



Link

- A model for building and renovating
- multibenefit parks in underserved communities

A Report by Jon Christensen, UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation | July 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE LINK Advocates, Governments, Families, and Parks initiative (Link) is working in six disadvantaged communities in Los Angeles County to establish a new model for successful collaborations between under-resourced municipal agencies, community-based organizations, and technical assistance providers to build and renovate multibenefit parks.

Link aims to:

- » undertake community-driven planning through robust community engagement led by trusted community-based organizations (CBOs) to identify park needs and opportunities in high- and very-high need areas;
- » work with municipal agencies to increase their capacity — through technical assistance provided by nonprofit organizations and others who are experts in park design and building — to successfully apply for public funding and build new parks or rehabilitate existing underused parks in high- or very-high need areas; and
- » establish a pipeline of projects recognized and endorsed by municipal governments in these areas as well as ongoing collaborations to continue to successfully implement projects in the pipeline.

Link was initiated by a partnership of funders — First 5 LA, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, the California Wellness Foundation, and Resources Legacy Fund. CBOs and nonprofits were recruited to work together in six locations throughout LA County: El Monte, Maywood and Cudahy in Southeast LA, Long Beach, and Panorama City and South LA in the city of Los Angeles. The CBOs and nonprofits included Active San Gabriel Valley, City Fabrick, Communities for a Better

Environment, Community Coalition, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, Pacoima Beautiful, TCC Family Health, the Trust for Public Land, and T.R.U.S.T. South LA.

The UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation has been participating in an ongoing evaluation and learning process with the Link cohort and has prepared this report on progress in the six communities, as well as lessons learned, and recommendations for systems and policy changes to lower barriers and scale success to more high- and very-high need communities throughout LA County.

When we began this evaluation, we thought that the Link initiative could result in building enough capacity in under-resourced municipalities that the initiative would, over time, work itself out of business in each community where it worked. We discovered something different. Rather than providing a bridge to a model where public agencies are able to do it all themselves, these kinds of collaborations — between government agencies, CBOs, nonprofits, and residents — *are the model* for successfully implementing community-driven planning for parks and multibenefit green infrastructure projects in disadvantaged communities. Therefore, we must foster effective ways to publicly support this model, because it is providing essential services for successful implementation of public policies supported by voters, and public benefits. All of our detailed recommendations in this report derive from that top-line finding as well as other lessons from the field about how to lower barriers and create additional support for implementation of Link-like projects in under-resourced communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS arise from the on-the-ground learnings of the cohort of municipal governments and agencies, nonprofit technical assistance providers, and CBOs that have worked together on Link projects in six high-need communities in LA County over the past two years.

Link provides a model for how to achieve the equitable results that are explicitly prioritized in public funding

measures for parks and green infrastructure. In the Link model, the nonprofit technical assistance providers and CBOs provide essential services that under-resourced municipal governments and agencies are unable to undertake themselves. The result is that good projects identified and supported by communities get funded and built in the communities that most need them, exactly what was intended for the funding measures that voters have overwhelmingly supported.

While Link has been successful, we have also identified eight recommendations for changes that could significantly improve the ability of Link-like projects to be successful at scale in high-need communities throughout LA County.

1. Los Angeles County should create a pooled fund to support Link-like, community-driven planning to create fundable proposals and a pipeline for future multibenefit park projects in underserved communities. The pooled fund should combine funding available for community engagement and planning from the Regional Parks and Open Space District (RPOSD) funded by Measure A, the Safe Clean Water Program of the LA County Flood Control District (LACFCD) funded by Measure W, and Metro funded by Measure M. This pooled fund would support community engagement to identify multibenefit projects that would meet community needs and then develop funding proposals.

2. County agencies should work across agencies to identify a common bench of pre-qualified nonprofits and CBOs that can partner with municipal governments and agencies to apply for funding for Link-like projects. This should include the RPOSD, the LACFCD, Metro, and the Department of Public Health. The health department's Places program has already developed such a bench and could provide a model and a good start for developing a common bench.

