



Public Land *for* Public Good

Advancing Community Stewardship of Public Land

Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this paper is drawn from truths and principles of Indigenous communities across the world, and particularly from Sogorea Te' Land Trust and their efforts to Rematriate the Land.

This paper is also dedicated to the fourteen People, Parks, and Power Local Partners who have shared their work, insights, and passion for green space equity to help advance the movement for justice.

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PREVENTION INSTITUTE

Prevention Institute (PI) is a national nonprofit dedicated to championing equitable health, safety, and wellbeing through upstream prevention and community-driven solutions. Our work focuses on creating healthy communities, advancing systems of prevention and health equity, bridging health equity and racial justice, building power with community, addressing adverse community experiences and resilience, shaping land use and the built environment, promoting safety, mental health and wellbeing, and preventing substance misuse. People, Parks, and Power (P3) is a national initiative that supports power building by community-based organizations to reverse deep seated park and green space inequities in Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities across the country. P3 is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is led and managed by Prevention Institute. P3 advances park and green space equity through a national grantmaking program, peer-to-peer learning community, research, network building and strategic communications.

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Ernst Consulting works with local and national nonprofits and their public sector partners to align their strategies with intended impacts, improve organizational effectiveness, and design programs and initiatives that contribute to more equitable, green and resilient communities. She has expertise in urban parks and forestry, climate and environmental justice, land conservation, land use policy, and community power-building. She is the author of seven publications and led the creation of online tools to support climate-informed forestry and equitable park funding.

Introduction

The People, Parks, and Power initiative, led by Prevention Institute, has worked to advance community-driven solutions to park and greenspace inequities by supporting power-building and self-determination in historically marginalized communities across the United States.

Parks and green spaces are essential infrastructure for healthy communities, providing opportunities for physical activity, time in nature, social connection, and respite. Greenspaces also play a critical role in mitigating extreme heat, the leading cause of weather-related deaths in the U.S.¹ Due to decades of insufficient public investment in parks, trees and recreational facilities in Black and Brown neighborhoods, people of color and low-income families are more likely to suffer the negative health impacts linked to extreme heat, air pollution, and lack of physical activity, including stroke, asthma, obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, depression, and some cancers.²

The P3 Initiative is supporting local efforts to gain access to increasingly scarce land in order to ensure residents drive decisions about how land can best serve their community. In addition to their health, economic, social, and environmental benefits, public parks and community stewarded spaces play an important role in a democratic society. “A community’s power to shape its social, cultural, and physical environment is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy, but for too many citizens, this vision is out of reach.”³

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The need for self-determination through land stewardship is becoming more urgent with the current

increase in privatization of public land. At the federal level, the Trump administration is eroding over a century of precedent and laws that prevent the sale of federal land to individual and corporate interests, ending historic preservation, conservation and environmental laws that have protected public lands from corporate exploitation, and eliminating funding criteria that have ensured fair access to Federal funds for Black, Brown and Indigenous communities.

At the state and local level, where there has historically been limited regulation or transparency around public land sales,⁴ governments have often sold public land in economically distressed communities to the highest private bidder in order to plug budget holes, reduce land management obligations, and generate property tax revenue. As the federal government slashes funding for essential public health, education, safety, and security and pushes those costs to states and localities, the pressure to privatize land to fill budget shortfalls will only increase.

Changing Systems and Policies

The burden of shrinking public lands and increased land exploitation will continue to fall on historically marginalized communities without intentional changes to local land ownership and stewardship systems and policies.

Community-based nonprofits and local advocacy organizations are rising to the challenge by engaging residents, identifying needs, and building community power through unified advocacy and action. This local power-building increases public awareness, challenges norms and advances alternatives, all of which are critical to creating long-term policy and systems change.

When community-driven solutions are scaled up through policy and systems changes that support replication, cities start to realize large-scale benefits from small-scale actions. Complex large-scale challenges, such as mitigating flooding, reducing extreme heat, addressing health disparities, improving food

security, or increasing access to affordable housing, can often be addressed more effectively and at a lower cost by scaling up, replicating, and supporting community-driven solutions, rather than investing in large-scale, top-down strategies.

