Parks: Community Places that Provide Active-Friendly Environments

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Key Words

Parks, Physical Activity, Supportive Environment

Background

Community health issues related to the recent obesity epidemic have created a need to better understand the role of proximate, attractive parks in sustaining or encouraging physical activity.

Lack of physical activity in daily lifestyles not only deters the potential for good health but can be a catalyst for acquiring chronic diseases.[1] In order to improve the overall US population health outcomes and combat the rise in obesity, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continues to encourage citizens to increase the amount of physical activity in their daily lives.[2] In addition to focusing on efforts concentrating on the individual, the CDC has expressed concern about environmental influences deterring or supporting human activity. They are concerned about the role the built environment, and particularly auto-dependent infrastructure, plays in impacting activity rates. Many communities are designed to discourage physical activity, especially in communities that primarily support auto-use and discourage walking.

People's physical activity rates are influenced by both recreational and utilitarian activities.[3] Park and park-like environments play a role in supporting and encouraging both.[4] From a utilitarian activity perspective, greenways, linear parks, and trails can serve as supportive connections that support walking or riding a bike to community amenities and necessities such as stores, work places, and schools.

Parks and park-like environments that do not serve as connectors are also seen as a key contributor to creating active-friendly environments.[3] Proximate, attractive parks serve as 'safe,' 'enjoyable' places for people to exercise.[3,4,5,6,7,8] When asked where people prefer to walk or exercise within their communities, parks are consistently listed as one of their top choices.[3,7,8,15]

Proximity and attractiveness are two main factors in park design that influence parks' contributions to creating active friendly communities. Research indicates that a clear relationship exists between residential proximity to parks and park use. [3,5,6,7,8,14] The importance of proximity and attractiveness are well documented with several user groups including seniors, youth, and adolescents.[5,7,9,10]

In addition to serving as safe and enjoyable places to exercise, proximate attractive parks also serve as destinations that encourage

physical activity. [3,11] While many people engage in sedentary behaviors at parks, most park users walk to the park. [12,13] Thus, the desire to go to a park inadvertently encourages physical activity.

As communities continue to understand environmental factors that support and encourage physical activity, they need to learn more about their parks and if they are located and designed to support physical activity.

What Communities Can Do

- Engage in a community mapping activity to understand if and which parks constituents use for physical activity;
- Conduct photo sampling to understand which elements of local parks are supportive or deterring;
- Continue to acquire, develop, and maintain parkland proximate to neighborhoods and work places.

Relevant Extension Resources

For reading resources visit the AgriLife Extension Bookstore at: https://agrilifebookstore.org/

- Engaging Citizen Input Activity Worksheets (agrilife.org/urbanparks)
- Paths to Participation: Developing Engaging Input Processes (agrilife.org/urbanparks)
- Going to the People and Getting the Feedback You Need (agrilife.org/urbanparks)
- Parkland Dedication Ordinances in Texas: A missed Opportunity. Texas AgriLife Bookstore Publication E-233

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