3. RPOSD should use Measure A's Technical Assistance Program to fund Link-like projects in high- and very-high need communities. The Link model has proven successful in providing the necessary capacity for under-resourced municipalities to develop successful proposals for renovating existing parks and building new parks

The Link model



in park-poor communities. The Technical Assistance Program could provide funding for municipalities to work with nonprofit technical assistance providers and CBOs to develop successful proposals and pipelines for park projects using the Link model.

4. RPOSD should increase the maximum allowable amount of grants and consult with nonprofit technical assistance providers, CBOs, and municipal governments and agencies to increase the ability of grantees to adapt to changing circumstances as they develop projects, including changes that result from other funding sources.

5. Advocates and funders should develop strategies to increase regular funding for park acquisitions, renovations, and operations and maintenance through local tax measures and an annual state appropriation prioritizing park-poor disadvantaged communities. In many underserved communities, older parks have suffered from years of neglect, making these parks feel unwelcoming and unsafe, making park renovations as important as building new parks. Many under-resourced municipalities also lack adequate budgets for park operations and maintenance. We need to create more reliable funding streams at the municipal level to support healthy parks.

6. School districts and state and local funding programs should remove impediments and create streamlined processes for green schoolyard development.

School greening and joint use agreements need to be made easier and more routine. And funding for developing green schoolyards as park spaces should not require a perpetuity clause for park use but instead create a more flexible framework for potential future uses.

7. Park agencies, school districts, and funders should put systems and practices in place for CBOs and nonprofits to take on and be compensated for operations and maintenance of parks.

8. Philanthropic funders should create a revolving fund that provides a line of credit for nonprofits and CBOs that have approved contracts to support increased cash flow capacity to undertake larger scale projects while waiting for reimbursement under contracts with public funding agencies. For many CBOs and some nonprofit organizations, scaling up to bigger projects with more impact and substantially larger, multimillion-dollar budgets can be exceedingly challenging when government grants only disburse funds based on reimbursements. A line of credit could help these organizations be successful at a larger scale across LA County.

THE STORY OF LINK

LINK GREW out of a great success — the overwhelming approval by Los Angeles County voters in 2016 of a funding measure that prioritizes park equity. Measure A was supported by a broad coalition of CBOs, park advocates, agency leaders, elected officials, and philanthropies. And a countywide, park-needs assessment made a strong case for prioritizing investments in high-need areas of the county. The resulting parcel tax provides nearly \$90 million a year for the Regional Parks and Open Space District to build new parks in park-poor communities and improve existing parks throughout the county.

That same year, voters also approved a major funding measure for transportation. Measure M contained significant priorities for clean transportation, green infrastructure, and equity, as well. The measure was supported by a broad coalition of environmental and social justice organizations, agency leaders, elected officials, and philanthropies, including many who also supported Measure A. The resulting sales tax provides nearly \$1 billion a year for Metro to implement an ambitious plan to improve transportation options throughout the county.

Two years later, voters approved Measure W, a parcel tax on impervious surfaces to fund stormwater management improvements throughout the county. The tax generates nearly \$300 million a year for the Safe Clean Water Program, which includes explicit priorities and guidelines for funding projects that benefit disadvantaged communities, included multibenefit urban greening projects.

The passage of these three measures sent a strong signal that voters in Los Angeles would agree to tax ourselves to make badly needed improvements in our infrastructure to make our metropolitan region work better for everyone. And we would do that by prioritizing communities that have historically been left behind so that neighborhoods and families across Los Angeles can thrive in place as we make these historical investments.

Attention has now turned to implementing these measures. Supporters celebrated the successful passage of funding measures with dedicated funding streams and explicit commitments to achieve equitable outcomes. But they knew that would not be enough. These new funding measures and policies would need to be implemented successfully in order to achieve the results envisioned.

And there is the rub. Many progressive policies have foundered on implementation and failed to deliver anticipated outcomes. Implementation is hard. And all too often, supporters of progressive policies have walked away after achieving political success and declaring victory. They have not stuck around to ensure that the policies were implemented successfully. They left that up to government agencies. This is the story of how that is changing.

