are emerging throughout the country to support various County, National and City Parks. It has become an essential piece in building a sustainable model for funding and community engagement. Legitimately empowering residents and building true community/public/private partnerships is the only way for civic programs to succeed and have a lasting impact. Akron Parks Collaborative was formed in partnership with the City of Akron to fill this role.

Programs

Akron Parks Challenge:

The City of Akron, Akron Parks Collaborative, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Akron Civic Commons together launched the first-ever Akron Parks Challenge. The Akron Parks Challenge invites neighborhood residents, leaders and organizations alike to pitch their vision for their favorite park and how they can partner to achieve the change they wish to see. Akron Mayor Dan Horrigan said, "This is every citizen's opportunity to help the City co-create welcoming, accessible, and functional spaces for the community to enjoy. To apply, all you need is a great idea for how to invest in an Akron park and a plan for engaging the community to help make it a reality."

The Akron Parks Challenge is all about bringing people together and empowering neighbors to invest in and take partial ownership of public spaces, creating lasting stewards for our community parks. A huge misconception exists that residents are not interested in being part of the process. The Akron Parks Challenge proves the community will support an idea where they know their opinions are relevant and are guiding the decision making process.

The first year, 69 applications were submitted and 3 parks were chosen to each receive \$100,000 in improvements. Akron Parks Collaborative worked with the three communities to find out what the collective community wanted through online surveys, events, public meetings and door to door conversations. We are finishing up the final details of their chosen improvements.

Two new parks were chosen for the 2019 Challenge: Elizabeth Park and Park East. Community engagement is underway.

Parks Friends Groups: One of the amazing things the Akron Parks Challenge identified was community champions that would steward and take ownership of the parks because it allowed citizens to self-select their winning park and projects. While the City is putting up the money, the residents are overseeing the work, from planning and budgeting to hiring contractors. The residents are not just co-designing but now co-maintaining these green spaces. This new found local ownership of the parks by community neighbors has set the foundation for long-term support and advocacy for these public spaces; ensuring the parks and local residents have a voice for years to come. All five parks selected as Akron Parks Challenge recipients have a functioning “Friends” group. Newly created are Friends of Reservoir Park, Friends of Chestnut Ridge Park and Friends of Elizabeth Park. Cadillac Park and Park East already had formed groups.

Akron Parks Week: We worked closely with the City of Akron to organize the first annual Akron Parks Week. Over a one-week period, 159 volunteers participated in improvement projects around the city resulting in 6 new picnic tables placed and stained, over 20 benches painted or stained, 4 swing sets painted and 2 sets of bleachers painted.

Results

The communities involved with our Challenge parks have been newly energized. The celebratory pool party at Reservoir Park and the National Night Out Against Crime events that took place at both Reservoir Park and Chestnut Ridge, just after winning the Akron Parks Challenge, drew record attendance with a renewed energy. And the inaugural summer neighborhood concert event at Cadillac Park witnessed neighbors who live within doors of each other meeting for the first time. The neighborhood business district on Goodyear Boulevard has even experienced an increase in foot traffic and patrons due to its proximity and the renewed interest in Reservoir Park, allowing Goodyear Heights residents to rediscover their community’s walkability and support local small businesses.

New events using Chestnut Ridge Park’s WPA built amphitheater have brought people together for Shakespeare (55 attendees), Movie Night (52 attendees), Councilman’s Picnic (45 attendees) and a celebration of diversity through the arts called “Many Voices, One Akron” (75 attendees). The new playgrounds at Chestnut Ridge Park and Reservoir Park are seeing regular use after years of falling down and faded playgrounds were mostly abandoned. Volunteers have reported less trash after beautification efforts of landscaping, painting and fence art at Reservoir Park. And “regulars” are found using the new walking trail at Reservoir Park on a daily basis.

