CITY WORKSHOP

Principles of Successful Park Partnerships

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Partnerships are distinguished by the mutual effort and investment required to accomplish an outcome that would have been unattainable without such collaboration.

Partnerships can be complex and challenging, but when managed well can leverage resources and expertise from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and can bring innovative solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

These principles are designed to be a guide for creating more effective and well-managed partnerships, both across agencies and across sectors. They are not designed as a step-by-step or how-to guide, rather, as a set of principles for reflecting on and evaluating the elements that, when in place, can contribute to the success of park partnerships. The principles were drawn from research on cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration, collaborative governance, and public-private and public-nonprofit partnerships.

1. Create a shared vision.

One of the most important and challenging tasks in any partnership is creating a shared vision, the process of which requires answering both **"what are we working towards"** and **"why are we working together."** Creating a shared vision involves identifying the area of overlapping interests for all organizations involved in the partnership.

Organizations are more likely to partner with others when the complexity of the challenges require a mix of skills and resources that no one organization can bring to bear. By understanding the history of past efforts and developing a definition of the problem and a shared vision, you can identify whether the collaborative actions of a partnership will be more effective than the actions of single organization.

Each organization comes into a partnership with its own mission, organizational structure, culture, existing commitments, constraints, and priorities, many of which may not align with those of their partners and may even be in conflict, particularly if the nonprofit is engaged in public advocacy. Nonprofit partners can play an important role as public advocates, as long as while working in partnership with public agencies they are not diverting or undermining the agency's accountability to broader public interests.

Whether broad or narrow, the shared vision must be central enough to each organization's mission that they are willing to commit their time, resources, and leverage to achieve the vision.

2. Engage the right partners.

Organizations enter into partnerships to take advantage of the unique assets of their partners. The better you understand what expertise, resources, and connections you need to achieve your vision, the better you will be able to identify and engage the right mix of partners for success. Each organization has its own assets and constraints.

POTENTIAL ASSETS:	POTENTIAL CONSTRAINTS:
» Financial resources (access to short-term or long-term capital) » Financial flexibility » Technical expertise » Staff capacity » Access to volunteers » Diverse constituents » Data » Strong community reputation » Political connections » The ability to smooth legal or bureaucratic barriers » Physical assets, such as land, buildings, or tools	» Lack of financial resources » Bureaucratic or financial inflexibility » Lack of technical expertise » Legal or regulatory limitations » Limited volunteer network

The better these are understood, the better you can build on an organization's assets while minimizing and mitigating constraints. In particular, partners need to be aware of their own assets and constraints and be as upfront about them as possible.

Over time, the needs of the partnership might change as the project and surrounding circumstances evolve. The identification of gaps in resources and expertise can guide the collaboration in the selection of additional partners.

3. Understand the risks and rewards for all parties.

Partnerships will be most effective, productive, and sustainable over time if each partner understands and appreciates the nature and scope of the other party's potential risks and rewards, as well as its own. The objective of accounting for risks and rewards is to show that the ultimate outcome of the partnership will be a win-win for each partner as a result of their respective investments and risk taking.[1]

Agency Risks & Rewards

AGENCY RISKS:	AGENCY REWARDS:
» Liability for safety and long-term maintenance » Loss of control » Off-mission diversion of public resources, including staff time » Meeting legal or regulatory requirements » Partners who become advocates for non-mutual agendas or narrow interests	» Access to volunteers » Improved relationship with constituents » The opportunity to test ideas » Access to private and philanthropic resources

Nonprofit Risks & Rewards

NONPROFIT RISKS:	NONPROFIT REWARDS:
» Reputation with funders » Decreased staff or volunteer capacity » Credibility in the community » Liability for safety and maintenance » Limited influence or control over decisions	» Access to public land and buildings » Smoothing of bureaucratic or political hurdles » Greater visibility » Financial support

Nonprofits tend to benefit from a public perception of altruism and assumed benefit, while public agencies can suffer from negative perceptions of government. In a strong cross-sector partnership, these differing public perceptions can be used to advance the efficacy of the initiative, but without trust and mutual respect, can put the public agency at a political disadvantage.