This time they decided to do things differently. The Los Angeles Funders Collaborative, a group of progressive philanthropies that had supported the measures, turned their attention to implementation. At their center was Beatriz Solis, a charismatic leader in The California Endowment, who insisted that healthy communities would be the most important outcome and that progress needed to be measured to ensure success. Several organizations in the collaborative agreed to fund research and a report to develop metrics for implementation of the measures.

Renowned sociologist Manuel Pastor and his team at the University of Southern California's Program for Environmental and Regional Equity produced "Measures Matter," a report and a road map for equitable implementation. "Measures Matter" built on the successful community organizing that led to the passage of the measures. Based on the experiences of dozens of CBOs, experts, and implementers, it framed a structure for implementation and metrics to measure success. It was a road map. But there was still much to discover and learn about the path ahead.

When the Los Angeles Funders Collaborative met to consider next steps, several of the members agreed to double down on their investment in implementation,

LINK ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This work takes time. EL Monte and Maywood and Cudahy in Southeast LA were first out of the gate. They have successfully secured funding to build new parks, renovate existing parks, and green schoolyards. Long Beach, South LA, and Panorama City joined later and are working toward those goals. All are on track to be successful using the Link model.

Link road map	El Monte	Southeast LA	Panorama City	South LA	Long Beach
Sign MOU or letter of commitment	✓	✓	✓	NA	NA
Develop community engagement plan	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Conduct initial community outreach	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Host community visioning workshops	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Identify sites for park renovation or development	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Develop preliminary design plans	✓	✓		✓	✓
Submit applications for funding	✓	✓			
Receive grant funding	✓	✓			
Build parks!					

while focusing on what it takes to build parks in under-resourced, park-poor areas of LA County. They decided on a model. They would fund a CBO and a nonprofit technical assistance provider to work with a city agency in as many high-need areas as they could to implement park projects that would qualify for Measure A and other public funding. Resources Legacy Fund has served as project manager, regularly convening participants in a peer learning group to work through challenges and review successes.

As part of the Link program, the Luskin Center for Innovation at UCLA was supported by several members of the funders collaborative to evaluate the overall effort. From the beginning, we agreed this would be a different kind of evaluation, fit to the project and the need to share ongoing learnings to improve

implementation. This report and recommendations are a result of closely following the process from the beginning, participating in dozens of project and community meetings, conducting dozens of interviews with stakeholders and implementers, and analyzing policy and implementation guidelines and results.

What we found surprised us. We came into this project thinking that Link could result in building enough capacity in under-resourced municipalities that the initiative would, over time, work itself out of business in each community where it worked as municipalities learned the ropes and built up their internal capacity to deliver the model. We discovered something quite different. Municipal staff told us that they could not foresee a time when they would be able to do it all themselves. These kinds of collaborations — between

government agencies, CBOs, nonprofits, and residents — are the model, they told us, for successfully implementing community-driven planning for parks and multibenefit green infrastructure projects in under-resourced communities. Therefore, we must create effective ways to publicly support this model, because it is providing essential services for successful implementation of public policies supported by voters, and public benefits.

Antecedents and History

This finding may not come as a surprise to close readers of “Measures Matter” and students of the history of community organizing in Los Angeles. Each of the places where Link has worked has a deep history of organizing focused on social and environmental justice, housing, and health. That history is important. Longtime organizing created the conditions, relationships, trust, and knowledge that laid a foundation upon which Link could build.

The CBOs involved in Link — Active San Gabriel Valley, Communities for a Better Environment, Community Coalition, Pacoima Beautiful, TCC Family Health, and T.R.U.S.T. South LA — have all been at it for many years. When they do community engagement they are mobilizing relationships based on trust. Residents know they are committed to the long haul in their communities. They are building community power with each project they take on, including Link.

The technical assistance providers involved in Link — City Fabrick, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, and the Trust for Public Land — have a proven track record of working closely with CBOs to plan, fundraise for, and build parks that provide what communities want.

