HEALTHY PARKS, SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES:
Green Access and Equity for Los Angeles County 2011
ABOUT THIS REPORT

This policy report is a summary for Los Angeles County of The City Project’s 2011 report, Healthy Parks, Schools, and Communities: Mapping Green Access and Equity for Southern California, which maps and analyzes green access and equity in nine counties in Southern California—Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside, San Diego, Kern, Santa Barbara and Imperial—using narrative and legal analyses, geographic information system (GIS) mapping tools, and demographic and economic data.

Unlike other studies, which plot either green space or population, the maps in this report plot green space in relation to population and other metrics that indicate accessibility, such as distance to the park. This report also provides multidisciplinary analyses of the vital benefits of parks and other green space to people and the environment. It describes the consequences of disparities in green access and the benefits that could be reaped in “park poor” and “income poor” communities if resources were fairly allocated. It concludes with recommendations for equitable investments in green space in Los Angeles County and throughout California and the nation.

The goal of this work is to combine research and analyses with effective outreach to provide concerned citizens, community groups, elected and other government officials, planners, funders and other stakeholders with the best available information upon which to prioritize actions and decisions that positively impact green access and quality of life for all.

Together we can help children be active, eat well, stay healthy and do their best in school and life.

For more information on green access and equity in Los Angeles County and Southern California, or to download a copy of this summary or the full nine county policy report, please visit www.cityprojectca.org/greenjustice.

This report is available in English and Spanish.

ABOUT THE CITY PROJECT

The mission of The City Project is to achieve equal justice, democracy and livability for all.

The City Project carries out its mission by influencing the investment of public resources to achieve results that are equitable, enhance human health and the environment, and promote economic vitality for all communities. Focusing on parks and recreation, playgrounds, schools, health, and transit, we help bring people together to define the kind of community where they want to live and raise children. The City Project works with diverse coalitions in strategic campaigns to shape public policy and law, and to serve the needs of the community as defined by the community.

The City Project is a nonprofit legal and policy advocacy organization established in 2000 with a grant from the Ford Foundation. Over the past decade, The City Project has worked and published extensively on equal access to parks and green space, physical activity and physical education, transportation, and related issues at the intersection of social justice, sustainable regional planning and human health.

AUTHORS

Robert García, Executive Director, Counsel and Founder, The City Project
Mr. García is a nationally recognized leader in the urban parks, physical education and environmental justice movements and has received numerous awards, including the 2010 Presidential Citation from the American Public Health Association for his dedication and contribution to the field of public health. He received a Bachelor’s Degree in Philosophy from Stanford University and a J.D. from Stanford Law School, where he served on the Board of Editors of the Stanford Law Review.

Seth H. Strongin, Director of Policy and Research, The City Project
Mr. Strongin analyzes policy, data and social science research related to public health, the natural environment and civil rights. He writes policy reports on physical education, park access, human health and the built environment. Mr. Strongin received a Bachelor’s Degree in Biology from American University and a Master’s Degree in Environmental Science and Management from the Bren School at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Anahid Brakke, Principal, Heed Nonprofit Consulting
Ms. Brakke works to advance the social justice efforts of nonprofits and foundations. She specializes in creating publications that make technical information or complex issues accessible and relevant to the public.

Amanda Recinos, Associate Director of GreenInfo Network and a GIS specialist, prepared the maps and demographics analyses in this report and has worked with The City Project for over ten years.

Cover photo: Mulholland Scenic Parkway, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.

The City Project
1055 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1660 | Los Angeles, CA 90017 | (213) 977-1035 | www.cityprojectca.org
FOREWORD BY THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

The California Endowment is a foundation committed to improving the health of all Californians, especially those living in poor and underserved communities. One of the most unfortunate truths of our society today is that when it comes to how long you will live, your zip code may be more important than your genetic code. Being able to breathe clean air, to send our children to school without fear of violence, to have a convenient place to buy fresh and healthy foods, to live near a park where we can walk and play – these are the things that keep us healthy and improve our odds of living a long life.

The California Endowment has worked with The City Project for many years to broaden access to parks and open space for inner-city residents, and to fight childhood obesity by guaranteeing that students get enough physical education at school.

Childhood obesity is an epidemic. The California Endowment believes all California families deserve to live in healthy environments with access to opportunities for physical activity. Improving green access, as called for in this report by The City Project, is a critical strategy in building healthy communities. We must make it easier for children and adults to be more active by eliminating the disparities in access to green space and recreational opportunities.

The California Endowment funded a study in late 2010 that shows nearly all segments of the voting population view childhood obesity as a very serious problem in the state, with African-Americans, Latinos and low-income voters particularly concerned.

Of those surveyed, 89% support requiring physical education classes for four years in high school. A similar percentage (88%) favors requiring school gyms, tracks, playgrounds and fields to be open to children when school is not in session. And 87% back the idea of cities making street improvements so that it is easier to bike, ride and walk. These are all recommendations supported in this report by The City Project.

Whether you are a parent, concerned citizen, educator, elected official or activist, we hope this report will be useful in your efforts to make your community a healthy environment.

Sincerely,

Anthony Iton, M.D., J.D., M.P.H.
Senior Vice President, Healthy Communities
The California Endowment

The work of The City Project is made possible in part by generous support from The California Endowment.

