

# Akron Parks Collaborative

Supporting Our Neighborhood Parks



## STRATEGIC PLAN

February 2023

A Vision for Akron's Neighborhood Parks 2023-2025

This strategic plan is the culmination of a process undertaken by Akron Parks Collaborative's (APC) Board of Directors and staff aimed at focusing on the challenges facing Akron parks over the next three years and the role that APC can play to support the City of Akron in meeting them. The plan includes a set of goals and priorities as well as specific operational initiatives for APC that will define a pathway to success for the Collaborative and its mission of serving Akron residents and their parks.

Akron Parks Collaborative, a 501(c)(3), has a mission of working to engage the community around the creation and sustainability of vibrant public spaces within the City of Akron. We foster and support neighborhood parks advocates by enabling them to meet their goals, partner with the city and instill a sense of stewardship among parks users.

**Our intended impact is that every neighborhood has created a plan for its parks, developed with and for community members, with resources for implementation and maintenance.**

The Collaborative presents this strategic plan on behalf of its Board of Directors and the broader community of parks advocates in the City of Akron.

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## What We Believe

Through focused relationship cultivation and management, Akron Parks Collaborative is the strategic partner for the City of Akron Parks' initiatives around neighborhood parks. Akron Parks Collaborative is dedicated to protecting Akron's parks and making them relevant, enjoyable and accessible for all residents by instilling a sense of stewardship for their care and maintenance.

We believe that parks are a key component of local revitalization and community investment. Our core values reflect our belief that neighborhood residents can be a powerful force for making the city's parks stronger and accessible to all in our community.

### Equity, inclusion and diversity around public spaces is the foundation of what we do.

- Our public parks are the hubs for community engagement and a thriving civic and cultural life. Our goal is to *support parks stakeholders* as they work to activate and maintain their parks improving accessibility, inclusion and connectivity throughout the city.
- All of our neighborhoods need quality parks. Many of the parks, especially in our low-income communities – parks serving majority of people of color – have been neglected and poorly maintained. We work to assure that *all of our residents have quality spaces* for health, wellness and neighborhood vibrancy.
- We believe in *equitable economic development opportunities* and are committed to inclusive community development. In our efforts to improve neighborhood parks we strive for a workforce that employs local residents and policies that ensure the value created by our parks financially benefits the whole community.
- As spaces for play and physical activity, our parks can help to improve health and wellness in our communities. We support more *recreation and cultural programming that focus on health, well-being* and clean and safe natural environments.

## The Opportunity

Every great city has a community-based partner to help support their parks. Akron Parks Collaborative has made a commitment to be the diligent strategic partner for the City of Akron. Founded in 2018, Akron Parks Collaborative provides financial and program support for Akron's neighborhood parks and park programs. The City of Akron manages 161 parks with over 3800 acres for its population of nearly 200,000 residents. The city's parks include citywide, community and neighborhood parks as well as community centers, playgrounds, ballfields and natural areas.

Akron Parks Collaborative was created to engage the community near each park to not only help keep Akron parks clean and inviting but to be a catalyst for expanding the city's capacity and commitment for serving parks. We support bringing together families, keeping children safe, promoting healthy, active lifestyles and preserving Akron's neighborhood green spaces.

After two years of a pandemic, during which parks took on a renewed importance as refuges of safe socializing, APC wants to be the leader in advocating for equitable funding for these important public assets across the city for spending on needed maintenance, repairs and upgrades.

As we celebrate our fourth year of operations, it is a good moment to reflect on our accomplishments and commit to a path forward. This plan captures our aspirations and priorities and reflects our collective vision for our three-year work plan. The Collaborative is committed to finding new ways and resources for making our neighborhood parks thrive and enabling the community connections that will make them stronger.

Allan P. Sweet  
Chair, Board of Directors

Bridget Ambrisco  
Executive Director



## Strategic Priorities

The strategic planning process has culminated in five key priorities for Akron Parks Collaborative over the next three years, and five critical targets to measure our progress.