There is also another more recent antecedent for Link and a model for success: Redesign LA. With support from Resources Legacy Fund and the Water Foundation, Redesign LA has brought together a similar cohort of CBOs, including some of the Link partners, to work with a technical assistance provider, the Council for Watershed Health, on a similar strategy to develop multibenefit, nature-based stormwater management projects in high-need communities. Redesign LA’s

success in developing community-driven plans that could be implemented with funding from a variety of public sources inspired Link to use the same method to develop community-driven park projects.

The Future of Link

The work of the Link cohort is ongoing in the six communities where it has worked so far. We hope to see the Link model implemented in additional high-need areas with support from public and private funding sources. As our sources told us, this is the model for successfully implementing multibenefit park projects in under-resourced communities, which is a priority goal for equitable park funding policies approved by voters. Through this work, Link has developed a collaborative of park experts and advocates poised to advance policy and systems changes to address barriers and facilitate Link-like projects into the future.

COMMUNITY PROFILES



Community-driven planning centers the needs and priorities of residents for new park spaces and renovating existing parks like Maywood Riverfront Park.

Southeast LA

Link has been working with Communities for a Better Environment and the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust to bring parks to two small cities in Southeast Los Angeles, also known as SELA.

With about 30,000 residents squeezed into just over one square mile, Maywood is the most densely populated city west of the Mississippi. Nearby Cudahy is close behind, with slightly less than 25,000 residents in just over one square mile. The two cities sit on the west bank of the Los Angeles River. Both are low-income communities of color. And they share another important characteristic: The overwhelming majority of their

residents live in areas of very-high park need, according to the Parks Needs Assessment conducted by the LA County Department of Parks and Recreation.

This is because of the population density and the small amount of park acreage in each city. Maywood has less than one-third of an acre of park space per 1,000 residents, compared to the county average of more than 3 acres of park space per 1,000 residents. That means that the average county resident has 10 times as much park space as the average Maywood resident. Cudahy residents have a little more park space, just under an acre per 1,000 residents, still far behind the average. Why is this important? A recent UCLA study found that if all of the areas in LA County that are below average in park space and tree canopy were just brought up to the average, close to a million years of life expectancy would

be added to the current residents of the county. This is literally a matter of life and death for the residents of Maywood and Cudahy and other high-need areas of the county.

To address this inequity, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (LANLT) and Communities for a Better Environment (CBE) identified prospective sites for new green spaces in Maywood and Cudahy, as well as existing parks needing renovation so that more people can enjoy the health benefits of time spent outdoors. CBE has a long history of community organizing on environmental justice issues in SELA, one of the areas of highest concentrated pollution burden and social and economic vulnerability in California. LANLT has built and renovated parks in many high-need areas of the county much like Maywood and Cudahy.

The Link program is “a beacon of hope for our communities to have a cleaner, better environment, and as the city we need to maintain and keep it.”

— Southeast LA resident

LANLT and CBE built upon existing relationships with elected officials and city staff and established a memorandum of understanding with each city that outlines a partnership between the organizations and the city, and a process of community-driven, collaborative park planning, design, fundraising and grant submission, and park development. The cities agreed to support the planning process, to partner on grant applications, and operate and maintain any new or renovated parks.

CBE organizers engaged residents of both cities in a series of workshops that identified two parks badly in need of improvements: Maywood Riverfront Park, a 7-acre park in Maywood, and Clara Street Park, a 2.5-acre park in Cudahy, both on the banks of the Los Angeles River. Together, LANLT and CBE worked with residents on renovation designs for both parks and an expansion



“Parks give us life.”

of Clara Street Park. LANLT staff wrote state and county grant applications and submitted them with the cities. And they successfully garnered \$7 million for Maywood Riverfront Park and \$5 million for Clara Street Park.

While additional funds are needed to finish these projects, renovations are underway at Maywood Riverfront Park. The scope of the renovation has grown to include new partners — East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice and the Council for Watershed Health — and a new memorial to the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the Zoot Suit Riots, an important landmark in Latino history. Clara Street Park is undergoing a complete renovation, which will include developing a previously underdeveloped portion of the park to expand park space for Cudahy residents.