4. Build trust as a core value.

To endure, partnerships require a foundation of trust in each partner's commitment to the project and its objectives. Given the complexity of relationships and the degree of risk each partner is taking in order to advance the initiative, there has to be a foundation of trust for the partnership to survive the changes and challenges it will inevitably face over time.

Trust is built through a sustained commitment to relationship-building at all levels of the partnership, positive and proactive communication, and shared responsibility and decision-making.[2] According to a GAO report on cross-agency collaboration, "positive working relationships between participants from different agencies bridge organizational cultures. These relationships build trust and foster communication, which facilitates collaboration."[3]

The trust of other stakeholders is also essential to the partnership's ability to garner the support it needs to be successful. Partners must ensure that other stakeholders, such as funders, elected officials, and community members, have faith in the ability of the initiative to be successful and trust the partners to effectively carry out their commitments.

"Building trust incrementally through small efforts within the partnership creates a record of small successes that support bigger strides. In other words, success breeds confidence, and confidence breeds trust. Because change is likely and reinvention becomes necessary, trust underlies the partnership's ability to stray from the prescribed path and yet continue to collaborate to realize mutual project objectives."[4]

5. Secure collaborative leadership, and define a governing structure.

Successful partnerships require collaborative leadership. In cross-agency and cross-sector partnerships, all participating partners are leaders in their own right, with their own organizational missions, cultures, constituencies, and interests. Partnerships often have multiple leaders, all playing different leadership roles: sponsors, conveners, facilitators, and project managers. However, leadership needs to be identified to serve the role of facilitator and manager and an agreed-upon governance structure.

[2] "Public—Nonprofit Partnership: Realizing the New Public Service," Administration & Society, 2009.
[3] Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms, GAO, p.14
[4] Ten Principles for Successful Public/Private Partnerships, ULI, 30.

In cross agency collaborative efforts, leadership models range from having one agency or person lead to assigning shared leadership over a collaborative mechanism. The advantage of having one agency or individual lead is that it centralizes accountability and can speed decision-making. However, when collaboration requires buy-in from more than one agency, shared leadership can help convey support from both agencies.

According to the *Ten Principles for Successful Public/Private Partnerships*,

> **"A good leader is a facilitator, a coach, an orchestra leader, an enabler. He or she brings people around the table and helps them move in a given direction. In a sense, the sign on a leader's desk reads "the buck starts here," not "the buck stops here." Such a person takes the initiative and does not wait for someone else to do it, and then follows through, tirelessly, patiently, painstakingly, to see the project to completion."** [5]

Described as "leading when you are not in charge," collaborative leadership requires the ability to exercise one's authority while being participatory and to balance advocacy, given what is known, with needed inquiry, given what is not known," as described in the UNCG *Guide to Collaborative Competencies*.[6]

Organizing to get things done in a collaborative manner is not easy, largely because it is time-consuming and constantly evolving, with players and roles changing over time. New leadership can be one of the most challenging disruptions to a partnership. Agency directors can change frequently, particularly when they are political appointees, as do leaders of grassroots groups and coalitions. Weathering leadership changes requires a commitment to the partnership's vision, strong relationships among staff, and a willingness to readjust timing and expectations.

Governing structures can range from loose-knit coalitions with consensus-based decision making to formal partnerships with more hierarchical decision-making. Flatter, less formal governing structures tend to be more inclusive and participatory and lend themselves to building a broad coalition of support. More formal and hierarchical governing structures may be less inclusive, but can support more efficient project implementation.[7]

Regardless of the leadership and governing structure, top-level commitment is important for any collaborative effort, whether from the mayor's office or other high-level officials. Top-level commitment facilitates broader collaboration and provides consistency and validity to participation at all levels. When top-level support wanes, so do collaborative programs.

[5] *Ten Principles for Successful Public/Private Partnerships, ULI, 20.*
[6] *UNCG Guide to Collaborative Competencies, Policy Consensus Institute, 10.*
[7] *"Collaboration: First Step or Last Resort?" Governing.*

6. Manage shared control with clear decision-making processes.

Managing shared decision-making and control is consistently identified as the greatest challenge for partners. Understanding each partner's organizational authorities, requirements, and constraints, as well as potential for flexibility can help create a realistic and sustainable decision-making process.