The California Endowment, a private, statewide health foundation, was established in 1996 to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities and to promote fundamental improvements in the health status of all Californians. For more information, please visit www.calendow.org.
A MESSAGE FROM THE ROSALINDE AND ARTHUR GILBERT FOUNDATION

The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation is deeply committed to improving the health of children in Los Angeles County. We hope that escalating rates of childhood obesity and diabetes can be reversed by providing more opportunities for children to play and exercise every day.

The Foundation is a proud supporter of The City Project’s efforts to change policy, improve access to green space, and promote healthy, livable communities for all.

Using multidisciplinary research and analyses, like the work reflected in this report, The City Project works to improve and create safe parks, mobilizes community residents to support policies that address equal access to parks and open space, and supports city and school district policies that promote physical activity and healthy choices.

We have seen our investment in The City Project yield impressive returns, such as new urban parks and the Los Angeles Unified School District’s adoption of a plan to enforce physical education requirements at all schools, in response to community campaigns led by The City Project with their community allies.

By helping children and their families be physically active, The City Project is setting a precedent for the rest of their lives and a foundation for healthy futures.

Sincerely,

Martin H. Blank, Jr.
Trustee
The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation

This report was sponsored in part by a generous grant from The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation.

The mission of The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation is to invest in programs that promote education, tolerance, social services, healthcare and the arts. The Foundation builds on the ideals and pursuits of its founders, Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert. For more information, please visit www.thegilbertfoundation.org.
WHY DO PARKS MATTER?

Green space provides places for people of all ages to have fun. The benefits of parks include improved physical and mental well-being. Access to green space correlates with lower obesity rates in adults and children. Park and recreation programs provide positive alternatives to gangs and crime. Parks contribute to community building and bringing people together. Parks help preserve our cultural heritage and Native American sacred sites. Green space provides important economic and environmental benefits, such as green jobs, higher property values, clean air and water, and a cool shady place to lie under a tree on a hot day.
Implementing the Olmsted Vision would have made Los Angeles County one of the most beautiful and livable regions in the world.

THE OLMSTED VISION

In 1930, the firm started by the sons of the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted proposed a comprehensive and coherent network of parks, playgrounds, schools, beaches, forests and transportation to promote the social, economic and environmental vitality of Los Angeles County and the health of its people.

According to the report Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region, in words that remain true today:

“Continued prosperity in Los Angeles will depend on providing needed parks, because, with the growth of a great metropolis here, the absence of parks will make living conditions less and less attractive, less and less wholesome. . . . In so far, therefore, as the people fail to show the understanding, courage, and organizing ability necessary at this crisis, the growth of the region will tend to strangle itself.”

Commissioned by the chamber of commerce, the Olmsted Report recognized that low-income people often live in less desirable areas, have fewer leisure opportunities, and should receive first consideration in parks and recreation. Other recommendations included:

• Shared use of parks and schools to make optimal use of land and public resources
• Greening the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers
• Doubling public beach access
• Integrating forests and mountains within the regional park system
• Multi-benefit projects for park and flood control purposes
• Transportation for people to reach parks, school fields, rivers, beaches, mountains and forests
• A balanced park and recreation system serving diverse needs with active and passive recreation
• Creation of a regional park authority with power to raise dedicated funds to acquire and develop parks and other natural public places

Each of these recommendations remains valid today . . . but unfulfilled.

The Olmsted Plan was never implemented. The report was killed by powerful interests in a triumph of private greed over public space. Today, the Olmsted Vision provides inspiration of what is possible - and necessary - to recapture the lost beauty and healthy environment of Los Angeles County.
DEFINING GREEN SPACE AND ACCESS

**Green Space:** “Green space” refers to all parks, natural open spaces, beaches, school fields, trails and recreational facilities. This term is applied broadly even though some of these areas may not have much greenery. The National Recreation and Parks Association has recommended *ten acres of park space per 1,000 residents*.

**Green Access:** The presence of green space alone is not enough. In order to truly benefit from these resources, residents must have access to green space. Many factors determine the accessibility of green space:

- Distance and time from green space to where people live, whether green space can be reached without a car, and obstacles such as highways.
- Location of natural geographic features and walkability.
- Whether a park is safe, or perceived as safe, by local residents.
- Physical appearance, condition and recreational amenities.
- Whether green space is open to the public, hours of operation and cost of admission.

**Park Poor:** Refers to any geographic area that provides less than *three acres of green space per 1,000 residents*, as defined by California law. Three acres is the size of approximately one and one half soccer or football fields.

**Income Poor:** Refers to a median household income of $47,331 per year or less, as defined by California law. In Los Angeles County, the income required to meet basic needs for a family of four is $75,114 as of 2010.

---

**Malibu Beach**

Los Angeles County is world famous for its beaches. The Olmsted Report called for the doubling of public beach frontage: “Public control of the ocean shore, especially where there are broad and satisfactory beaches, is one of the prime needs of the region, chiefly for the use of throngs of people coming from inlands.” Over eighty years later, the sad reality is not all beaches in Los Angeles County are open to the public. Worse yet, private property owners have tried to cut off public access to public beaches in the City of Malibu.
GREEN ACCESS IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY TODAY

Demographics
Los Angeles County was created in 1850 as one of California’s original counties under statehood. Today, there are 88 incorporated cities in the county, including the City of Los Angeles, which is the largest city in both the county and the state.