Policy, legislative and organizational strategies for increasing community ownership and stewardship of land include:

1. **Public Land for Public Good Policies** that offer Community Land Trusts and other nonprofits first right of refusal and steeply discounted prices for surplus public land;
2. **Land Banks and Land Banking Programs** that take parcels out of the speculative real estate market temporarily while working with communities to determine the best use;

3. **Community Land Trusts**, nonprofits governed by the community that own and steward land for a variety of purposes based on community needs; and

4. **Community Stewardship and Joint Use of Public Land** that enable public access to existing public land, such as land owned by school districts and other public agencies and institutions.

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EXAMPLE

Investing in Small Scale Solutions to Large Scale Problems

Scaling up small-scale, community-driven solutions is often the most cost-effective way to tackle large-scale challenges.

- **Keep Growing Detroit** has supported the creation of 2,200 urban farms and gardens around Detroit, supporting small-scale urban farmers while increasing food access and security for residents.
- **Tuscon's Storm to Shade Program** provides funding and technical assistance to community groups to create and maintain community-driven public greenspace and green infrastructure projects that manage stormwater and reduce extreme heat. The program has funded 42 new green infrastructure projects and maintains another 500.
- **Boston's Food Forest Coalition** uses surplus public land to enable communities to create and sustain neighborhood food forests, increasing food access while cooling communities and providing neighborhood greenspace. As of 2025, 13 new food forest parks had been created, with plans for 30 parks by 2030.



EXAMPLE

Building Community Power to Protect Land in Puerto Rico

La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, a Black, women-led organization in Puerto Rico, is building community power to re-imagine and rebuild the Río Piedras neighborhood by uniting neighborhood residents, teachers and students from local public schools and universities, as well as local small businesses. Working together with neighbors, La Colectiva identified the need for community stewarded spaces where residents could come together, celebrate local arts and culture, and organize outreach and community-supporting resources.

La Colectiva created El Parquecito de la Calle Robles on vacant land and organized the community and local youth to program the space with local artists, musicians and educators to showcase the rich cultural wealth within their community. At El Parquecito, residents have established a community garden, educators from local public schools and universities have shared neighborhood stories and history, and local businesses have contributed food and goods. La Colectiva's youth groups, who are neighborhood residents and students of the community's public school, both use and maintain El Parquecito.

Working with residents, La Colectiva has begun the process of assuming stewardship of other abandoned buildings and vacant lots, and is now partnering with a community land trust to gain permanent ownership of El Parquecito de la Calle Robles to ensure the site remains a pocket-park, owned and stewarded by the community.

Public Land for Public Good

Local jurisdictions and public agencies often own and maintain significant land portfolios that enable them to fulfill their mission and ensure the provision of public infrastructure and services into the future. Public land may be held by a variety of agencies, such as general services, parks and recreation, and public works, as well as independent districts and authorities, such as school districts, economic or redevelopment authorities, land banks, transportation authorities or public utilities.

Due to decentralized public land ownership, many jurisdictions are unaware of the scale of public land holdings. Under pressure from affordable housing advocates, Seattle and King County, Washington assessed public land assets owned by the city, county, Regional Transit Authority and the city's electric utility, concluding that they "have adequate land capacity to solve the housing problem in this county",⁵ by using surplus public land more strategically. Seattle, King County and the State of Washington, now have some of the most progressive land disposition laws in the country.

Although there are often regulations on how governments acquire land, whether through purchase, tax delinquency, mortgage foreclosures, or eminent domain, there continues to be limited regulation of how they dispose of (or sell) public land. Often, public land is treated as a commodity that agencies or quasi-public authorities sell in order to fill short-term budget needs, with each agency making independent decisions with limited inter-agency coordination or long-term strategy around highest or best use, and perhaps most importantly, limited transparency or public accountability.

As part of the federally funded "urban renewal" movement from the 1950s to 1970s, local governments acquired, through eminent domain or forced below-market sales, land formerly occupied primarily by residents of color, then disposed of that land by selling it to for-profit developers, resulting in the systematic displacement of communities of color in major American cities under the guise of "blight removal" and "slum clearance."⁶ "This history provides a crucial reminder

[Seattle, King County and the State of Washington] have adequate land capacity to solve the housing problem in this county, by using surplus public land more strategically.

that the power associated with public land [acquisition and sale] has often been co-opted and wielded for private, commodified, and racially discriminatory ends."⁷

Limited regulations of public land sales, combined with the long history of government officials selling public land to private industry and failing to adequately regulate land use in economically distressed Black and Brown communities, has fueled the environmental justice movement and led to demands for increased community stewardship of land. In cities around the country, advocates are pushing for new regulations around the use and sale of public land to address communities' needs, such as affordable housing, recreational space, community centers, and food security.