Most importantly, partners need to decide early on what each organization's realm of decision-making authority is within the partnership, particularly when leadership roles are shared. Partners need to identify which decisions they will make together and which they will make independently, as well as what types and range of decisions other stakeholders can influence or have the authority to make.

It should be clear what level of decision-making authority participating representatives have for their organizations, particularly public agency representatives who must adhere to public and government processes. Whenever possible, individuals with authority to make relevant decisions and allocate resources should be at the table. Going through the process of making joint decisions that can then be rejected by individuals who weren't present can significantly undermine trust. This is particularly true when community members are invited to give input or develop a plan that is then rejected or substantially disregarded by authorities.

For decisions that need to be made jointly, it's helpful to identify a process and who from each organization needs to be involved. A clear decision-making process and protocol increases transparency and facilitates sharing of information about the project.

Types of protocol include:

- » **Hierarchical decision-making**: One member or group holds power over the final decision for the entire collaboration.
- » **Majority voting**: Each member receives a vote, and the majority decision determines process.
- » **Group consensus**: All members agree on the decision.
- » **Mediator**: An individual brokers the decision-making for the collaboration.

Finally, partnerships must create mechanisms to allow continuous assessment of the effectiveness of decisions and the decision-making processes. Inevitably, partnerships will go through changing conditions, time frames, and conflicts and will need to be flexible in their approaches to shared control in order to survive and thrive through change.

7. Establish positive and proactive communication.

Positive, proactive communication in a partnership requires establishing norms for internal team communication to which all partners agree. Communication norms might include:

» When and how frequently will we meet in-person?
» What are the expectations for attendance?
» How will we communicate between meetings?
» What types of information do we expect others to share on a regular basis?
» How will we use technology to communicate and share data (conference calls, listserv, shared website, online sharing and coordination sites like Big Tent, Google Docs and Dropbox)?

Partners also need to establish clear expectations, responsibilities, and a process for external communication, such as responding quickly to media requests. Important external audiences might include elected officials and other city or agency leaders, funders, volunteers, community residents, other nonprofits, and the general public.

Proactive communication that supports collaborative governance must involve creating agreed-upon terminology and a shared knowledge base. Partners should agree on what data is relevant, what data gaps exist, and how to make data transparent and accessible. Technology can be used to create accessible sources of information and to sustain joint activities. Some agencies have developed information-sharing websites, integrated electronic reporting processes and procedures, and negotiated data-sharing arrangements.[8]

Sharing and jointly analyzing data helps create a common understanding of the problem that the partnership is trying to address, supports shared management and decision-making, and is an important way to track future progress.

Finally, effective communication in a partnership requires the ability of partners to be respectfully assertive – which means being able to influence and persuade in a constructive manner that takes others' interests into account.[9] An excellent resource for how to be respectfully assertive, even in the most difficult and high stakes situations, is the book Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes are High, by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler.

8. Negotiate a fair agreement.

"Fairness" is a value subject to judgment by both sides in any negotiation. When partners enter a negotiation with equal power and leverage and equal ability to walk away from the agreement, they are able to negotiate an agreement that is considered fair to all partners. However, an imbalance in negotiating power can lead to one partner carrying more of the responsibility for managing and funding projects, and/or one partner having substantially more decision-making authority. Ultimately, an unfair agreement means the project won't be representative of shared interests and may not be sustainable.

A sense of mutual dependence can strengthen a partnership, while an imbalance in the partnership can lead to engagement slowly dwindling over time or the group taking action outside of the agreement that will ultimately undermine trust and the ability to work together constructively.

With park partnerships, as with many cross-sector initiatives, the partners are sometimes not on equal footing. Private sector partners often bring substantial funding and resources to the partnership, which can skew negotiations, as can the imbalance in authority between nonprofits and public sector partners. When potential partners don't feel able to walk away from an agreement out of fear of losing needed support, or as with community partners, the problems they are trying to address are in their "backyard," they may agree to imbalanced terms that can undermine the sustainability of the partnership.