More than one-quarter of all Californians live in Los Angeles County, and its population is among the most racially and ethnically diverse in the nation. The population is not distributed evenly, however, and groups are often concentrated in distinct communities based on race, color or national origin. For example, a far higher percentage of African Americans live in the neighborhoods of South and Central Los Angeles than the county average. Even within the same city, the differences between neighborhoods can be extreme. Some neighborhoods in the eastern sections of the City of Los Angeles are more than 80% Latino, while other neighborhoods are less than 10% Latino. The population living along the beach in Los Angeles County is disproportionately non-Hispanic white, ranging from 58% to 89% in beachfront communities, and wealthy. The only exception is Long Beach, which has the lowest median income level of all beachfront communities.

More than 16% of Los Angeles County residents live in poverty, as of 2009. The true cost of living, however, is widely recognized to be 300% of the federal definition of poverty. Fully 85% of households with children in Central Los Angeles and 92% in South Los Angeles fall below the income level required to meet basic needs. Countywide, 91% of Latino families fall below this income level, compared to only 33% of non-Hispanic white families.

Green Access and Equity
As shown by the map on the next page, the communities with the worst access to green space tend to be those with the lowest income levels and the highest concentrations of people of color. Compounding this issue, there is little public transportation to most parks, beaches and open space, so access is limited for low-income people without cars or other personal vehicles.

While more than 30% of the land area of Los Angeles County is designated as green space, about 80% of that land is in a small number of large parks: Angeles National Forest, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, Griffith Park, Elysian Park and Baldwin Hills parklands. Many neighborhoods in the urban core of Los Angeles are densely populated but offer very little green space. Inner city state assembly districts in central Los Angeles have less than one acre of parks per 1,000 residents. This is in stark contrast to Districts 37, 41 and 54, which are disproportionately non-Hispanic white and wealthy and all have more than 100 acres of parks per 1,000 residents – even after excluding the large parks listed above.

In some neighborhoods, school fields may be the only green space where children can play. In 2006, only 103 out of 605 schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) had five acres or more of playing fields. The schools with the most acres for play and exercise tend to be located in areas that are disproportionately non-Hispanic white and wealthy, where residents have the best access to neighborhoods parks, as well as personal transportation to reach green space in other areas. A 2004 study reported 71% more acres of school fields for non-Hispanic white elementary school students in LAUSD than for their Latino peers.
The hatched red “hot spots” indicate the park poor, income poor communities of color in Los Angeles County.
WHY PARKS MATTER: PHYSICAL HEALTH

Children of color living in poverty with no access to a car suffer from the worst access to parks and schools with five acres or more of playing fields in Los Angeles County. Children and adults who live in communities with parks, school fields, pools and other recreational facilities tend to be more physically active than those who lack access to these resources. This is particularly true for low-income communities where car ownership rates tend to be lower. One study found that in low-income areas of the City of Los Angeles, people who live within one mile of a park exercised 38% more than people who lived farther away.

There are profound health implications for communities that lack opportunities for physical activity in parks and schools.

Five Los Angeles County state assembly districts, clustered in the Central and Southern regions, had rates of childhood obesity higher than anywhere else in California. Over 31% of children in Los Angeles County are overweight, but the prevalence of childhood obesity varies significantly among cities and communities, from a low of 4% in Manhattan Beach to a high of 37% in Maywood. The rates of childhood obesity are strongly associated with race and ethnicity and economic hardship.

Seventy percent of overweight adolescents go on to become overweight adults, with increased risk for a variety of diseases and ailments that diminish quality of life and can ultimately lead to premature death. Overweight and obesity, in combination with general lack of physical activity, are estimated to cost California $41.2 billion annually.

Parks, schools and physical activity are integral parts of a comprehensive approach to healthcare and the built environment. As the nation struggles to come to grips with spiraling costs of medical care, improving green access and increasing physical education in schools should be embraced as forms of preventive medicine.
Children with the worst access to parks and open space tend to suffer from the highest levels of obesity. It is critical that green space is accessible to all Los Angeles County residents, regardless of race and ethnicity or economic standing.
3 WAYS to INCREASE Children’s Physical Activity

ENFORCE PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Evidence shows lifelong benefits of physical activity. Physically fit students tend to do better academically. Students who regularly take part in physical activity, including team sports, tend to stay in school longer and are less likely to get involved with gangs, drugs, crime and violence. Increasing physical education and activity in school can improve academic achievement and graduation rates.

Good schools, a good education and the full development of the child includes making physical education a part of the core curriculum. California public schools are required by state law to provide an average of 20 minutes of physical education per day in elementary school and 40 minutes per day in middle and high school. In addition, civil rights laws require equal access to physical education in California’s public schools to alleviate unfair disparities based on race, color or national origin.

Increased pressure to meet academic standards, as measured by standardized tests, has led to a decline in physical education classes. Physical education quality and quantity are particularly deficient for less affluent students and those in racial and ethnic groups at high risk for overweight and obesity. Ninety-one percent of students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) are children of color, and 75% are low-income (qualify for free or reduced price meals). LAUSD serves over 680,000 K-12 grade students in 1,032 schools. Many of these students do not have enough safe places to play and exercise in their neighborhoods, so physical education may be their only opportunity for physical activity.

Half of the California school districts audited from 2005-2009 failed to provide the required amount of physical education. According to the California Department of Education, 66% of fifth, seventh and ninth graders statewide did not achieve minimum physical fitness standards during the 2008-2009 school year. In LAUSD, the rate was even higher, with 75% of students failing to meet physical fitness standards. Not surprisingly, LAUSD is also faced with a growing obesity epidemic.