Where local and state regulations of public land disposition do exist, they are designed to address one or more of the following values:⁸

1. **Transparency and democratic checks and balances**, which ensures that decisions are made with public input and the approval of a city's elected officials;
2. **Anti-corruption**, which eliminate back-door deals and constrain or prevent the donation of municipal land, except where the recipient is a nonprofit or charitable organization intending to use the land for a public purpose;
3. **Public use**, which encourages cities to incentivize publicly-beneficial uses of surplus municipal land (such as parks and affordable housing);
4. **Community Stewardship**, which encourages de-commodified, community-based ownership and stewardship of land; and
5. **Efficiency**, which encourages cities to sell parcels at fair market value when selling to private bidders.

Many cities, including Seattle, WA, Denver, CO, Dallas, TX, Jacksonville, FL and Philadelphia, PA, have passed laws designed to protect public land through preferences for the continued public use of city-owned land after disposition, and by selling land at a discount to nonprofits when the land will be used for a public purpose.⁹ The State of California's Surplus Land Act (AB 1486, January 1, 2020) requires local agencies to alert the state Department of Housing and Community Development and local affordable housing developers if any parcel of surplus government-owned land is potentially developable as affordable housing, and to alert parks departments, school districts, and transit agencies if the land is suitable for recreational, educational, or public transportation purposes.¹⁰ California's Surplus Land Act is one of the most substantive and public use-oriented state laws governing municipal land disposition.

Public land disposition laws that (1) require public transparency, (2) build in opportunities for communities and nonprofits to respond or bid, (3) eliminate loopholes and back-door deals, and (4) prioritize and incentivize uses that benefit the public, reflect a long-term investment in a community's future. Additionally, land disposition laws that prioritize "transferring land from the city's ownership to collectives of residents who promise to tend to it as a decommodified urban commons resource," such as Community Land Trusts, foster democratic, community-driven ownership and stewardship.¹¹

The privatization of public land places excessive pressure on local land values, a pressure that is exacerbated by the fact that land is traded on global capital markets as assets and targeted for speculation by foreign and national corporations,¹² private equity funds, and other opportunistic investors.¹³ Urban land and home ownership are concentrated not only among white wealthy residents, but increasingly among foreign corporate landlords.¹⁴ The loss of local control of land has been particularly damaging in places like Puerto Rico, where local laws incentivize foreign investment. By selling surplus land on private markets, local governments may realize a short-term influx of cash, but over the long-term they are greatly contributing to structural inequity and constraining the ability of future governments to provide for the changing needs of their communities.

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EXAMPLE

South Bronx Unite and the NYC Community Land Initiative

In New York City, where land is extremely limited and affordable housing is scarce, city and state agencies and quasi-public authorities have a long history of selling public land to private developers with limited community input. Between 2014 and 2018, 78 percent of lots owned by New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)s were transferred to for-profit developers for luxury housing, with a minimum number of units for affordable housing.¹⁵

In the South Bronx, where over 90% of residents are either Black or Latinx, much of the riverfront, formerly filled with industrial sites and warehouses, has been sold by the city to private developers. Over 5,000 new units have already been developed that will be unaffordable for local working-class residents and will permanently cut off residents' access to the river.

South Bronx Unite, a grassroots environmental justice organization, has been pushing back against the development of luxury housing and polluting industries, and building the power of the community to determine its own future. After developing a community-driven master plan for the waterfront, SBU formed a community land trust — the Mott Haven/Port Morris Community Land Stewards. The Land Stewards secured a property that they are transforming into a vibrant, multi-use facility that will serve as a hub for wellness, learning, creativity, and connection.¹⁶

In addition to its community-based work, South Bronx Unite is part of the New York City Community Land Initiative, a coalition of organizations leading a legislative campaign to prevent the mayor and city agencies from disposing of municipal land to for-profit developers unless no qualified CLT or nonprofit organization makes an offer. The proposed Community Land Act is a set of bills that would give community land trusts and other nonprofits priority when city-owned land is sold and first right to purchase multi-family buildings when landlords sell, and would give tenants first right to collectively purchase their buildings when a landlord sells.¹⁷



EXAMPLE

MILPA – Protecting California Farmland for Farmworkers

Project MILPA, a collaborative effort of The Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy, The Mixteco Indígena Community Organizing Project and Lideres Campesinas, is organizing farmworkers in Ventura County, CA, to form a farmworker cooperative, enabling immigrant and indigenous farmworkers to build economic independence through cooperative farming. As part of this initiative, MILPA is exploring the creation of a community land trust to secure agricultural land that would be cooperatively owned and stewarded by farmworkers.