Negotiating a fair deal structure is a cumulative process that begins with some of the principles previously outlined. Above all, mutual trust established over time will go a long way in bridging difficult negotiating issues as they invariably arise.[10] Ultimately, "establishing 'win-win' arrangements and aligning incentives to reward participation makes individuals and organizations more likely to participate in collaborative arrangements, particularly in cases where participation is voluntary."[11]

[10] *Ten Principles for Successful Public/Private Partnerships, ULI, 27.*
[11] *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms, GAO, p.11*

9. Develop a shared work plan.

Developing a shared work plan and a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on how the work will be implemented, can strengthen commitment to working collaboratively. Partnerships require participants to balance accountability to one's own organization with accountability to partners' shared initiatives. The best way to avoid these conflicts is to have a shared vision that aligns with the mission and work of each organization and a detailed work plan.

According to a GAO report on cross agency collaboration, "Not all collaborative arrangements need to be documented through written guidance and agreements, particularly those that are informal. However, we have found that at times it can be helpful to document key agreements related to the collaboration. One expert we interviewed stated that the action of two agencies articulating a common outcome and roles and responsibilities into a written document was a powerful tool in collaboration."[12]

The process of developing an MOU can also help to identify potential problems or conflicts that could be mitigated or avoided, rather than allowing them to fester and undermine the effort over time.

Partnerships that involve on-going projects or programs benefit from having a clearly articulated work plan. A work plan serves as an implementation strategy and can include:
  » Partners and their responsibilities
  » Clearly identified leadership and staffing
  » Clearly defined tasks
  » A timeline for completion of each task
  » Budget and funding mechanisms
  » Regularly scheduled times for partners to check in and update each other on progress and challenges.

For any partnership to be successful, all parties must do their homework — at the onset as well as throughout the project – and remain accountable to the partnership. With a well-developed work plan to which all partners have access and a regularly scheduled time for review, it becomes easier for each partner to follow through and for the partners to hold each other accountable for progress. When partners fulfill their promises to the partnership, they inspire trust among each other and among external stakeholders, building confidence in the initiative and in the likelihood of a positive outcome.

[12] *Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms, GAO, p.25*

10. Secure necessary resources.

While not all collaborative efforts require funding, "collaboration can take time and resources in order to accomplish such activities as building trust among the participants, setting up the ground rules for the process, attending meetings, conducting project work, and monitoring and evaluating the results of work performed. Consequently, it is important for groups to ensure that they identify and leverage sufficient funding to accomplish the objectives."[13] If funding is needed, participating agencies and organizations need to find compatible methods for tracking funds for accountability.

For ongoing or long-term collaborative initiatives, it can be helpful to assign staff to the initiative from an agency or organization that serves as the "host agency" supported by other organizations through contributions of funds or in-kind support, such as office space. Lack of adequate staffing to support management and communication can undermine the success of even the most promising partnership.

11. Measure outcomes, and promote accountability.

In any effective partnership, participants need to step back regularly to evaluate how effectively they're achieving desired outcomes. Evaluation can involve both quantitative and qualitative measures and should include an evaluation of both the process (partnership) and outcomes (results). Partners will need to come to consensus on what measures will define success in the short, mid, and long term, and agree on measures to evaluate and report on results. This might include identifying what data will become available during the course of the collaboration and planning for who and how that data will be collected.

Agencies and organizations can incentivize and reinforce organizational accountability to outcomes from collaborative initiatives through agency plans and reports and reinforce individual accountability for collaboration through performance management systems.

ORGANIZATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY:	INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNTABILITY:
» Use annual performance plans as tools to drive collaboration. By having a means to monitor, evaluate and report the results of collaborative efforts, organizations can better identify areas for improvement.	» Evaluate individual performance against collaboration-related competencies. » Factor interagency experience into promotion decisions. » Publicly acknowledge or reward participants in other ways, such as conferring awards to individuals who exhibit exemplary collaborative leadership skills.