Fortunately, LAUSD is taking action to correct the problem. In response to an organizing campaign by The City Project and diverse allies, the district voluntarily adopted an implementation plan in December 2009 to provide properly credentialed physical education teachers, meet the physical education minute requirements, maintain reasonable class size averages, and provide quality facilities for physical education.

The wisdom of the district’s decision to proactively comply with the education and civil rights laws was reinforced in November 2010 when the California Court of Appeal ruled that public elementary schools must provide physical education to comply with state law, and that parents and students have the right to seek access to justice in court to enforce the law.

“The physical education plan adopted by the Los Angeles Unified School District is a best practice example for districts across the state to provide a quality education for the children of California. Research tells us physically active and fit kids get better grades and have better overall health.”

- Dr. Robert Ross, President, The California Endowment

Photo by Tim Wagner for Partnership for the Public’s Health (twagnerimages.com)
**IMPROVE PARK SAFETY - REAL AND PERCEIVED**

Access to safe parks and other places for physical activity has an important effect on whether children meet recommendations for physical activity - and whether they get any activity at all. Fear of crime is a major deterrent to the use of parks. On a nationwide basis, 48% of Latino children and 39% of African American children in urban areas were kept inside as much as possible because of the perception that there was no safe place to play in their neighborhoods, compared to 25% of non-Hispanic white children and 24% of Asian children.

Parks and recreation programs can play an important role in reducing crime and violence and making neighborhood parks safer. The City of Los Angeles Summer Night Lights program could be a best practice example - but the City is not implementing it widely. The program keeps select parks open from 7 pm until midnight, offering recreational activities, mentoring and counseling programs, meals, and other services, throughout the summer as an anti-gang initiative. There has been a 40% overall reduction in gang-related crime, including a 57% reduction in gang-related homicide, in the neighborhoods where the program operates.

In densely populated urban areas that may lack space for creating new parks, making existing parks safer and seem safer may be one of the best ways to improve green access.

**SHARED USE AGREEMENTS**

Joint use agreements between schools and parks can help alleviate the lack of places to play and recreate, while making optimal use of scarce land and public resources. Keeping school, pools and parks open to the public after school, on weekends and during breaks provides places for physical activity.

In a 2005 audit of city parks, the Los Angeles City Controller called for the shared use of parks and schools, but this recommendation has not been implemented. As of 2006, there were only 30 joint use agreements between LAUSD and the City of Los Angeles Recreation and Parks Department.

**Shared Use is a Win-Win**

When the Olympic-sized swimming pool opened at the Miguel Contreras Learning Complex in September 2006, residents of the local community were not allowed to use the downtown Los Angeles facility, despite promises made during the planning process. After a community organizing campaign by The City Project, LAUSD opened the school for community use after school and during breaks.
Children have the right to the simple joys of playing in safe parks and school fields. Fun is not frivolous. The United Nations recognizes a child’s right to play as a fundamental human right.

Spending time in parks can reduce irritability and impulsivity. Parks promote intellectual and physical development in children and teenagers by providing a safe and engaging environment to interact and develop social skills, language and reasoning abilities, and muscle strength and coordination.

Green space provides needed reprieve from the everyday pressures that lead to mental fatigue. This improves the health of adults and children by reducing stress and depression and improving focus, attention span, productivity and recovery from illness.

Researchers have also found associations between contact with the natural environment and improvements in the functioning of children with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Parks provide a place for social support and an opportunity for self-determination, both important factors in reducing stress, lowering anxiety, and improving a person’s overall mood. This is true for children and adults, though it is particularly significant for older adults. Social support is derived from the friendship or companionship that comes from the shared experience of participating in activities in a park with other people. Research has also shown that people living in public housing who have contact with natural environments, such as trees, are more likely to make changes that will improve their lives.

Recreation Builds Character

Youth recreational programs, including active recreation and team sports, promote positive choices and help reduce youth violence, crime, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy. Sports and recreation provide life-long lessons in teamwork and help build character.
WHY PARKS MATTER: CULTURAL HERITAGE

Parks provide important places to celebrate diverse culture, heritage and art. Cultural, historical and artistic monuments should reflect the diversity of a place and its people. People of color and women have been vital to the creation of Los Angeles throughout the history of the City and the area. Yet with over 1,000 official cultural and historical landmarks in the City of Los Angeles, only about 10% relate to people of color and women.

Community activists and advocates have identified over 100 recreational, cultural, historical and public art resources along the “Heritage Parkscape.” These cultural heritage links serve as a “family album” to revive and honor the forgotten history of Los Angeles, creating a continuous parkway system from the Great Wall of Los Angeles to the Rio de Los Angeles State Park, the Los Angeles State Historic Park at the Cornfield, and El Pueblo de Los Angeles.

Los Angeles County is home to more than 25,000 Native American people, the largest population of any county in the United States. Native Americans inhabited most of what is now California for more than 10,000 years prior to European contact.

Many of California’s 278 State Parks, including Leo Carrillo State Park in Malibu and Deane Dana Friendship Community Regional Park in San Pedro, contain significant numbers of Native American cultural resources including sacred burial grounds and priceless archaeological items. For example, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument and University High School in Los Angeles are both located on areas originally occupied by villages of the Tongva or Gabrieleño people. Puvunga, a Sacred Site for the Tongva or Gabrieleño people, the Acjachemen people, and others, is located at what is now California State University at Long Beach. Without adequate maintenance and security services, these cultural resources may be vandalized or destroyed, erasing an important historic link with natural and indigenous California.