MILPA representatives participated on California's Agricultural Land Equity Task Force and are working to advance policy recommendations for the legislature and governor that would provide farmworkers, cooperatives, or conservation nonprofits first right of refusal when agricultural land is sold, and priority access for farmland preservation programs, easements or lease of publicly owned land.

MILPA also worked with the California Alliance with Family Farmers to advocate for AB 524¹⁸, the Farmland Access and Conservation for Thriving Communities Act, to guide implementation of the disadvantaged farmer land access program funded by California's Proposition 4 \$10 Billion Climate Bond.¹⁹



EXAMPLE

Creating Public Parks out of Vacant Lots

The Conscious Connect, a community development corporation in Springfield, Ohio, has purchased six vacant lots from their local land bank, some with dilapidated houses, and worked with the community to transform them into three vibrant pocket parks. These community-designed greenspaces cultivate passive and active use with two basketball courts, little libraries, benches, landscaping, hardscaping, planted trees, bike racks, frisbee golf, trashcans, and a mural.

Land Banks

Land banks are quasi-public entities created to acquire unused, tax delinquent, or abandoned property to be repurposed for community benefit. Land banks were originally created in the 1970s as tools for “urban renewal”, enabling local governments to take tax delinquent or abandoned properties and sell them to new owners with the goal of addressing “urban blight”.

Historically, land banks served a primarily transactional purpose—buying tax delinquent properties and selling them to spur private investment and put properties back on the tax rolls. Over time, it has become clear that this transactional approach contributes to gentrification and displacement, particularly in formerly redlined communities where Black and Brown homeowners were prevented from accessing loans and investment capital.

Many land banks are now embracing a more transformational role by taking neglected or abandoned

properties out of the speculative real estate market, working with community groups to identify needs and priorities, and eventually selling or transferring those properties to agencies, nonprofits, residents or local businesses. Community uses might include affordable housing, community gardens, urban agriculture, or commercial space.²⁰

Combined with stronger regulations of public land acquisition and disposal, land banks can serve an important role for cities and communities interested in addressing community needs, such as parks and affordable housing, while supporting increased community land stewardship.

Land banks often have limited staff capacity, but can leverage strategic partnerships to meet community needs. Partners might include:

- Water and sewer agencies to create green infrastructure and mitigate flooding and heat.
- Park agencies to address park equity gaps or develop trail networks.

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- Community Land Trusts to create neighborhood serving greenspaces or permanently affordable housing, and
- Community Development Corporations to develop affordable housing, revitalize commercial corridors, or create neighborhood parks.

Transformational land banks often partner with Community Land Trusts (CLT), using the land bank's unique powers to bank land and hold it while the CLT identifies priority uses and raises capital. Where appropriate, the land is transferred or sold to the CLT for long-term community use and stewardship.

Establishing a Land Bank

In order for a land bank to serve a transformational role, rather than a transactional role, it should be established with:

1. Governance structures informed by and responsive to community needs (i.e. community representation on the Board),
2. Policies that give community-based nonprofits priority in the disposition of banked lands,