Support

2018

Support of Akron Parks Collaborative

City of Akron	\$50,000	<i>for community engagement work for Akron Parks Challenge</i>
Knight Foundation	\$25,000	<i>for capital improvements toward Cadillac Park (for 3rd park)</i>
Knight Foundation	\$10,000	<i>for marketing, prototyping, community engagement work</i>
Akron Community Foundation On the Table	\$2,000	<i>for "Many Voices, One Akron" programming at Chestnut Ridge Park</i>
TOTAL	\$87,000	

Additional support for Akron Parks Challenge Parks in partner budgets

City of Akron	\$275,000	<i>allocated to Akron Parks Challenge improvements in the City of Akron Capital Budget</i>
Northern Ohio Golf Charities	\$30,000	<i>\$30,000 to the RIGHT Committee (Residents Improving Goodyear Heights Together) toward the new nature playground</i>
GameTime	\$28,000	<i>rebate for playground equipment in at Chestnut Ridge Park</i>
TOTAL	\$333,000	

2019

Support of Akron Parks Collaborative

City of Akron	\$75,000	<i>for community engagement work for Akron Parks Challenge</i>
Knight Foundation	\$10,000	<i>for marketing, prototyping, community engagement work</i>
Neighborhood Partnership Prog	\$1,000	<i>for programming at Chestnut Ridge Park</i>
Akron Community Foundation	\$7,000	<i>for capacity building</i>
TOTAL	\$93,000	

Additional support for Akron Parks Challenge Parks in partner budgets

City of Akron	\$200,000	<i>allocated to Akron Parks Challenge improvements in the City of Akron Capital Budget</i>
United Church of Christ	\$25,000	<i>pledged for a social justice garden at Elizabeth Park</i>
Akron Community Foundation/Beyond the Table	\$13,500	<i>for a social justice garden at Elizabeth Park</i>
Keurig, Dr. Pepper	\$108,000	<i>for the KaBOOM playground at Park East</i>
Akron Civic Commons	\$72,700	<i>for the KaBOOM playground at Park East</i>
United Way	\$25,000	<i>for the KaBOOM playground at Park East</i>
Knight Foundation	\$10,000	<i>for the KaBOOM playground at Park East</i>
TOTAL	\$454,200	

Total City Funds \$600,000

Total Private Funds \$367,200

GRAND TOTAL \$967,200

Organization Staff

Bridget Ambrisco is the Executive Director of Akron Parks Collaborative and has worked in this field for over 18 years with Cascade Locks Park Association, Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park and Friends of Metro Parks. She has a strong record of success, especially in the areas of collaboration and partnership building.

Bridget is currently part-time and is managing all aspects of the organization and its programs. This includes the community engagement and decision making work with the 2019 Akron Parks Challenge recipients. It also includes finishing up the projects with the 2018 Challenge recipients while also supporting the work of the 2 newly developed Friends groups.

Our capacity needs to grow to achieve our mission and support our programs in a solid and meaningful way.

CAPACITY BUILDING

We are asking for capacity building funds to help us grow as our programs grow. While the Friends groups are doing amazing work, they are volunteers who need ongoing support. It is essential that we increase organizational capacity to support existing Friends groups, while building new groups throughout the city.

As Deputy Mayor James Hardy said in initial conversations to create Akron Parks Collaborative, “there is no one at the city who wakes up every day with the sole job of improving our parks.” The Recreation Bureau focuses on programming. The Parks Maintenance division on maintenance. Akron Parks Collaborative focuses on creating vibrant, inclusive, welcoming spaces to improve neighborhoods, working closely with the City of Akron, Akron Civic Commons, Knight Foundation, Summit County Historical Society and Keep Akron Beautiful. The word “collaborative” helps define purpose; A “collaborative” of organizations who can play specific roles in the parks. And a “collaborative” of Friends groups that exist under the Akron Parks Collaborative umbrella, receiving support and resources.

New position to support Friends Groups

Capacity Building funds will go toward a part time staff member to support the growth, needs and creation of new Friends of Parks Groups.

Goals of our Friends of Parks Program:

Establish Friends of Parks group for each Akron Parks Challenge recipient

Establish Friends of Parks groups for other active and interested parks

Support Friends of Parks groups by:

- Connecting them to resources
- Connecting them with City of Akron staff on needed resources and improvements
- Serving as fiscal agent for grants and donations
- Offering administrative support including banking, bookkeeping, copies etc.
- Assisting with marketing needs
- Connecting them with other Friends groups through workshops and events

Outcomes for Year 1:

- 4 established Friends groups
- Groups will hold programs and events
- Groups will organize clean ups or build projects in their park
- There will be increased neighborhood engagement and a stronger sense of community

Staff will track our goals and outcomes.