Monuments, Diversity and Democracy

“Manzanar National Historic Site preserves the stories and resources of Manzanar for this and future generations. We will facilitate a park experience that weaves the stories of the various occupations of Manzanar faithfully, completely, and accurately. Manzanar Historic Site will provide leadership for the protection and interpretation of associated sites. From this foundation, the park will stimulate and provoke a greater understanding of, and dialogue on, civil rights, democracy, and freedom.”

Manzanar National Historic Site Mission Statement, 2001
WHY PARKS MATTER: COMMUNITY PRIDE

Parks satisfy our need for social interaction by enticing residents into public spaces with trees, greenery, and venues for sports and active recreation. People from different racial and ethnic groups use parks differently, constructing meanings for natural space based on their own values, cultures, histories and traditions. According to a UC Los Angeles study of cultural differences in the use of urban parks, Latinos primarily use parks as social gathering places. African Americans, more than any other racial group, tend to engage in team sports in parks. Non-Hispanic whites tend to value a park for its passive qualities – its greenness, landscaping and natural elements – and tend to engage in solitary, self-oriented uses. Asian-American (specifically, Chinese) families were rare in parks studied. This does not mean that Asians do not value parks; this may reflect the failure of the parks to meet the needs of the Asian-American community.

Park and recreation plans, programs, and funding should provide a balanced park and recreation system that offers active recreation with soccer fields, baseball parks, basketball and tennis courts, running tracks or bike paths, as well as passive recreation with wilderness areas, walking trails or picnic areas.

Parks and recreation programs that serve the diverse needs of diverse users bring people together in the public commons for the public good. Social interaction and neighborhood spaces have been identified as key facets of healthy communities. These factors promote social networks, social support systems, and social integration, all of which contribute to a sense of belonging and community. Parks become a source of community building, pride, and inspiration for further neighborhood improvements and revitalization.

Park poor neighborhoods miss out on opportunities green space provides to increase civic engagement and enhance community wellbeing.

Save Watts Towers!

The extraordinary Watts Towers were built by Italian immigrant and master cement mason Simon Rodia over the course of 34 years from 1921 to 1954, using his own design, labor, materials and money. Now owned by the City of Los Angeles and the State of California, the Towers are a National, State, and City Historical Landmark. A collective symbol of Los Angeles cultural heritage, Watts Towers must be preserved with proper restoration and conservation.
Neighborhood workdays for green space maintenance and improvement foster common purpose and sense of ownership and pride among residents.
WHY PARKS MATTER: ECONOMIC VITALITY

If you want parks, work for jobs – and justice. Green space is an economic stimulus that creates jobs, boosts local businesses and raises property values. Improving green space and green access can benefit local, state and national economies in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) is a best practice example for government agencies today to get the nation back to work, while improving green access and quality of life for all. The CCC created 3 million new jobs, established 8,000 new parks including 800 state parks, and planted 2 billion trees. Visits to national parks increased 600 percent from 3.5 million people in 1933, to 21 million by 1941. Other public work projects built 40,000 new schools. Parks and recreation programs and green infrastructure projects – such as developing and enhancing parks or park accessibility via public transit, walkways and bike paths – can be sources of green collar jobs and job training for local workers. Giving priority in contract selection to local small businesses and apprenticeship programs can help ensure benefits are fairly distributed.

Parks are essential to community development and revitalization efforts, drawing new visitors to existing businesses and new businesses to the area. Parks and recreation also help strengthen and stimulate the economy through the tourism and hospitality industries and recreation-related sales of clothing, equipment, fees and services. Studies from around the country have shown that parks can generate as much as $5 in revenue for every $1 in costs.

A Southern California study found that being located near green space adds five to ten percent to the total value of a home, in both high-income and low-income communities. Higher home prices can also result in higher property tax revenues.

L.A. River Junior Rangers

The Los Angeles River Junior Rangers and Transit to Trails are part of a creative partnership that includes Anahuak Youth Sports Association, Mountains Recreation Conservation Authority, and The City Project. Transit to Trails takes inner city children and their families and friends on fun, healthy and educational mountain, beach, and river trips, while teaching about the environment, wildlife, culture, history, physical health, and healthy eating.
Parks and green space provide many important environmental benefits. The ground in parks and school fields acts as a natural filter that absorbs rainwater directly, or from runoff, and prevents pollutants from entering our rivers or ocean. This can help reduce flooding while also improving water quality after heavy rainfall. Clean water compliance and flood control projects should be combined with efforts to improve green access through multipurpose projects, such as the Sepulveda flood control basin recreation areas along the Los Angeles River.

Parks can help offset the adverse effects of climate change, including global warming and dirtier air. Low-income communities of color already experience more heat-related deaths during heat waves, and higher rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses associated with air pollution. A canopy of trees provides shade and cooler temperatures that moderate the effect of asphalt, concrete, and other man-made building materials that trap heat. Trees and other vegetation also filter out harmful pollutants, improving the air we breathe.

Green access can often be improved by providing alternative transportation options, such as public transit, complete streets and bicycle paths. Transportation resources are generally spent in a way that encourages people to drive more. Currently, more than 80% of gas taxes go to highways and bridges, while less than 20% goes to transit. Developing sustainable infrastructure that people can use to get to parks and school fields without a car can also reduce transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions and improve local air quality.