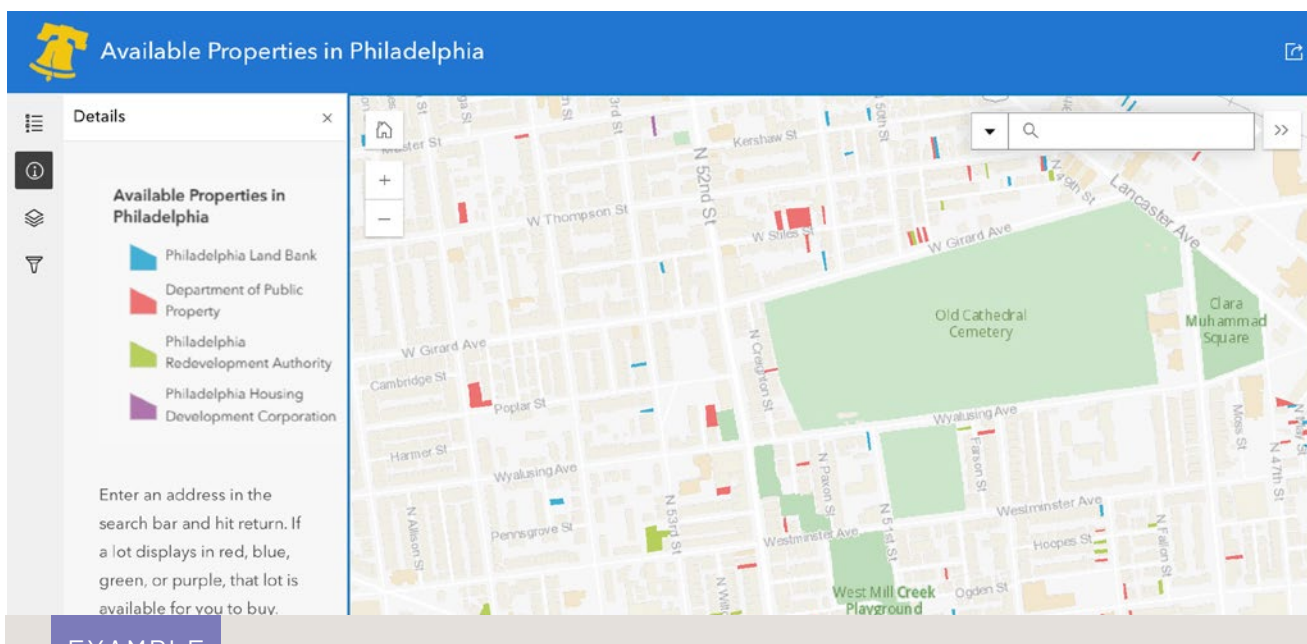
3. Funding structures that enable land to be banked long-enough to ensure community input on their use, and that enable nonprofits to acquire parcels at prices aligned with their intended use.

As independent, quasi-public entities, **land banks** set their own policies and priorities and are governed by an independent Board of Directors. In contrast, **land banking programs** are governed by the agency where they are housed. Land banking programs can be established by a local government agency, but independent land banks often require state enabling legislation, because of their unique powers. State enabling legislation defines the scope and limitations of those powers, while local legislation defines their role. Land banking programs often don't have the funding or flexibility of independent land banks, but they may be faster and easier to establish.

To serve a transformational role and succeed in their mission, it's critical that land banks have consistent and dedicated funding²¹. Land banks are funded through a variety of sources, including general fund appropriations from local and county governments, revenue from the sale of properties, federal and state grants, and foundation grants. Some states and localities include financing mechanisms in the land bank enabling legislation.

The **Center for Community Progress** has extensive resources to support the establishment, funding and management of land banks,²² including:

- Technical assistance
- Educational programs
- Policy and research
- Publications and a resource library, and
- National land bank network



EXAMPLE

Philadelphia Land Bank²³

The Philly Land Bank is dedicated to turning vacant and underused properties into opportunities for residents, businesses, and communities. By making land more accessible, the Land Bank helps to stabilize and build socially and economically diverse communities.

The Philly Land Bank has established a unified, predictable, and transparent process that ensures residents and community-based organizations have the opportunity to influence decisions about the future uses of land in their neighborhoods and to purchase parcels for local ownership and stewardship.

Their website includes a map of all publicly owned parcels in the city available for acquisition, with links to data on assessed value, sale price, as well as related permits and inspections. The map includes parcels owned by:

- The Philadelphia Land Bank
- Department of Public Property
- Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority
- Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation

The website allows anyone to apply to buy land for the following purposes:

- Creating or preserving a community garden, open space or recreational area
- Creating a side or rear yard, or developing on an adjacent parcel
- Developing affordable housing or other community uses, such as playgrounds, senior centers, or daycare centers, and
- Local business expansion

The Land Bank recognizes gardening can be an important part of transforming and sustaining communities, and it has a strong commitment to supporting the creation of community gardens, recreational areas and urban agriculture. Residents who are interested in turning an empty lot into a community garden, or are already gardening on a lot without permission, are encouraged to apply to the Land Bank to make their ownership and stewardship of those sites official.

