

# Reimagining Neighborhood Parks

By David Barth, PhD, CPRP, ASLA

**Park planners should consider context, demographics, perception of safety, and location when designing or retrofitting neighborhood parks.**

On a beautiful Saturday spring morning the Orange County Parks and Recreation Department sponsored a public "Park Evaluation Event" as part of its Parks and Recreation Master Plan in 2014. More than 20 landscape architects, civil engineers, parks and recreation staff, and county residents visited 50 of the county's parks to evaluate existing conditions, including 16 neighborhood parks and 18 community parks. One of the most surprising findings was that hardly any residents were using the county's small, traditional neighborhood parks, while the larger, multi-purpose community parks were teeming with people. The master planning team hypothesized that the smaller parks may no longer be relevant to residents' lives, due to the lack of multiple recreation facilities, and the absence of organized programs.

In the spring of 2016, "The First National Study of Neighborhood Parks" was published by the Rand Corporation to assess the role of neighborhood parks in meeting the need for physical activity. A representative sample of 174 parks in 25 major cities across the United States were studied, including park use, park-based physical activity, and park conditions. The study concluded that, although "an extensive infrastructure of neighborhood parks supports leisure time physical activity in most U.S. cities..., most Americans do not meet national guidelines for physical activity." (Cohen, p. 1) Neighborhood parks are designed mostly for the young, with few things for adults to do. In particular, the study found that "adults ages 60 and up made up only four percent of park-goers, even though they're 20 percent of the population." (Hobson, p. 1). Similar to the findings from the Orange County site evaluations, the study concluded that neighborhood park use may be increased by adding recreation and fitness programs; facilities such as walking loops; and marketing banners and posters.

A round table discussion: "Are Small Neighborhood Parks Still Relevant?" was convened at the 2016 Florida Recreation and Park Association (FRPA) conference to explore these findings further. More than 60 parks and recreation professionals met for an hour to discuss neighborhood park issues



Use your knowledge to make an impact on your community by attending the

## Orange County Park Evaluation Event!

**Saturday, April 26, 2014**  
**8:30am at Silver Star Recreation Center**  
 2801 N. Apopka Vineland Road, Orlando

**LUNCH PROVIDED**

Volunteers are needed from the parks, planning and landscape architecture professions to provide their observations to identify the strengths and weaknesses of existing parks.

- Groups of 3-4 will be asked to evaluate parks based on a questionnaire that we provide to you.
- All groups will be driven by an Orange County Staff member.
- Lunch will be provided.

### Event Details

**8:30am:** Meet at Silver Star Recreation Center, pick up your group assignment and evaluation packets.

**8:45-9:00:** Presentation by David Barth, ASLA, AICP, CPRP

**9:00:** Depart with your group from Silver Star Recreation Center

**9:00-1:00:** Park Evaluations.

**1:00-1:30:** Lunch at Silver Star Recreation Center

Please RSVP by Wednesday, April 23 to Camille Seabrook at 407-836-6261 • [camille.seabrook@ocpr.net](mailto:camille.seabrook@ocpr.net)

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in their communities, as well as ideas for making the parks more relevant and useful for residents.

Common issues identified by participants included the high cost of maintenance and staffing; problems such as alcohol use, vandalism, gangs, and drugs; lack of visibility, safe access, and parking; lack of supervision, programs, and recreation facilities; small size; and outdated amenities. In response to these issues, the group concluded that park planners should consider context, demographics, perception of safety, and location when designing or retrofitting neighborhood parks. For example, the needs of a suburban neighborhood may be very different from those of an urban neighborhood. And neighborhood parks should be designed in accordance with the CPTED (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design) principles of natural surveillance, natural access control, territorial reinforcement, and maintenance ([http://cptedsecurity.com/cpted\\_design\\_guidelines.htm](http://cptedsecurity.com/cpted_design_guidelines.htm)).

While acknowledging that no two parks are alike, the group created the following "typical development program" to attract users to neighborhood parks:

- Safe and comfortable spaces
- Power, water, infrastructure for special events
- Multipurpose open lawns

- Shade trees and canopies
- Paved, multi-purpose trail
- All types of seating, including moveable tables and chairs
- Picnic shelters
- Playground for all ages
- Wi-Fi throughout the park
- Amenities such as water fountains and fitness equipment
- Multi-purpose courts for basketball, tennis, and pickleball
- Restrooms in suburban parks that are far from residents' homes (less important in high density urban areas)

The group also concluded that three keys to continuing to attract users to neighborhood parks include an ongoing public engagement program to understand the needs and concerns of residents in surrounding neighborhoods, continued maintenance of the park, and the periodic addition of new recreation programs and facilities (in response to neighborhood needs) to refresh the park and provide new recreation experiences. ■

## References

Cohen, Deborah A. et al., The First National Study of Neighborhood Parks, American Journal of Preventive Medicine, Volume 51, Issue 4, 419–426

Hobson K, Girls And Older Adults Are Missing Out On Parks For Recreation, May 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/05/18/478402956/girls-and-older-adults-are-missing-out-on-parks-for-recreation>



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