Another important ecosystem benefit of green space is habitat for plants and animals. For many individuals, particularly in low-income urban areas, parks represent their only opportunity to escape from concrete, play on grass and experience a diversity of wildlife. Green space promotes environmental conservation values including the protection of clean air, water and land, and climate justice.

**Complete Streets Improve Green Access**

“Complete streets” ensure safe and convenient access to public transit and promote active transportation, both of which can help people get to parks, schools and pools without a personal vehicle. Gas tax and public transit funding can improve green access when invested in new buses, extended transit services, and active transportation resources such as bicycle racks, sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and trails. Programs such as *Safe Routes to School* can make bicycling and walking to school safer, thus encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle from an early age.
Low-income communities and communities of color suffer from disparities in access to green space and from the health and social problems that stem from the lack of places for physical activity and recreation.

The fact that low-income people of color disproportionately lack equal access to parks, school fields, beaches, trails and forests is not an accident of unplanned growth or the outcome of an efficient free market distribution of land, housing, transit and jobs. Disparities in green access are the result of a history and continuing legacy of discriminatory land use, and housing, school and economic policies and practices.

The history of Southern California is relevant to understand how the region came to be the way it is, and how it could be better.

Los Angeles pioneered the use of racially restrictive housing covenants, which prevented people of color from buying or occupying property in many areas of Los Angeles County and led to segregated neighborhoods. As a result, African Americans became concentrated in South Central Los Angeles, Chinese Americans in Chinatown, Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles, and Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo. As the decades passed, property values in Los Angeles skyrocketed. When housing restrictions were prohibited in the 1950s and 60s, purchasing land in beach communities and other desirable areas of Los Angeles County was cost-prohibitive for the people who were denied access when property values were lower.

The destruction of Chavez Ravine is another example of historical discrimination that has contributed to the lack of green space in the Los Angeles urban core today. In the 1950s, the City forcibly evicted residents of the Mexican-American community with promises of affordable housing. Generations of residents left their homes, but then the City abandoned the housing plans and sold the land to the Dodgers. Chavez Ravine was buried by Dodger Stadium and its 16,000-space parking lot.

Even in recent history, discriminatory policies and practices continue to affect green access. Recipients of federal and state funds, including cities in Los Angeles County and their park and recreation agencies, are prohibited from engaging in practices that have the intent or the effect of discrimination based on race, color or national origin. As a matter of simple justice, parks, school fields and other green space are public resources, and their benefits must be distributed equally.

From 2005 to 2008, the Los Angeles City Controller published several audits of the Recreation and Parks Department. The audits showed that more high quality recreation programs are available in wealthy communities than in low-income communities, and the policies and formulas for distributing public funding exacerbate rather than alleviate inequities. The audits also documented systemic management failures and disparities in green access that City officials have known about for decades. The City has failed and refused to implement the Controller’s recommendations to improve parks in every neighborhood.

Public resources must be distributed with the goal of eliminating park, school and health disparities. Investing in park poor and income poor communities not only provides economic stimulus and the additional benefits of green space to underserved communities, it helps achieve compliance with civil rights laws and principles mandating equal access to public resources.
Children of color disproportionately live in communities of concentrated poverty without enough places to play in parks and schools, and without access to cars or an adequate transit system to reach parks and school fields in other neighborhoods.
RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

Parks and green space are not a luxury. Prioritizing existing public resources for creating and improving access to green space in low-income communities and communities of color offers an exceptional opportunity to improve public health, environmental quality, economic vitality and quality of life for all.

The following strategies are based on the Olmsted Plan, recommendations by the Controller for the City of Los Angeles in audits of the parks and recreation system, and The City Project’s research and analysis.

1. **Adopt standards to measure equity and progress and hold public officials accountable.**
   - Park poverty and income poverty criteria under California law are a best practice example for standards to measure green access and equity.
   - Identify community-specific standards based on community need, such as the number of existing after-school recreation programs or parks with areas for physical activity.
   - Publish a community needs assessment every five years to document progress and ensure public officials meet the needs of the community, as defined by the community.

2. **Develop and implement a strategic plan to improve access to parks and recreation programs in every neighborhood.**
   - Prioritize communities that are “park poor” and “income poor” to eliminate unfair disparities.
   - Increase joint use of parks, schools, pools and other recreational facilities to make optimal use of scarce land, money and public resources.
   - Improve real and perceived park safety through better lighting, maintenance and upkeep, the visible presence of security officers, and targeted programs to meet the needs of at-risk youth.
   - Keep public lands public for all. Reverse the privatization of public green space.
   - Meet the diverse needs of diverse users by creating “balanced” parks that offer active recreation with soccer fields, baseball diamonds, basketball and tennis courts, running tracks, and bike paths, as well as passive recreation with natural open space, walking trails, and picnic areas.

3. **Create a fair system of park financing and fees that ensures equitable development and access to parks and recreation.**
   - Invest Quimby park development fees based on need, not based on artificial geographic limitations.
   - Hold public agencies responsible for allocating funds in compliance with civil rights laws guaranteeing equal access to public resources.
   - Publish reports analyzing investments by park agencies and allocation of resource bonds to get a more complete picture of which communities benefit from the investment of public funds and which do not, in order to help prioritize investments.
4. Frame green access as a multi-benefit solution to a range of issues, including obesity and diabetes, the full development of the child and community, gangs and crime, economic vitality, and environmental degradation.