Community Land Trusts

Community Land Trusts (CLT) are an important non-profit model for supporting community ownership and stewardship of land. CLTs use public and private investments to acquire and develop land on behalf of communities with the goal of promoting beneficial community uses, such as affordable housing, neighborhood parks, community gardens, agriculture, arts and culture, and commercial spaces. The CLT owns the land in perpetuity and provides “ground leases” for any buildings that meet public needs, such as deeply and permanently affordable housing and nonprofit services. Ultimately, a Community Land Trust is a way to rearrange rights and responsibilities to give people power over the places that they live.

The first community land trust grew out of the southern civil rights movement as a tool for establishing a new form of land tenure for black farmers and their families. The CLT model is still used across the U.S. to support farmworker-owned and other cooperative agriculture models, however, it is more often used to support the development of affordable housing. Increasingly, communities are using the CLT model to protect land for community greenspaces, such as community gardens and parks, in order to address historic inequities in parks and greenspaces and to reverse the legacy of environmental injustice from redlining.

Native American Tribes, particularly those that have no federal designation, are increasingly adapting the community land trust legal framework to enable Indigenous peoples to regain access to their traditional lands and steward them in sustainable ways that preserve

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their cultural heritage and support Tribal self-determination.²⁴ “For some, establishing a land trust is seen as a temporary workaround. There are legal barriers to exercising jurisdiction, and conflicting territorial claims resulting from histories of colonialism. The development of community land trusts forms a way for Indigenous Peoples to assert their responsibilities and engage in land-based practices, reclaim areas in their homelands, and build connectivity amongst themselves and with their relatives.”²⁵

Establishing a Community Land Trust

In order to ensure land is owned by and for the community, CLTs are governed by a tripartite Board of Directors made up of one third CLT residents (lease holders), one-third community residents (surrounding community), and one-third public representatives (government officials, local nonprofits, funders, and others representing the public interests). The CLT has a membership that is open to anyone living within the CLT’s service area, and a majority of the nonprofit’s board is elected by the CLT membership.

There are multiple organizational structures for CLTs. How the organization is structured impacts the level of community control vs. nonprofit control.²⁶

More community control		More nonprofit control	
Independent CLT: CLT is incorporated as an entirely separate organization from the founding nonprofit, who serves as convenor	Spin-off Nonprofit: A separately incorporated CLT is spun off from a founding nonprofit, within which the CLT is initially incubated and temporarily housed	Subsidiary Nonprofit: Founding nonprofit sets up a separately incorporated CLT, but the CLT remains affiliated with and controlled by that sponsoring nonprofit	Program of Founding Nonprofit: No separate entity is created, but elements of the CLT model are grafted into a founding nonprofits operations



EXAMPLE

Sogorea Te' Land Trust Rematriating Land and Sacred Sites³⁰

In 1999, development of a new park was proposed that threatened Sogorea Te', a 3,500 year old Karkin Ohlone village and burial site located at Glen Cove, which kicked off a campaign to protect the site.

For twelve years, Indigenous organizers attended city council meetings, met with recreation district officials, held demonstrations and prayer walks, and submitted their objections during the environmental review process for the proposed park. Dismissing the requests of the Native community, the city pressed forward with their plans. As permits were finalized to begin grading the site, organizers realized the time had come to make a stand.

Over a hundred people gathered at Sogorea Te'— an elder lit a sacred fire, an altar was established, and the spiritual encampment to protect Sogorea Te' began. A community of protectors stood vigil together, tending the sacred fire continuously for 109 days and nights. Thousands of people visited the spiritual encampment to pay their respects, bring supplies and support, offer songs, stories, dances and ceremonies, and lay their prayers on the fire, including members of other California tribes and Indigenous people internationally.

The spiritual encampment ended after a cultural easement and memorandum was signed between federally recognized Patwin/Wintu tribes, the City of Vallejo and the Greater Vallejo Park District, which promised to ensure the protection of the site. Though Sogorea Te' is Karkin Ohlone territory, Ohlone people are not federally recognized and could not themselves be a party to the easement. As a result of the struggle to protect Sogorea Te, representatives of the Ohlone people formed the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, a legal entity that would enable their people to purchase land outside of the federal Tribal recognition system as a way to permanently protect cultural and spiritual sites.

