

Parks Revitalization Project History

In 1993, the William Penn Foundation funded a restoration of Center in the Park, a multi-service non-profit agency serving seniors in the Germantown community. The Center is located in Vernon Park, an 8.5 acre park owned by the former Philadelphia Department of Recreation. Despite the renovations, participation in the Center's services and attendance at programs was not as dynamic as the funders and the Center staff had hoped. Seniors would not utilize services at the Center because they were simply afraid of going into Vernon Park. The park had become a haven for illicit behavior – drugs, gang activity, drinking, and illegal dumping dominated the park.

In response to this crisis, The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) teamed up with the Philadelphia Department of Recreation (PDR) on an innovative program. Starting with three parks – Vernon Park in Germantown, Norris Square in Kensington and Wharton Square in Southwest Philadelphia – PDR and PHS organized volunteer Park Friend Groups to serve as community stewards. These city volunteers worked in close partnership with PHS and PDR staff in transforming their neighborhood green spaces from acres of neglect and negative use to clean and safe parks with family friendly programming.

Today there are approximately 100 volunteer Park Friend Groups who gather neighbors for cleanups and gardening workdays, organize community-based programming and raise money for park physical improvements. These allied volunteers ensure that their local parks are clean safe and ready to use for everyone in their community. In our 20 year history of this work, we can affirm a clear and strong message: positive park use drives out negative activities.

One of the most important aspects of the Parks Revitalization Project has been the dynamic partnership between PHS and Parks and Recreation. For 19 years, this partnership has worked to solve maintenance and operational issues, develop standards for physical improvements, train PPR staff and volunteers, collaborate on park programming, organize two annual citywide park cleanups, and coordinate up with other city agencies and non-profit partners to solve community problems.

Transition

In the summer of 2012, the Fairmount Park Conservancy, whose sole mission is to preserve and improve parks in the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation system, joined PHS and PPR in this collaborative effort with PPR serving as the lead partner. This enhanced partnership is an outcome related to the Parks and Recreation merger as well as strategic reviews of each partner agency's mission and goals. The partners collectively decided to reorient the roles of each agency and beginning September 2012, the Fairmount Park Conservancy will take the lead in community outreach and assisting PPR in managing the Friends Group network while PHS contributions will focus on sustainable design and training for PPR staff and volunteers.

Going Forward: The Neighborhood Park Stewardship Program Network

The “Neighborhood Park Stewardship Program” supports Friends Groups in a variety of ways:

- Program Partners will hold Friends Group Network meetings five times a year to which all Friends Groups are invited. These meetings offer Friend Groups a shared forum to receive updated park-related information, to address issues directly with partners and fellow volunteers, to advocate for system and process improvements, to engage in partner-led programs, and to develop a deeper relationship with organizational partners and other volunteer groups.
- Program Partners will organize two citywide park cleanups which we call “Love Your Park.”
 - o Fall: Knowing that leaves can be a safety hazard during the winter (clogging storm drains and making walkways slippery) our fall cleanup focuses on leaf removal in parks. Last year volunteer park groups collected over 41 tons of leaves in one day. In our collective efforts toward environmental sustainability, these leaves went to the PPR Recycling Center to become compost.
 - o Spring: Love Your Park starts with a citywide park cleanup and follows with a weeklong series of events and programming encouraging citizens to celebrate Philadelphia’s parks.
- Program Partners will acknowledge the contributions of the Neighborhood Park Friend Groups by holding an annual volunteer appreciation party. Park Friend Groups collectively volunteer over 200,000 hours per year which, with the current value of volunteer time at \$21.79 per hour, our Park Friend Groups contribute over \$4 million in services each year.
- Fairmount Park Conservancy (FPC) will serve as the lead in community organizing efforts around large-scale physical improvements and master planning processes in neighborhood parks.
- Program Partners, through FPC, will offer two grant programs for Friend Groups each Fall – one for events and one for physical improvements.
- PPR and FPC will assist Park Friend Groups with capacity building, transition planning, volunteer recruitment and leadership training.
- FPC will also be the fundraising leader and steward of select signature capital projects such as the \$20 million revitalization of Hunting Park.

Together we believe that parks can be catalysts for positive change in our city and that better parks make individual lives healthier, neighborhoods safer and communities stronger.