

A photograph of a park scene. In the foreground, a young boy in a white shirt and blue shorts sits on the grass, surrounded by many pigeons. In the background, a paved path leads through a green lawn where several people are walking or playing. The scene is bright and sunny.

RECREATION ROADMAP

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Problems & Progressive Local Solutions	1
Available Local Levers & Targets for Reform	2
Current Reforms & Tools to Fight for Them	3
Taking it to the Next Level	4
Allies, Comrades, & Helpers	4

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Recreation Policy Roadmap was prepared by ProGov21.



ProGov21 is a shared resource for progressive local policy makers and advocates alike. Operated and maintained by COWS, a national think-and-do tank based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, ProGov21 offers a fully searchable digital library of progressive policies, practices, and other resources for 21st century local government.

The Problems & Progressive Local Solutions

America needs more equitable access to recreational spaces and recreational opportunities. Recreational facilities and opportunities to play are key to driving equity, economic development and environmental preservation at the community level. They improve community and individual health, increase home values, and preserve green spaces where people to interact with nature and each other.

However, access to recreational spaces and opportunities are increasingly stratified and for many low-income communities and communities of color, access is not equitable. For example, a study of spending on parks and recreational space in Southern California found that funding for these projects ranged from \$1 per capita annually to more than \$500 per capita annually, with lower income communities suffering the most from low investment in recreational spaces and opportunities (Joassart-Marcelli 2010). Making access to recreational space and recreational opportunities more equitable would contribute to reducing inequality and improving outcomes for members of marginalized communities.

In terms of equity, proximity to parks and recreational spaces is one of the strongest predictors of physical activity for adults, teens, and children (Joassart-Marcelli 2010), and physical activity is



related to reduced likelihood of heart disease, high blood pressure, and obesity (Sherer 2005).

Recreational spaces also affect the economic development of their neighboring communities: parks and open spaces drive higher real estate

values, and studies have shown as much as a \$4.20 decrease in the price of residential property for every foot farther that property is from concentrated green space; this relationship holds true for low-income communities and communities of color ([Sherer 2005](#)). In many cases, these increased property values are large enough to cover the cost of creating and maintaining parks and recreational areas (Id.).

Available Local Levers & Targets for Reform

Communities fighting for effective and equitable recreation policies must address issues of funding, access, and design. The economics of funding the development and maintenance of recreational spaces can be difficult because of problems associated with placing a value on recreational spaces directly as well as the associated improvements in health, wellbeing, and real estate value.

Frequently, the value of alternative land uses, such as real estate development or commercial development of natural resources, are easier to identify than the dispersed benefits of recreational space. Further, charging users of these resources the full cost of their development and maintenance undermines the public health benefits and allows real estate owners act as free-riders, reaping a benefit without contributing for costs. To overcome this issue, the well-established benefits of recreational space must be clearly stated and consistently emphasized, and myths about recreational spaces must be countered.

Issues of access must also be addressed. Users should be able to access recreational resources with or without a car, and the standards set out in the Americans with Disabilities Act need to be met to make the recreational facilities truly accessible. However, deeper issues around accessibility exist. Residents in many low-income communities or communities of color perceive the recreational facilities available to them as unsafe. When parks and recreational facilities are designed using relatively inexpensive Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) protocols that emphasize sufficient lighting and sightlines, they may allow improved informal monitoring and “create and enhance family and community ties by increasing interaction, decreasing isolation and crime, and encouraging volunteerism” ([ChangeLab Solutions 2015](#)).

Recreational facilities must be designed around shared goals developed and articulated by the community. The most important measure of success for recreational facilities is the extent to which they meet residents’ needs. Demographic indicators and local preferences must be accounted for in the process of allocating resources to active, high-exertion recreation or more leisurely passive recreation. Differences in language, communication barriers, cultural differences, differences in family structure, and income among the groups of people using the park must be accounted for and addressed during the

design process. Involving local residents in all aspects of the design and implementation process not only produces recreation facilities more responsive to the needs of the community, but also increase community buy-in and sense of ownership in the resulting programs and or facilities.

Current Reforms & Tools to Fight for Them

The ProGov21 database highlights two important tools for framing and achieving equitable recreational opportunities: (1) the possibility of achieving more equitable distributions of recreational facilities and opportunities through Shared Use or



Joint Use planning and (2) the effectiveness of recreational space and opportunities in combating childhood obesity. [ChangeLab Solutions fact sheet, Fair Play: Advancing Health Equity through Shared Use](#), introduces the shared use strategy for reducing disparities in recreational access in low-income communities and communities of color by working with government entities or private organizations to open their recreational facilities for community use. The most common form of shared use has been the opening school playgrounds and athletic fields to the whole community, but other examples of shared use planning have involved utility districts making their land available for community gardens, community organizations hosting free exercise classes in local schools and churches, and hospitals creating public trail systems on their property. ChangeLab's fact sheet (linked above) also includes information on promoting community safety in shared use programs, and introduces solutions to legal liability concerns that often arise when negotiating or establishing shared use programs. Also available in the ProGov21 database is [Joint Use of Public Schools: A Framework for a New Social Contract](#), an excellent primer by the 21st Century School Fund and Center for Cities & Schools on shared use partnerships with public school districts.

The childhood obesity epidemic in America is a public health crisis, particularly among low income

communities and communities of color: equitable access to recreational opportunities is a cost-effective method of addressing this problem. The National League of Cities white paper [Addressing Health Disparities in Cities: Lessons From the Field](#) provides an excellent briefing on urban health disparities and the first steps to addressing them, while UC Berkeley's Department of Environmental Design and Public Health have produced an excellent fact sheet titled Parks and Recreation Programs Help to Reduce Childhood Obesity containing statistics and linkages between childhood obesity, sedentary behavior, and access to recreational facilities.

Taking it to the Next Level

We must fight for a world where every person (and especially every child) has equitable access to recreational activities. The ProGov21 database features model laws and model ordinances designed to promote and protect equitable access to recreation. The [Model Ordinance-Open Space Development](#) drafted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) creates a legal requirement that the amount of open or green space in a community increases with the number of housing units to ensure that communities establish and maintain open space even as they develop more housing units and become more populated.

Allies, Comrades, and Helpers

ChangeLab Solutions

ChangeLab provides a whitepapers on improving public health through better access to recreation, exercise, and high-quality nutrition.

[College of Environmental Design & Public Health at UC Berkley](#)

Researchers have helped write numerous local wage and benefits ordinances and conducted research of community benefits agreements.

Mayors Innovation Project (MIP)

MIP provides a wealth of resources for cities pursuing a high road development strategy as well as a network to learn and share with.

We continue the conversation around local policy on **ProGov21's Podcast**. Our latest episode features experts from [Policy Matters Ohio](#), and the [Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy \(LAANE\)](#), on a panel discussion all about highroad progressive environmental policies.

Listen to our podcast on, [our website](#), [Spotify](#), [Apple Music](#), or [Amazon Music](#).