- Combine efforts to improve green access with efforts to prevent obesity and related diseases and improve individual and community well-being. Apply physical, psychological and social health criteria to public infrastructure investments.

- Ensure that infrastructure projects create green collar jobs for local workers, small and disadvantaged business enterprises, and youth. To ensure benefits are fairly distributed, contracts should be awarded to local small businesses and should hire workers and apprentices from the community where the project is located.

- Align green access goals with other environmental initiatives to improve water quality, reduce the effects of climate change, promote climate justice, decrease greenhouse gas emissions, and preserve plant and animal habitat.

- Create complete green streets and safe routes to school. Utilize public transportation resources for infrastructure projects that enable green access without a car, such as Transit to Trails, walking paths and pedestrian bridges.

- Prioritize cultural, historical and public art projects that reflect the diversity of a place and its people to build community pride and civic engagement.

Griffith Park on the East Bank of the L.A. River

“Public parks are a safety valve of great cities and should be made accessible and attractive where neither race, creed, nor color should be excluded,” said Colonel Griffith Jenkins Griffith, who donated Griffith Park to the City of Los Angeles in 1896. With over 4,210 acres, Griffith Park is the largest municipal park with urban wilderness area in the United States. The portion of Griffith Park within reach of the park poor communities on the East Bank of the Los Angeles River, however, is used today as a service yard and junkyard (photo at right). This area should be greened as part of the Los Angeles River Revitalization.
GREEN ACCESS VICTORIES AND CHALLENGES

The City Project works with diverse allies to implement strategies to improve green access for all through: (1) community organizing and coalition building; (2) multidisciplinary research and analyses, including this report; (3) strategic media campaigns, including new social media; and (4) policy and legal advocacy outside the courts. When necessary, we also seek access to justice through the courts.

Over the past decade, The City Project and its allies have empowered communities to preserve and increase access to parks, rivers, mountain areas and historical sites throughout California. These are a few of the projects in Los Angeles County.

**Ascot Hills Park**
The planned 140-acre nature preserve in East Los Angeles will provide passive recreation and green space in one of the city’s most park poor areas.

**Victory:** In response to community demands led by The City Project, Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles, PolicyLink and others, as well as hard hitting coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*, the City of Los Angeles held a second groundbreaking celebration for the Ascot Hills Park on June 14, 2010, five years after the City held the first groundbreaking in November 2005, but failed to open the park.

**Challenge:** Though City officials in 2010 claimed the park would be completed by March 2011, the park is nowhere near finished as this report goes to press. Working with the community, The City Project will continue to serve as watchdog to make sure the City keeps its promises to the children and people of Los Angeles.

**Baldwin Hills Park**
The community vision for the Baldwin Hills is to create a two square mile park, the largest urban park planned in the U.S. in over a century. The park is located in the heart of Los Angeles’s African American community, which has long suffered from environmental degradation and discrimination.

**Victory:** Over the past decade, The City Project has worked with the community and Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles to stop a power plant and garbage dump and preserve the budget for the park.

**Challenge:** The City Project and Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles have been working with the community, Community Health Councils, National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Culver City and Citizens Coalition for a Safe Community since 2006 to regulate the oil fields adjoining the park, both in and out of court. Please see www.greaterbaldwinhillsalliance.org for more information.
El Pueblo Campo Santo
Campo Santo (Spanish for sacred ground or cemetery) is in El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument and Los Angeles Plaza National Historic District. Located next to La Placita Catholic Church, and at the site of the Tongva village of Yaangna, Campo Santo holds much historical and cultural significance.

Challenge: Campo Santo is being excavated as the site for a new Mexican-American cultural center. One hundred eighteen sets of human remains, including Native Americans, have been excavated since October 2010 without proper protections. The City Project and diverse allies are working together to ensure the respectful reburial of human remains at Campo Santo, protection of the remains still at the site, respectful consultations with Native Americans, and respectful dialogue with Pobladores and others whose ancestors are buried at Campo Santo. Visit www.saveancestors.org.

El Pueblo Father Serra Park
El Pueblo Father Serra Park, a one-acre oasis of grass and trees in the park starved heart of Los Angeles, is a historical and environmental resource that encompasses the rich history of: (1) the site of the Tongva village of Yaangna; (2) the birthplace of Los Angeles; (3) the Zanja Madre or “Mother Canal” that carried water from the Los Angeles River to El Pueblo; (4) the Lugo Adobe, California Historical Landmark 301; (5) the first institution of higher learning in Southern California, which became Loyola Marymount University; (6) Old Chinatown; and (7) the Chinatown Massacre of 1871.

Challenge: The City Project is challenging the piecemeal construction of a war memorial in El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument without an environmental impact report, on behalf of a diverse group of stakeholders.

Los Angeles River
The Los Angeles River stretches 52 miles and crosses 13 cities, flowing through diverse communities from Canoga Park in San Fernando Valley through downtown Los Angeles to the ocean at Long Beach. In 1930, the Olmsted Report recommended greening the river. The Army Corps of Engineers poured concrete along the length of the river to prevent floods.

Victory: The City and County of Los Angeles have launched river revitalization plans for the next 20 years. The City also published a report on the need to ensure that river revitalization meets the needs of the people as well as the environment. The New York Times cites the revitalization of the Los Angeles River as a best practice example for “more sustainable, livable and socially just cities.”

Challenge: Communities of color and low-income communities must receive their fair share of the benefits of river revitalization and should be part of the planning process.