### Our strategic priorities over the next five years:

- Build organizational capacity to better serve our parks
- Communicate the benefits of our parks and the value they provide
- Create a neighborhood parks alliance to lift up neighborhood voices
- Grow and develop the Parks Challenge program
- Strengthen our City of Akron partnership in support of a plan for equitable investment

### We'll know we are succeeding when we,

- Increase the number of APC donors for its parks work donors by 20% and total giving by 20%.
- Strengthen the capacity and impact of neighborhood-based park partnerships with the creation of an alliance supported by training, skills development and a website portal for learning and sharing.
- Develop a campaign to promote and raise additional funding to support the Parks Challenge Program which results in 30% new funding for neighborhood parks.
- Secure support for and partner with the city to create a master plan for city parks.
- Create a story campaign promoting the value of neighborhood parks that doubles attendance at park events and shapes a recognizable brand for the Collaborative and its park partners.

## Build organizational capacity

Akron Parks Collaborative has the ability to leverage the work of the City of Akron in managing city parks with opportunities for partnership around funding, new programs and park improvements that give greater access and enjoyment to users. We believe the organization can build an alliance of advocates and lead with a vision for the city's neighborhood parks – and be the nonprofit backbone to the city's efforts.

To meet the needs of users, match the interests of donors, and create an enhanced level of excellence in the parks Akron Parks Collaborative must devise new ways to communicate the value of neighborhood parks and build a team of neighborhood-based advocates to promote a new vision for these important public assets and a new way of working with the city to implement that vision.

**To meet these challenges, Akron Parks Collaborative will build its capacity to better serve city parks. Through 2025, the Collaborative will:**

1. Use its strategic plan to build alliances and clarity of vision for what neighborhood parks can be – a key element in city residents' quality of life.
2. Strengthen its board and committee leadership with strategic people who have good networks and a track record of collaboration.
3. Strengthen and expand donor relations with clarity around giving opportunities that layer multiple forms of giving for sustainable results. The Collaborative will look at ways to show how considering community engagement, park programs, capital investments and maintenance *together* can have greater impact for donor gifts.
4. Use its organizing strength, community knowledge and skill to work more collaboratively with the City of Akron to better leverage opportunities for planning and funding parks.

## Share the best stories about Akron's parks with a message about making their future better

The Akron Parks Collaborative team is out in the field hearing how people think about and value their parks. These stories are compelling messages about how high-quality parks are key to Akron being a desirable place to live. APC believes – and hears from residents – that there is magic in the shared world of a public park. We want to tell this story in a way that builds the case for a citywide focus on their value and needs.

The opportunity to tell stories is part of APC's initiative to influence parks use, parks investment and parks giving – it's a key strategic priority for the next three years.

We are committed to promoting the idea that parks can be the seedbeds for connecting with neighbors in ways that build community connections, community development and economic opportunity.

Well-used parks are much more likely to have a vocal constituency to support them – and city park partnerships that measure park use are better positioned to make the case for public spending to maintain and enhance them.

### Through 2025, Akron Parks Collaborative will:

1. Develop communication goals and equip neighborhood advocates with tools and messages that can help lead a citywide conversation.
2. Develop a strategy for shaping park stories that will resonate with park users and engage those on the periphery of the parks world to help them understand the fundamental role parks play in community development.
3. Create a campaign that will hold interest and strengthen over time, using stories to demonstrate value – and using value to demonstrate the need for better planning and investment.
4. Measure the impact of the story-telling campaign by looking at support indicators such as program use, event registration, donations, and testimonials.
5. Use the results of the campaign to shape a recognizable brand for the Collaborative and its neighborhood parks advocates.

## Unite neighborhood parks advocates

Neighborhood parks advocates and friends' groups promote ways for the community to better use the City of Akron's programs and facilities; provide communication to the city on matters relating to their parks; increase community awareness of parks; provide the community with a vehicle through which park information can be shared; and assist in locating alternate funding sources to enhance park facilities. Akron Parks Collaborative's goal is to support the efforts of these parks champions with training and learning programs.

A strong alliance can be the champion for improving our neighborhood parks and making them places where people want to be, gather and connect.

Akron Parks Collaborative proposes to continue its efforts to provide a support system to neighborhood parks advocates and other community-based parks supporters with additional training opportunities, peer networking and communications and new program opportunities that increase parks usership.