CONCLUSION

Park partnerships must be dynamic and responsive, as they operate in a constantly changing environment. Issues arise that individual partners may have little control over, and even when they have some control, they need to balance that with the interests and needs of their partners.

Here are some **common partnership pitfalls**, that when recognized, can be mitigated or addressed:

> » Limited vision/failure to inspire.
> » One partner manipulates or dominates, or partners compete for the lead.
> » Lack of clear purpose and inconsistent level of understanding purpose.
> » Lack of understanding roles/responsibilities.
> » Lack of support from partner organizations with ultimate decision-making power.
> » Differences of philosophies and manners of working.
> » Lack of commitment; unwilling participants.
> » Unequal and/or unacceptable balance of power, control and/or workload.
> » Key interests and/or people missing from the partnership.
> » Hidden agendas.
> » Failure to communicate.
> » Lack of evaluation or monitoring systems.
> » Failure to learn.
> » Financial and time commitments outweigh potential benefits.
> » Lack of resources for dedicated staff to sustain partnership.
> » Too little time for effective consultation.
> » Inability to respond to or weather unexpected challenges or changes.

Collaboration is not an easy answer to hard problems, but a hard answer to hard problems, according to John Bryson in his article "Designing and Managing Cross-Sector Collaboration."[14] But when done well, cross-sector collaboration can produce innovative solutions to seemingly intractable problems and can have more far-reaching and sustainable impacts than can be achieved by the actions of one organization. With the growth of cross-sector partnerships and other collaborative governance models, research and resources are proliferating on how to partner effectively. Each partnership, and the challenges and opportunities it faces, will be unique and will evolve over time. By taking advantage of the resources available and taking a deliberative approach to collaboration, partners can position themselves for success in addressing even the most complex challenges.

[14] *"Collaboration: First Step or Last Resort?" Governing, 2009.*

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ABOUT CITY PARKS ALLIANCE

City Parks Alliance is the only independent, nationwide membership organization solely dedicated to urban parks. It unites and serves a growing network of hundreds of civic and community leaders, government agencies, parks and recreation authorities, funders and others. City Parks Alliance was established in fall 2000 by a nationwide group of urban parks administrators and advocates. It is an outgrowth of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund's Urban Parks Initiative in the 1990s.

The mission of City Parks Alliance is to engage, educate and nurture a broad-based constituency to support the creation, revitalization and sustainability of parks and green spaces that contribute more to vibrant and equitable cities.

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APPENDIX I: INTERAGENCY COLLABORATIVE MECHANISMS

Agencies use a variety of leadership, staffing, and organizational mechanisms to incentivize and support collaboration, often using more than one mechanism to support an initiative. This is a list of common mechanisms and is not intended to be exhaustive.

LEADERSHIP:

» Mayoral appointee focused on an issue that crosses agency boundaries/missions.
» One agency primarily accountable for an initiative.
» Agreement by more than one agency to share accountability for an initiative.

STAFFING AND PERSONNEL:

» **Interagency collaborator positions**: An individual within one agency designated to collaborate within or between agencies.
» **Liaison positions**: An employee of one organization assigned to work primarily with another agency.
» **Personnel details**: A specialist or professional designated to perform tasks for another agency while employed at home agency.

ORGANIZATION:

» **Permanent or temporary groups** formed by a mayor's office to lead collaborative policy or implementation efforts, such as task forces, councils, commissions, or working groups.
» **Interagency groups** led by agency or department heads, or led by program level staff.
» **Specially created interagency offices** with their own authority and resources and with responsibility to cover a policy area that crosses multiple agencies.
» **Interagency agreements and memorandum of understanding** between agencies or departments.

JOINT PROGRAMMING:

» Joint budgeting of resources that are allocated or administered by more than one agency.
» Joint training with participants from more than one agency.
» Joint development of policies, procedures and programs, in which multiple agencies develop policies or programs together.

COLLABORATION TECHNOLOGIES:

» Shared databases
» Web portals
» Information-sharing websites
» Integrated electronic reporting processes and procedures

APPENDIX II: TYPES OF NONPROFIT PARK PARTNERS

The following categories represent typical park partnerships; however, cities and citizens develop a wide-range of formal and informal partnerships to create and improve parks and to use parks as a place-based strategy to address a variety of social and economic issues.