As one city official told us in an interview, none of this would have happened without the Link program. And the need for Link is not going away. Maywood and Cudahy, like many other small cities in LA County, simply do not have the staff to undertake these projects on their own. They depend on organizers like CBE to conduct robust community engagement and technical assistance providers like LANLT to do the planning, grant writing, and project management. The Link model is the way forward. As one local resident noted, the Link program is “a beacon of hope for our communities to have a cleaner, better environment, and as the city we need to maintain and keep it.”

El Monte

El Monte straddles the Rio Hondo, a tributary of the Los Angeles River, as it flows from the San Gabriel Valley south. The 10-square-mile area of the city is home to just over 100,000 residents, making it one of the midsize cities in Los Angeles County.

El Monte has a high need for more park space, with less than half an acre per 1,000 residents, compared to the county average of more than 3 acres per 1,000 residents. More than half of the residents of El Monte do not have a park within walking distance — about half a mile — of their homes.

Why is this important? Research has consistently shown that having a park within walking distance of your home is significantly correlated with better health outcomes,

including lower rates of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and low birth weights. Parks are a health equity issue.

In El Monte, Active San Gabriel Valley (Active SGV) and the Trust for Public Land (TPL) conducted extensive community engagement and identified several priority areas for new investments in parks, community gardens, and street greening projects that could serve as active transportation corridors for bicyclists and pedestrians as well. They also looked at under-utilized schoolyards as potential green spaces for the community, which residents have identified as a priority in previous community plans that the team reviewed.

Active SGV had already partnered in a successful collaboration with the El Monte City School District and Amigos de los Rios to turn a former elementary school into a family resource center that offers education, family support services, and access to green space and recreation for the surrounding community. Active SGV's



Community engagement means meeting people where they are.



Participatory design requires language justice in diverse communities.

community engagement identified the need for a space where people could learn to ride their bikes safely. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the city was no longer able to staff the park, Active SGV stepped up to staff the bike park on weekends and has continued to do so.

With support from the Link program, Active SGV and TPL used this inspiring model to develop a community-driven plan for greening a new school site: Norwood Elementary. With the school district and city, they developed a successful \$10 million grant application to the Safe Clean Water Program for greening the schoolyard so that it can be used as a community park at the same time that it captures stormwater. And it won't just be doing this good, important work with rainwater that falls on-site. Stormwater will be shunted from surrounding streets to a playground with permeable surfaces, an edible garden, and bioswales that enable the water to infiltrate into underground aquifers. The team has now submitted applications with the district to green three additional schoolyards.

Active SGV has also worked with the city to secure a \$9 million grant for a linear park along Merced Avenue that will provide similar multiple benefits. The street greening will make active transportation, walking and bicycling, more attractive, while a new inverted road drain will channel stormwater runoff to the park, where it will be slowed and cleaned up before it drains into the Rio Hondo.

El Monte is a leading example for urban greening on two fronts: First, schoolyards present the most obvious solution for providing green spaces in high-need areas. Parks are not evenly distributed throughout Los Angeles but schools are. While some school districts make it difficult to create joint use agreements for schoolyards, the El Monte City School District has actively sought to craft solutions with city and nonprofit partners. Second, creating multibenefit green spaces that provide benefits for people, stormwater management, active transportation, and habitat is the wave of the future.

In El Monte, the Link partners are showing how we can get there together.

Long Beach, South LA, and Panorama City

Long Beach, South Los Angeles, and Panorama City are earlier in the process. The CBOs and nonprofits working to implement the Link model in these three communities have done community engagement, developed community-driven priorities and plans, and identified potential sites for creating new parks, renovating existing parks, and bringing multibenefit green infrastructure projects to their communities. They are working on developing funding proposals to implement their projects.

In central Long Beach, TCC Family Health and City Fabrick began the conversation with residents by acknowledging the racial inequities that have led to poor conditions in Martin Luther King Jr. Park, an important

park in need of new life in a high-need area. This phenomenon has emerged as an important lesson of the Link program. Without adequate upkeep and updating, parks become less attractive and can feel unsafe. In the extreme, they become liabilities rather than assets in their communities. Sometimes the best new park can be created by renovating an existing park.