### Through 2025, Akron Parks Collaborative will:

1. Convene, inventory what's working, share best practices – and align neighborhood parks organizations based on what they want and need for their parks.
2. Connect neighborhood residents to each other and to their parks by providing a new vehicle for participation in the stewardship of parks.
3. Hold an annual training and networking conference that allows sharing information between neighborhood groups, offers skills workshops and brings new and relevant ideas for fundraising, programming and completing capital investment projects.
4. Develop a web portal for easy access by advocates for learning, sharing and communicating so that neighborhood advocates can be key stakeholders in leading efforts to improve neighborhood parks.



## Grow and innovate the Parks Challenge Program

The city's annual Parks Challenge grants have successfully been offered for four years with the facilitation and management of Akron Parks Collaborative. These capital grants offer a new model for community engagement, opening up new relationships and activating parks so that they are safe and well-used. APC's goal is to sustain the program's success and look at opportunities for growing the program.

APC is working with the city to strategically leverage new funding opportunities that match city funding, and helping to find new ways to offer smaller grants that reach more parks and catalyze more stewardship champions. These outreach efforts and partnerships – including those tied to the numerous social and environmental benefits of parks – are broadening parks' base of support.

A focus on equity is helping to guide park priorities and investments in ways that engage and benefit historically neglected communities. APC's goal is to broaden the program goals to reach more neighborhoods with creative ideas focused on a wider number of neighborhood park needs.

### Through 2025, Akron Parks Collaborative will:

1. Update the framework for the program with input from the new Neighborhood Alliance and consider ways to engage past awardees in the program to support the development of new proposals.
2. Explore ways to reach more neighborhoods with smaller grants that can help them develop capacity.
3. Develop a pre-proposal workshop using mentors to help new applicants to the program.
4. Use neighborhood engagement and program success to attract private support that can match the city's contribution.



## Spotlight on Akron Parks Challenge



The Akron Parks Challenge annually invites neighborhood residents, organizations and leaders to pitch their vision for their favorite park and how they can partner to achieve the change they wish to see. Neighborhoods need only a great idea for how to invest in their park and a plan for engaging the community to help make it a reality. Up to \$100,000 in funding is available.

Past winners include Hyre/Lions Park, Boss Park in 2022; Kerr Park and Jewett Park in 2021; Elizabeth Park, Ohio & Erie Canal Park in 2019; and, Reservoir Park, Chestnut Ridge Park and Cadillac Park in 2018. In total, \$700,000 of city funds have leveraged \$410,000 in private funds for a total of \$1,110,000 awarded in the past four years.

*"Already, I have met so many wonderful neighbors I would not have met without this process. It makes me feel like we can do anything!"*

--Kary Bailey, Ellet resident  
2022 Parks Challenge winner

## Work with the city to create a parks masterplan

To be successful, a city park system needs a master plan – built upon a process, demonstrating a path of achievement, and expressing a final outcome. A city should have a robust, formalized and ongoing community engagement mechanism for regularly reviewing the plan and updating it every five years.

APC wants to support the City of Akron in making the transition to having a parks master plan. A parks plan can help make the case for the importance of parks to neighborhood vitality. We know that residents and visitors assess neighborhoods on the quality of their parks – not just by their housing stock and commercial corridors.

No city can have a truly great park system without a strong network of park advocates that serve as both supporters and partners for the city. But their work must be centered on a plan and a shared vision for the city's parks. APC is a new kind of partner for the city and it wants to lead this public-private-community conversation toward better results for city parks.

We believe that without a plan and a team to focus and drive further parks funding, system equity will be an impossible job.

### Through 2025, Akron Parks Collaborative will:

1. Facilitate cooperation through regular meetings and planning initiatives among city departments, nonprofits and community-based parks advocates, enhancing communications and building toward more collaboration.
2. Create a team approach to parks planning and programs with clear roles and responsibilities and better communications for enhancing cooperation.
3. Develop metrics for ongoing parks evaluation and ways to measure the impact of community collaboration on parks investment and stewardship.
4. Work with park advocates to support the city in a commitment to a citywide parks' masterplan.