In some cities, CLTs work with local land banks to access land below market rates, or with local jurisdictions to access surplus public land before it is put on the private market. They may also partner with conservation land trusts to implement projects that include both protected park land as well as affordable housing. CLTs often partner with Community Development Corporations or Mutual Housing Associations to develop and manage affordable housing on CLT land. Where agriculture or food security is the goal, they may work with farmworker cooperatives or organizations representing historically marginalized growers to use land for food production. CLTs addressing park and greenspace inequities, such as Boston Food Forest Coalition and the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust often partner with their local parks department and community organizations to identify, develop and steward community greenspaces.

There are a number of state and national organizations and associations that support the creation and build the capacity of community land trusts, including:

- **Grounded Solutions Network**,²⁷ which supports CLTs focused on building permanently affordable housing by providing training, peer learning, technical assistance, and a resource library with model ground leases, governance models and finance strategies.
- **Equity Trust**,²⁸ which supports CLTs focused on protecting agricultural land by providing model ground leases, access to low-interest loans, and technical assistance.
- **State Community Land Trust Networks**,²⁹ such as California CLT Network, Greater Boston CLT Network, and New York City Community Land Initiative. These state networks connect CLTs to each other and to technical assistance and resources.

Community Stewardship and Joint Use of Public Land

In communities with inequitable access to parks, playgrounds and affordable housing, enabling the use of existing land and facilities owned by agencies, nonprofits and religious institutions may be the most expedient strategy to addressing community needs without changing land ownership.

Community Stewardship of Public Land

Local jurisdictions and public agencies own and maintain significant land portfolios, with parcels that often sit vacant and underutilized. Agencies often hold parcels for potential future use, but without a currently defined need or timeline. Keeping vacant or underutilized parcels in public ownership maintains the jurisdiction's capacity to meet future public needs, but is an on-going maintenance expense for the government and a lost opportunity for the community.

Increasingly, communities are working with government agencies to develop and steward these spaces for community use, while maintaining public ownership. The creation of community gardens, pocket parks, civic gathering spaces, food forests, recreation and green infrastructure improve community health and quality of life and help to address park and recreation inequities.

Keeping vacant or underutilized parcels in public ownership maintains the jurisdiction's capacity to meet future public needs, but is an on-going maintenance expense for the government and a lost opportunity for the community.

In some cases, the agency and community members develop an agreement that gives residents and community-based organizations permission to improve and steward the space themselves for an agreed upon period of time. When the site requires infrastructure improvements in order to enable community use, elected officials and agencies might fund the improvement costs, while residents provide long-term stewardship, programming and amenities.

The first challenge for community stewardship of public land is often just determining who owns the land, which can be a surprisingly difficult question to answer. Land ownership data can be inaccessible, fragmented, outdated, incomplete, and inaccessible.

Some jurisdictions have developed publicly accessible land ownership maps that identify public ownership by agency. The [King County Parcel Viewer](#) enables users to identify the ownership of any parcel in the jurisdiction, public or private. The [Philadelphia Land Bank](#) property map shows all publicly owned parcels that are currently vacant or underutilized, and allows residents and businesses to apply to turn those lots into community greenspaces or other community-serving uses. For jurisdictions where parcel ownership data isn't readily available, the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy's [Center for Geospatial Solutions](#) has created its "Who Owns America" methodology to unlock the black box of property ownership information and empower informed land use decisions.

Joint Use of Public and Nonprofit Land

Traditionally, joint (shared) use agreements have been used to create management and resource-sharing agreements between two or more entities, such as a school district and parks department, that enables facilities to be opened for public use when the owner of the facility does not require exclusive use.

Management and resource-sharing agreements are usually designed to benefit both parties to the agreement. For example, when school districts agree to open schoolyards for community use after hours, the

partnering agency, such as a parks department, often agrees to invest in infrastructure upgrades and site improvements, and may split maintenance responsibilities or costs. Thus, the school district and its students benefit from a significantly improved schoolyard and receive either budget or services that can reduce their maintenance costs. In districts where families have a choice of where to send their children to school, community schoolyards create positive connections between families and their neighborhood schools, which often leads to increased enrollment.

A number of national organizations have developed extensive resources to support and promote the development of joint use agreements and policies, with a particular focus on creating access to playgrounds, greenspaces and recreational facilities where cities have failed to provide them.