TCC Family Health and City Fabrick are using innovative games to build empathy among diverse stakeholders and help them find common ground on what the community needs and wants at Martin Luther King Jr. Park. This will result in a community-driven plan that will become a proposal for funding this legacy park. The city has allocated funds for deferred maintenance and the area's congressional representative has proposed an appropriation for the park.

In South Los Angeles, two long-standing CBOs — the Community Coalition (CoCo) and T.R.U.S.T. South LA — are building on years and years of organizing,



A board game gives residents an opportunity to find common ground at Martin Luther King Jr. Park.

relationship-building and trust to bring three new park spaces to a very-high-need area of Los Angeles. Working with the LA Neighborhood Land Trust and local residents, they have identified three projects. The first is a lot owned by the LA Department of Transportation (LADOT) at the corner of South Broadway and West 86th Street. The second is a lot owned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power on South Central Avenue. The third is 93rd Street STEAM Academy, an opportunity for greening a schoolyard that is almost entirely asphalt at this time.

The first two projects illustrate an important opportunity for finding land in urban areas where it can be exceedingly difficult to do so: under-utilized lots owned by public agencies. The Link partners are working to finalize agreements with LADOT and LADWP so that they can apply for funding to build the badly needed park spaces that neighbors requested.

The importance of the hard, detailed work of building collaborations and implementing plans that are community generated cannot be overstated. South LA has seen many promises come and go. With trusted CBOs putting their history of organizing, their reputations and relationships on the line, the time to change that narrative and deliver on promises is now.

Panorama City is a high-need community in the northeast San Fernando Valley. Parks in the area provide only half an acre of park space per 1,000 residents. Pacoima Beautiful, a veteran CBO in the neighboring community of Pacoima, is working with the Link program to expand its community organizing and urban greening projects into Panorama City. Working with local residents, including leaders in First 5 LA's network of families, Pacoima Beautiful has identified several promising projects in the area, including improvements to the Pacoima Wash, which drains into the Los Angeles River, as well as Tobias Avenue and Sepulveda Recreation parks, both badly in need of major renovations.

In an unfortunate illustration of the role that external factors can play in our theories of change, turmoil in the local city council district stalled some of the necessary work to secure public funding to advance these projects.



Renovating neglected legacy parks can be as important for park equity as building new parks in high-need communities.

But Pacoima Beautiful is in it for the long haul and continues to make progress. A new city council member has been elected. Pacoima Beautiful recently received a \$3.5 million grant from the Bezos Earth Fund to work with the Trust for Public Land to reshape four miles of the Pacoima Wash into a valuable community asset. And it recently acquired Casa Esperanza, an important community center offering resources and programs for families in Panorama City and the broader northeast San Fernando Valley.

THE LINK THEORY OF CHANGE AND METRICS FOR SUCCESS

THE THEORY OF CHANGE embedded in the Link model on page 3 of this report is pretty simple. If you combine a city or agency that embraces collaboration with a trusted CBO to conduct community-driven planning and a technical assistance provider with expertise in planning, fundraising for, and building parks, you can develop competitive proposals for park projects that can be funded from a variety of local, county, state, and federal sources. In fact, we are so confident of what we've learned in this process that we call it a model for success.

The devil — and the angels — of course, are in the details. The pull-out “Link Road Map” that accompanies this report lays out the common steps in this process. And here we offer a set of metrics and indicators to measure progress along the way and success in the end.

What are metrics and indicators? And how do we use them? A metric is a measurement that gives us essential information for taking action. For instance, if we want to know whether we can reach our destination, we'll want to know how much gas we have in the tank of our car — or charge left in our battery. The amount of gas or battery charge is the metric. The indicator of that metric is the gauge on our dashboard. We use these indicators and the underlying metrics to decide whether we need to fill up or recharge our car before heading out on a trip.

Our metrics and indicators will not always be so simple, of course, as they have to do with people, communities, governments, agencies, and sometimes politics and power. These factors are not always quantifiable. So, we will also want to use qualitative metrics, too. That's OK, as long as the metrics give us useful information that helps us reach our desired outcome: building and improving multibenefit parks in high-need communities.