Río de Los Angeles State Park
Río de Los Angeles State Park at Taylor Yard is the site of a former rail yard.

Victory: The City Project worked with Anahuak Youth Sports Association and the Coalition for a State Park at Taylor Yard to stop a commercial development in favor of the 40-acre Río de Los Angeles State Park as part of the greening of the Los Angeles River in Northeast Los Angeles. The California Department of Parks and Recreation initially opposed active recreation at Taylor Yard, but relented under community pressure. The balanced park, which opened on Earth Day in 2007, provides active recreation with soccer fields, basketball courts, a running track and bike paths, as well as passive recreation with natural open space and picnic areas.

> Continued on next page
Keep Public Lands Public For All!

The City Project has worked with community allies to keep public parks, beaches and trails open for all:

- **Santa Monica Mountains**: Public trails in the Canyon Back area and public parks, overnight campsites and trails in the coastal zone.
- **Millard Canyon**: Public trails that begin in the Angeles National Forest and end at the Arroyo Seco in Altadena.
- **Malibu Beach**: Public campgrounds and public access to the beach.

Los Angeles State Historic Park

The Los Angeles State Historic Park lies just south of where the Los Angeles and Arroyo Seco rivers connect, in one of Los Angeles’s most culturally, historically, and ethnically diverse – and park poor – communities.

**Victory**: The diverse Chinatown Yard Alliance created a park and stopped a proposal by City officials and a developer to build warehouses in the last vast open space in downtown Los Angeles. The *Los Angeles Times* called the community victory “a heroic monument” and “a symbol of hope.”

**Challenge**: Ten years after the struggle began, the California Department of Parks and Recreation still has not completed the park. Officials announced they are finally moving forward in December 2010, with the environment impact report process to begin in 2011, construction to begin in 2013, and the park to be completed eighteen months later.

San Gabriel Mountains and San Gabriel River

The San Gabriel Valley severely lacks parks and open space and has some of the highest childhood obesity and diabetes rates in California, despite its proximity to the San Gabriel Mountains.

**Victory**: *San Gabriel Mountains Forever* (SGMF) is a diverse partnership working to establish a National Recreation Area in the San Gabriel Mountains to increase federal support. The SGMF proposal would improve access to places for physical activity with hiking trails, picnic and camp sites, a series of interconnected parks and trails, and Transit to Trails to better connect the people of Los Angeles County with this magnificent resource.

**Challenge**: The creation of a National Recreation Area will require Congressional legislation, and San Gabriel Mountains Forever is working to build local grassroots support in many southern California Congressional districts. Please contact The City Project for more information.

Transit to Trails

*Transit to Trails* provides fun, educational and healthy trips for children and families to parks, beaches and mountains. Although they may live only an hour from the mountains and beaches, many children have never been there, because parents often work two or more jobs, and do not have access to cars or to information to plan trips.

**Victory**: A successful pilot *Transit to Trails* program has been implemented in Los Angeles County through a partnership between Anahuak Youth Sports Association, Mountains and Recreation Conservation Authority, and The City Project.

**Challenge**: The goal is to institutionalize and expand *Transit to Trails* in the Santa Monica Mountains and extend the program to other areas, including the San Gabriel Mountains.
CREDITS

The work of The City Project is made possible in part by the generous support of:
Active Living Research, a national program office of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Baldwin Hills Conservancy
The California Endowment
California State Parks Foundation
Marguerite Casey Foundation
Convergence Partnership
Ford Foundation
The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation
John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation
Impact Fund
The James Irvine Foundation
JiJi Foundation
Kaiser Permanente
The Kresge Foundation
Levi Strauss Foundation
Liberty Hill Foundation
Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority
Nike, Inc.
PolicyLink
Resources Legacy Fund Foundation
The San Diego Foundation
San Gabriel Mountains Forever Campaign
Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy
Southern California Edison
Surdna Foundation
Surfrider Foundation
Union Bank of California Foundation
Wildlands Conservancy
William C. Kenney Watershed Protection Foundation
Whole Systems Foundation
and individual donors.

Contributors:
Andrea Misako Azuma, Kaiser Permanente Southern California Region
Rajiv Bhatia, University of California, San Francisco
Benny Diaz, California League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Leo Estrada, University of California, Los Angeles
David Fukuzawa, The Kresge Foundation
Tomas Gonzalez, California League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Stephen Koletty, University of Southern California
Ruben Lizardo, PolicyLink
J. Eric Lomeli, University of California, Los Angeles
Marty Martinez
Anne McEnany, International Community Foundation
Marisa Aurora Quiroz, The San Diego Foundation
Amanda Recinos, GreenInfo Network

Copy and Design:
Produced by Anahid Brakke (heedconsulting.org) and designed by Black Sheep Ink (blksheep.com).

Invest in justice with a donation to The City Project.

Your generous donation to The City Project ensures that we can continue our work to achieve equal justice, democracy, and livability for all. The City Project is a project of Community Partners, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All donations are tax deductible. Please visit our website to make a secure online donation: www.cityprojectca.org/greenjustice.

© The City Project 2011
“It is very important that our children grow up healthy. The more they run, the happier they are. The more they play together with other children, the better people they will be in the future. Parks and school yards are a place for peace, a place where life-long values are built. Community activism to build parks and schools is a way of saying no to violence, no to war. Peace and hope are part of our children’s education and culture.”

Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, speaking about the work of The City Project and Anahuak Youth Soccer Association to bring parks, school fields, and green space to the children of Southern California.