



Open Space and Recreation Plan

Create an Open Space and Recreation Plan to guide open space protection and preservation.

WHAT IS IT?

Open Space and Recreation Plans are goal-setting and strategic documents that guide the long-term preservation and management of natural spaces within urban environments. “Open space” is defined as undeveloped land that is accessible to the public. Open spaces can include green space, schoolyards, playgrounds, public seating areas, public plazas, vacant lots, parks, and community gardens.

Open spaces provide a variety of community, economic, environmental, and public health benefits. By creating a strategic plan, cities can proactively manage their open space, combatting the trend of decreasing open space with rapid urbanization. Open Space and Recreation Plans can help cities integrate open spaces into community growth and development projects as well, optimizing the efficiency of new green space projects.

Cleveland's *Re-imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland* initiative, started in 2008, was one of the first programs centered around the strategic reuse of vacant urban land. The initial program outlined three main strategies for vacant urban land: 1) stabilization and holding strategies, 2) green space expansion and green infrastructure, and 3) economically productive uses. Following the plan the City of Cleveland and Neighborhood Progress, Inc funded 56 pilot projects to transform vacant spaces into community gardens, small-scale farms, native landscapes, soil remediation, and stormwater management projects. These pilot programs used a grassroots approach to prioritize sites and served as an important community engagement opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of converting vacant space. In 2010, this effort was expanded to include the inner-ring suburbs of Cuyahoga County, released as *Re-imagining a [Greater] Cleveland*. This report identifies and maps priority areas with sites to convert vacant land into green space, agriculture, stormwater management, urban watershed restoration, and renewable energy sites.

In 2015, Cuyahoga County published the Greenprint, which is a toolkit of mapping and planning resources. As the most populous and urbanized county in the state, approximately 78% of the land is developed and only 10% is protected open space. To encourage the increase of protected open space, Greenprint Viewer is a mapping tool that identifies land status throughout the county, including vacancy or existing natural areas.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- Access to open space has a wide variety of public health benefits. Outdoor recreation is one of the primary methods of activity in the United States; therefore, by creating protected open areas, cities can provide safe and accessible locations for exercise.
- Open spaces, particularly green spaces, can also provide natural services. Annual air pollution removal and economic value of urban trees is estimated to be 80 pounds or \$300 per acre of tree cover.
- Urban parks and green spaces have carbon storage potential of:
 - Carbon storage = 40 tons or \$800 per acre of tree cover
 - Carbon storage = 32 tons or \$650 per acre of soil
 - Annual carbon removal = 1.2 tons or \$25 per acre of tree cover
- Open spaces that integrate natural elements can be up to 1°C cooler than built urban spaces, combatting the urban heat island effect.

BENEFITS



Offset carbon emissions through
carbon sequestration



Improve air quality



Expand stormwater
management infrastructure



Increase community health
outcomes by improving accessibility
to open space



Improve mental health outcomes
through access to green space



Encourage community identity
through shared open spaces

HOW CAN COMMUNITIES IMPLEMENT THIS POLICY?

Cities can utilize digital tools and inclusive planning processes to set ambitious goals in an actionable Open Space and Recreation Plan.

- **Utilize mapping software to identify existing open spaces or potential sites for conversion.** By visualizing the data on open spaces, the city can understand where increasing access to open space is most needed. Additionally, filters for sites such as vacant lots or brownfields can help transition unproductive space into new sites. When this data is available to the public, it can also encourage grassroots projects to create new open spaces.
- **Engage a variety of stakeholders in planning and implementation.** The city should engage environmental organizations, community-based organizations, private businesses, and academic institutions in the planning and implementation processes. These groups can provide valuable insights into community needs, economic benefits, environmental benefits, and public health impacts. For implementation, these partners can contribute volunteer hours or capital to help achieve shared goals of community development, environmental protection, and equity.
- **Create an Open Space and Recreation Plan for the City.** Cities can create a strategic plan to prioritize strategies to expand open spaces. Policies can include internal processes to convert vacant lands into open spaces or streamline permitting processes for community-based projects that convert brownfields or vacant spaces.
- **Prioritize pilot projects to increase community engagement.** Cities should create internal criteria to prioritize sites for open space development, which may include elements such as reuse of vacant or polluted space, equity, and potential environmental impact. Once the criteria is developed, the city should engage partners to encourage applications for pilot projects and participation in greenlighted pilots.
- **Identify equity-related goals for the Plan.** Through the Open Space and Recreation Plan, cities can identify areas where open spaces will be most impactful. With mapping data, the city can see where access to open space is the lowest and needs to be increased. Additionally, the city can determine where community gardens would be most beneficial for low-income residents or areas with food deserts to increase the availability of fresh foods.