- **ChangeLab Solutions** has extensive Model Joint Use Agreement Resources,³¹ including model language for different types of joint use agreements, and publications and resources for communities, advocates and public health practitioners.
- **KaBOOM!'s toolkit**, *Playing Smart: Maximizing the Potential of School and Community Property through Joint Use Agreements*,³² shares lessons learned from successful agreements, as well as guidelines and templates for communities looking to expand their access to school recreational facilities.

Increasingly, nonprofit religious and educational institutions are rethinking how to serve their communities through their often expansive land and facilities, with a particular focus on recreation, community centers and deeply affordable housing.

Several local and state governments have passed "YIG-BY" laws (Yes, in God's Backyard) making it significantly easier for religious and educational organizations to develop affordable housing on their land. Washington was one of the first states to pass a YIGBY law (HB 1377), which extends a density bonus for 100-percent affordable housing built on property owned by religious



institutions. California's YIGBY³³ law, also known as SB 4,³⁴ went into effect in 2024, giving nonprofit colleges and religious institutions the power to build 100-percent affordable housing projects on their properties "by right," bypassing any special zoning requirements from local jurisdictions so long as the project meets state-mandated criteria.³⁵ Similar legislation has been proposed in the states of New York, Virginia and Hawaii, and have been enacted in cities, such as Atlanta,³⁶ Georgia, and San Antonio,³⁷ Texas.³⁸ With religious

groups collectively owning more than 2.6 million acres across the U.S., much of it underutilized, the impact of opening those acres for community serving purposes is significant.³⁹

With escalating land costs and competing demands on urban space, joint use of land and facilities can be an important strategy for providing affordable housing and close to home recreation and greenspaces, particularly in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color.



East Austin Soccer Club

EXAMPLE

Central Texas Interfaith Addressing Park Inequities through Joint Use

In Austin, TX, Central Texas Interfaith (CTI) has created innovative joint use partnerships with the school district, universities, religious institutions and a variety of city agencies to create close-to-home recreation spaces in historically underserved neighborhoods. CTI has upended the traditional planning process, by working first with residents to identify greenspace needs, then engaging non-traditional partners, such as churches and universities, where opportunities exist for shared land use, then engaging with a variety of city agencies to implement projects and negotiate shared use agreements.

CTI has worked for a number of years with the Austin Independent School District and Austin Parks and Recreation to open schoolyards for neighborhood recreational use in communities underserved by parks. In recent years, CTI expanded their joint use efforts beyond schoolyards, partnering with leaders at St. John's Episcopal Church and the Austin Parks and Recreation to create a neighborhood park on land adjacent to the church owned by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. Church leaders worked with the diocese to draft an easement for the acreage, creating a park managed by Austin Parks and Recreation on land that will continue to be owned by the diocese. With CTI's support, the church has engaged residents and community serving nonprofits in planning for the park and for use of the renovated church hall as a community center.

CTI helped bring together innovative partners to create and jointly manage Tillery Field - a new soccer field in East Austin on city-owned land. CTI brought together the immigrant-led East Austin Soccer Club and HBCU Huston-Tillotson University to work with the City of Austin to create the soccer field with the cooperation of City of Austin Public Works and Watershed Protection Departments. Watershed Protection is deeply involved because part of the site is a detention pond for stormwater management. The soccer field will be managed through a shared use agreement between the soccer club and the university.

CTI has built the power of the community to come together to advocate for shared needs, and has demonstrated its value to agencies and institutions as a trusted, strategic, and committed partner. As a result, CTI is able to train resident leaders on how public relationships are built and how power is leveraged within them, and to persuade partners to champion community-driven projects.

Conclusion

When cities shift policies and resources to scale-up, replicate and support community ownership and stewardship of land, they benefit from significant resident engagement, private investment, and creative solutions to complex challenges. By enabling, supporting and scaling up community solutions to environmental and societal problems, cities realize large-scale benefits from small-scale actions, often at significantly lower costs than traditional top-down approaches.

"In cities around the world, residents are proving that urban resilience isn't just about major initiatives and

investments—it's about many small, replicable actions accumulating to create systems change. A single community garden might seem insignificant, but multiply that by a hundred, and suddenly, a neighborhood has enhanced food security, increased green space and strengthened community ownership."⁴⁰

Prevention Institute's People, Parks and Power (P3) Initiative is supporting local efforts to gain access to increasingly scarce land and building the capacity of community-based organizations to ensure residents drive decisions about how land can best meet their needs. To learn more about P3, visit www.prevention-institute.org.



Endnotes

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