One last word on metrics and indicators: Measurements are sometimes abstractions that stand for something

important that is hard to measure. When it's necessary to use this kind of metric, it's important to make sure you're attuned to the ways in which the metric may or may not be measuring what you actually care about. For example, the number of people who participate in planning meetings and provide comments is often used as a metric for community engagement. And it is a valid one. But we all know that there is more to real community engagement than just numbers. Qualitative metrics can help here, along with the deep understanding that comes with community organizing over time.

We pose these metrics as questions that you will want to answer as specifically and concretely as possible. As much as possible you will want to seek out quantitative metrics, but qualitative metrics are also very important. But you will want to clearly enumerate those qualitative metrics, too.

We organize these metrics into four buckets that correspond to four stages of this work over time: 1) pre-project metrics that measure whether the conditions for success are present; 2) process metrics that help measure whether you are making progress toward your desired outcomes; 3) outcome and impact metrics that measure whether you have achieved your desired goals and impact; and 4) policy and systems change metrics that measure whether you are helping to improve policies and systems for future success at a broader scale.

Pre-Project Metrics of Success

1. Community Desire for a Park Project and Willingness to Engage in Planning. Are there indicators that can help you determine whether the community wants a park project and is willing to engage in the planning? Are there previous plans that have not been implemented? Do interviews or surveys — or the experiences of community organizers — provide evidence of a desire for new and improved parks? Are there stories in the media or on social media that corroborate this community sentiment? These metrics are most likely to be qualitative unless a quantitative survey has been conducted, but you can still enumerate the evidence supporting the desire for a park as well as the need for park space, including quantitative metrics

of the number of people who don't have a park within walking distance of their homes and the park acreage per thousand people in the area you are working.

2. An Existing Community-Based Organization

Working in the Community. Is there an existing CBO with a proven track record of working in the community, building power and trust? This does not necessarily have to be an organization focused on parks and the environment or environmental justice. It could be an organization focused on health or social justice. But it would be important to know whether the organization is interested in working on a park project. This metric is most likely to be confirmed by talking with its staff.

3. A Technical Assistance Provider. Is there an existing, experienced technical assistance provider, either nonprofit or private sector, that has the capacity and would be interested in working on the project? The best way to measure this is by reviewing its past projects and talking with them.

4. Municipal Governance, Capacity and Willingness.

Is the municipality where you are thinking about working stable? Does it have enough trust in the community? These metrics are most likely to be qualitative, a matter of judgment based on interviews or conversations with knowledgeable community members, augmented by stories in the media and on social media. Does the municipality have the capacity and willingness to work on a project? These metrics may come from experience working with the municipality but are most likely to be confirmed by having a frank conversation with knowledgeable decision-makers in the municipal government and agencies. Their willingness — and even eagerness — to work with a CBO and a technical assistance provider is key. It's important to know their capacity, though that can be augmented with community engagement and technical assistance. But they must, at least, have the capacity to have designated staff work on a collaborative project. Are they willing to make that commitment to work with you to get funding and build or renovate a park? Will they put that in writing in a memorandum of understanding? And what commitment will they make to ongoing operations, maintenance, and programming at the park?

5. Potential Funding. Are there sources of funding — public or philanthropic — that could support this effort? You probably will want to have a conversation with a grants administrator or program officer to determine whether such a project fits their guidelines. If there is potential interest, ask how much funding could be available, and assess whether it is enough to support the effort. You'll want to find out whether funding is available for community engagement and planning, as well as project implementation.

Process Metrics

6. Early Assessment of Community and Municipal Capacity, Roles, and Responsibilities.

Throughout your project you will want to measure both the community's and the government's or agency's capacity, and their understanding of their roles and responsibilities in achieving success for your project. This is especially important at the beginning, though it should be ongoing. And it will mainly be a qualitative assessment, but you will want to be rigorous in your thinking about it, because everything hinges on it. And it will help you adjust your approach to address any weaknesses and misunderstandings.