Friends-of Parks Group:

Grassroots groups that come together around improving a park or greenspace near their home or organization. Examples: Friends of the Birmingham Botanical Garden; Friends of Avondale Park, Birmingham.

- » Informal governance
- » Highly inclusive
- » Highly dynamic and evolving
- » Limited resources and staffing
- » Limited geographic focus – often single park or garden
- » Limited range of activities – community engagement, volunteer coordination, maintenance, programming, fundraising
- » Often aligned with other community institutions – school, church, sports league, CDC, business district – and benefit from institution's stability, resources, and sometimes staffing.

Umbrella Organization for Friends-of Group:

Nonprofit organization formed to support and build the capacity of Friends of Parks, community gardening or other grassroots groups, and to serve as a liaison between those groups and the city, funders and other partners. Examples: Partnership for Providence Parks; Park Pride, Atlanta.

- » More formal governance structure
- » Long-term partnership agreement with public agencies
- » Evolve to meet the needs of participating grassroots groups
- » More stable resources and some staffing
- » Broader geographic focus: often city-wide
- » Activities focused on supporting capacity: training, fundraising, programming, volunteer coordination, liaison with public agencies and sponsors/funders

Parks Alliance:

An alliance of separate organizations that come together in order to promote or support parks, often through policy or funding advocacy. Example: New Yorkers for Parks.

- » Less formal governance – mix of formal partnerships and loose-knit coalitions
- » Highly inclusive and evolve to meet the needs of participating organizations
- » Broad geographic focus
- » Activities focused on advocacy around specific parks-related policy and funding issues

APPENDIX II: TYPES OF NONPROFIT PARK PARTNERS (CONTINUED)

Strategic or Opportunistic Park Partnership:

A partnership or alliance of often diverse organizations using parks as a place-based strategy to address a specific issue or challenge. Examples: Summer Night Lights – Los Angeles gang violence reduction program in parks, Medical Mile – health and wellness education trail in Little Rock, AR,

» Short-term, project-based and/or seasonal agreements

» Formed to address a specific issue or challenge through joint projects or programming, such as public safety, public health, education, environment, employment, youth development

Parks Conservancy:

A nonprofit formed to improve or create a specific park or group of parks through a wide range of activities, including fundraising, projects and programs. Examples: Central Park Conservancy, New York; Piedmont Park Conservancy, Atlanta.

» Formal governing structure and long-term agreements with public sector, private sector and other nonprofits

» More defined membership

» Limited geographic focus – often single park

» Broad range of activities – capital projects, programming, advocacy, fundraising, community engagement, historic preservation, education, employment, environment, park management, operations, maintenance and beautification

Citywide Greening Organization:

A nonprofit formed to promote and implement a wide range of urban greening activities in parks and other public spaces. Examples: Greening of Detroit, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

» Formal governing structure and long-term agreements with public sector, private sector and other nonprofits

» More defined membership

» Broad geographic focus – might encompass parks as well as other greenspaces or vacant land

» Broad range of activities – fundraising, advocacy, park restoration, new park creation, programming, tree planting, urban gardens, school yards, vacant land, historic preservation, education, environment, green infrastructure, green streets, volunteers, fiscal agents.

APPENDIX III: PARTNERSHIP PHASES FROM ASSESSMENT TO IMPLEMENTATION

Assess the situation

» Frame the challenges/opportunities
» Decide whether and why to collaborate
» Identify and engage the right players
» Understand risks and rewards

Take Action

» Initiate actions and build trust and confidence through small successes
» Broaden support (corporate sponsors, private funders, Institutional, political)
» Evaluate and monitor over time

Get started

» Develop shared purpose/vision
» Secure collaborative leadership
» Evaluate resources and gaps

Work out the details

» Develop strategy and workplan
» Negotiate a fair agreement
» Establish positive and proactive communication
» Initiate collaborative fundraising
» Establish a governance structure and formalize through agreements

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