## Business as usual

Akron Parks Collaborative already produces programs, provides services, links donors to parks programs and engages community park supporters in wonderful ways. The Collaborative commits to continuing these programs, strengthening them with new ideas, resources and leadership, specifically focusing on,

1. Community Outreach: APC will grow this work with the creation of a Neighborhood Parks Alliance that can turn interest and advocacy into action and investments.
2. Park Enhancements: Better story-telling about what is already happening in parks and what could be with more investment will inspire and grow new opportunities for donors who care about making parks places where people want to gather.
3. City Partnership: In one of its very first moves, Akron's Office of Integrated Development created the Akron Parks Collaborative in 2018 upon the belief that a partnership could better leverage resources, reach residents and improve parks. City leaders view parks as vital to the well-being of its residents. APC respects the city's faith in collaboration and willingness to partner as a means to improving city parks and it will continue to strengthen efforts to be a strong partner.

## The Resources We'll Need

Akron Parks Collaborative is young. As it takes on new responsibilities and grows successful partnerships and giving opportunities for the City of Akron's parks and priorities, its spending will increase. During the strategic planning process, APC's staff and board developed some assumptions about staffing, operating expenditures and other costs that APC would incur over the next three years. Based on these projections we estimate that APC's budget might grow from its 2022 budget of \$290,000 to \$360,000 by 2025.

The increased operating capacity of the Collaborative will ensure the growth of its capital fundraising goals for neighborhood parks over the next three years.

### Budget

	2023	2024	2025
<b>REVENUE</b>			
City Funding	290,000.00	305,000.00	290,000.00
Corporate Giving	8,000.00	9,000.00	10,000.00
Foundation grants	10,000.00	10,000.00	20,000.00
Board and Individuals	5,000.00	6,000.00	10,000.00
Rec Bureau Scholarship income	<u>30,000.00</u>	<u>30,000.00</u>	<u>30,000.00</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>343,000.00</b>	<b>360,000.00</b>	<b>360,000.00</b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>			
Personnel	225,000.00	232,790.00	241,430.00
Community Engagement & Programs	66,000.00	68,500.00	68,500.00
Marketing and Public Relations	20,000.00	16,000.00	16,000.00
Operations	<u>31,900.00</u>	<u>35,600.00</u>	<u>35,600.00</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>342,900.00</u></b>	<b><u>352,890.00</u></b>	<b><u>361,530.00</u></b>

## Timeline



## Staffing



## Supporting our Strategy: How to Get Involved

Akron Parks Collaborative invites park users, partners and other stakeholders in the community to support its work through active engagement with their parks.

### Opportunities include:

- Introduce Akron Parks Collaborative to your employer for corporate participation
- Introduce the Collaborative to family and friends
- Donate your talent by volunteering
- Share your resources and make a gift at any level
- Leave a legacy via a bequest



*“Clean, green, and accessible public spaces are essential to strong neighborhoods and a healthy quality of life,” shared Akron Mayor Dan Horrigan. “The challenges of 2020 further demonstrated the essential value of our parks and public spaces within our neighborhoods. Each Akron family deserves access to healthy, vibrant parks in which to play, reflect, and enjoy the natural world.”*

*--Mayor Dan Horrigan*

# Acknowledgements

## APC Officers

Allan P Sweet, President and Secretary  
 Neil Keating, Vice President  
 Tim Wechter (CPA), Treasurer (Ward 8)

## APC Board Members

Ward 1: Katie Carver Reed  
 Ward 2: vacant  
 Ward 3: Terri Johnson  
 Ward 4: Eric Fletcher  
 Ward 5: Valarie Moss  
 Ward 6: Kate DeAngelis  
 Ward 7: Sheri Shields  
 Ward 9: Angela Miller  
 Ward 10: Derek Stone  
 At Large: Gary Riggs  
 At Large: Mary O'Connor

## Strategic Planning Ad hoc Committee

Derek Stone  
 Valarie Moss  
 Angela Miller  
 Mary O'Connor

## Akron Parks Collaborative Staff

Bridget Ambrisco, Executive Director  
 Ariana Wilin, Program Manager

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