7. Collaboration Among Project Partners. This also will mostly be a qualitative assessment, but one that you will want to think about regularly and address intentionally should things seem to be potentially headed in the wrong direction. There are likely quantitative metrics that could be useful here, including regular contact, exchanges of information and updates, attendance at meetings, and the like.

8. A Memorandum of Understanding with the Municipality.

This is crucial and easy to measure. You need an MOU or letter of commitment to proceed. And you either have it or you don't. When you get it, you have a green light. Until then, the signal might be yellow, and you can proceed deliberately with caution, assuming the light will turn green. These things take time. And sometimes this commitment can come in another form. But be sure you have it. A lack of clear progress in obtaining a commitment is a sure warning sign.

9. Community Engagement. Here is where you can have quantitative measures of engagement: the number

and type of meetings held, attendance at meetings, focus groups, and individual conversations, as well as surveys filled out. But you will probably also want to pay close attention to anecdotal conversations and stories you hear during the process, and create space for diverse points of view as well as for leaders to emerge. All of this is valuable information for assessing the key question: Is the community engaged in this process?

10. Identified Project Sites. This is an easy metric. Has the community engagement process come to some kind of consensus or plurality of agreement about sites for park renovations, improvements, or new parks? The harder part of this metric will be a qualitative judgment about which of these sites should be priorities given the community's preferences, the conditions on the ground, and the funding potential. Your ability to articulate these trade-offs in a way that builds community trust will be another process metric.

11. Project Funding Proposals. This is a very cut-and-dried metric. After all this work, are you able to submit compelling proposals to public funding sources? It may likely take more than one. Can you find a way to make them work together?

Outcome and Impact Metrics

12. Securing Funding. This metric speaks for itself. You might want to measure your ability to layer multiple funding sources or secure matching funds.

13. Construction of a New Park or Park Renovations. This metric also speaks for itself. You might also want to compare the completed project with the original vision of community members for the park. It will rarely be exactly the same given contingencies encountered along the way. But how close did you get? You could survey community members again to find out what they think.

14. Operations and maintenance and community stewardship. Is your municipality dedicating adequate resources, staff, and funding to operations and maintenance of the park? Are community members engaged as stewards of the park?

15. Community Use of New Park Spaces. How is the new space being used after it opens? This could

be an intensive, quantitative observational survey conducted at different times, on different days of the week, in different seasons. Or it could be a qualitative assessment. You might engage community members in doing the survey or assessment.

16. A Pipeline of Projects. Have you identified future projects to work on together?

17. Sustained Growth of Community Member Involvement and Advocacy. Did the experience of community members carry over into continuing engagement in a CBO and civic advocacy? You might measure this by member growth in a CBO or a survey of participants in the park process after the park opens.

18. Improved Community Health. This is the ultimate impact metric. It is also the most difficult to measure precisely. Over time, we would expect to see improvements in the health of community members near the park. You might be able to get some information to measure these improvements from a survey of residents and park users to find out how often they use the park, for how much time, and which activities. All of those factors will correlate with improved health.

Policy and Systems Change Metrics

19. Strengthened Relationships. Has this process strengthened relationships among a community-based organization, a technical assistance provider, and municipal staff and elected officials? This is likely a subjective metric, but a very important one.

20. Long-Term Capacity Building. Has this process improved the long-term capacity of a community-based organization, technical assistance provider, and municipal staff to work together on future projects? Have these organizations secured additional funding, brought on additional staff, or increased their membership base?

21. Policy and Systems Change. Has this experience led to insights about policy and system changes needed to improve this process? Have the organizations involved been able to share those insights with other organizations and advocate successfully for those changes?

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Links and Contact Information

Contact the author at jonchristensen@ioes.ucla.edu. For more information about Link, contact Michelle Warren at Resources Legacy Fund at mwarren@resourceslegacyfund.org.

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This report and the accompanying “Link Road Map” are available online at:

<https://innovation.luskin.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Link-Parks-Initiative-Report.pdf>

<https://innovation.luskin.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Link-Parks-Initiative-Road-Map.pdf>