

OPINION

JULY 22, 2020

# Safely Reopening America Requires Reinvesting in Public Spaces

By Dana Bourland, Sam Gill, Judilee Reed, and Chantel Rush



PHOTO BY BREE GANT

Community residents work on a mural at Ella Fitzgerald Park in Detroit.

During a global pandemic when millions of people rarely leave their homes, our public parks, plazas, trails, greenways, and even sidewalks have become critical havens. In cities large and small, these public spaces are sustaining people in ways we couldn't have imagined a few months ago. The importance of a robust, connected, and nature-rich public realm — a true civic commons — is clearer than ever.

As we practice physical distancing, our public spaces allow us to exercise, reduce stress, and stay socially connected with our neighbors. They provide people with much-needed hope and a sense of community at a time of great disconnection from each other.

But while the pandemic has revealed the power of our shared public spaces, it has also magnified enormous disparities in quality and access to them. Demand has outstripped supply, in some cases leaving beaches and parks packed with more people than social distancing guidelines allow. Some urban leaders have responded with innovations, such as closing streets to cars and rededicating them for pedestrians and outdoor dining.

We applaud these and other efforts cities are taking to expand public spaces as the country reopens. But they don't go nearly far enough. Decades of disinvestment have left too many neighborhoods with nowhere to safely exercise or experience nature.

The ongoing protests against racism and police brutality reflect longstanding, systematic exclusion and discrimination that is also evident in our civic infrastructure. Investing in a civic commons that connects and welcomes people of all backgrounds will help create a path to more inclusive communities. Well-designed and well-run public spaces can nurture the diverse social fabric of our cities that allows empathy and trust to flourish.

A robust civic commons should be a universal right, delivered to every neighborhood in every city. Achieving this will require dedicated attention and, yes, dedicated funding. We've neglected our public spaces for far too long, seeing them as "nice to have" but not essential. Budgets for parks and recreation, trails, and libraries are the first to be cut when government revenues are tight, leaving in their wake a civic common inadequate to meet the demands revealed by Covid-19.

### **A Philanthropic Opportunity**

As communities around the country reopen this summer, public spaces should be at the top of philanthropy investment lists. Intentionally welcoming, spacious, and well-appointed parks, well-maintained hiking and walking trails, robustly programmed libraries and community centers, and even wider sidewalks may be among the most important investments we can make to recover.

Here's why: During the last 50 years, Americans have been increasingly isolated from each other, segregated by income and belief more than at any time in modern history. The proportion of families living in predominantly low-income or predominantly affluent neighborhoods has more than doubled since 1970, and a full third of us don't interact with nearby neighbors at all. Levels of trust among people and between people and institutions have declined for years.

This separation, and the growing distrust it fosters, is harmful. Health researchers have demonstrated that social isolation is causing physical and mental illness, even premature death. Growing segregation not only limits economic mobility and exacerbates inequities between neighborhoods, but also reduces interactions with people of different races and incomes at a time when a shared sense of purpose is key to our nation's recovery from the pandemic.

Fortunately, through our foundations' support of Reimagining the Civic Commons, a national initiative to transform public spaces, we have witnessed how a thoughtful and well-maintained civic infrastructure can bring communities together and help level the playing field.

In Akron, Ohio, strategic investments in parks and plazas along a major trail line have reconnected economically challenged and previously isolated neighborhoods, spurring new levels of trust in local institutions and city government. In Memphis, an effort is underway to reimagine public parks and a riverfront trail, as well as a branch library, including removing Confederate monuments and giving maintenance staff responsibility for planning programs and making all visitors feel welcome. In Detroit, a brand-new community park and greenway, combined with investment in a nearby

commercial corridor, has created green infrastructure jobs for neighbors, sparked the opening of local businesses in formerly vacant spaces, and inspired hope for residents of a long-neglected neighborhood.

### **Fitting In With Grant-Maker Priorities**

We've learned that with an intentional focus on outcomes, public spaces can help create more racially equitable and just communities while addressing key grant-maker priorities.

**Concerned about growing distrust and polarization among Americans?** Public spaces are one of the few places left that bring together people of diverse backgrounds — and with no price of admission.

**Interested in improving public health?** Numerous studies show how access to parks and green spaces boost physical and mental health.

**Working on economic development in low-income neighborhoods?** Public spaces are an integral part of supporting the public, which allows small businesses to flourish.

**Focused on economic mobility?** High-quality parks and open spaces across a city can promote diverse neighborhoods, improving opportunities and life outcomes for children in low-income families.

**Worried about civic involvement and democratic participation?** People living near popular parks report greater community connection and satisfaction with local governments.

The list of benefits goes on and on.

Our job now is to convince those in power that our public spaces are vital civic infrastructure — essential for supporting health and well-being through this pandemic and for building engaged, equitable, and resilient communities beyond that. If local governments and nonprofits can demonstrate a commitment to creating more welcoming public spaces, philanthropy should provide the risk capital needed to support these innovative projects.

To fight pandemics, climate change, systemic racism, and inequality, we need to trust each other and work together to heal our country and the planet. We can start by investing in the places where we play, exercise, and naturally come together. We can take an active role in reimagining our civic commons.

*Dana Bourland is vice president for the environment at the JPB Foundation; Sam Gill is senior vice president and chief program officer at the Knight Foundation; Judilee Reed is program director of Creative Communities at the William Penn Foundation; and Chantel Rush is managing director of the American Cities Program at the Kresge Foundation. Their foundations are all key supporters of Reimagining the Civic Commons.*

© 2020 The Chronicle of Philanthropy

1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037