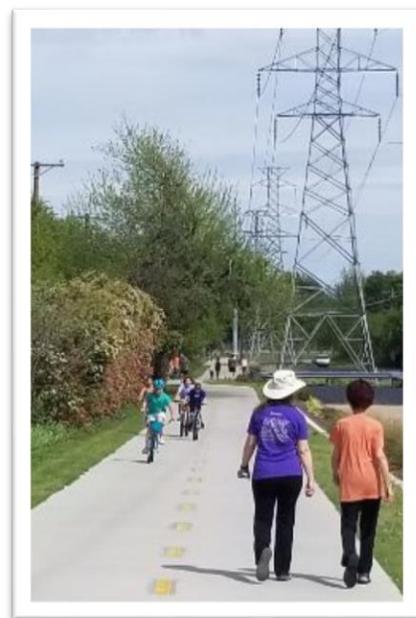


Dispersing park use in a time of need ---

Jamie Rae Walker, Ph.D., Urban & Municipal Park Specialist

Last weekend as we culminated our first week of shelter in place in North Texas, the rain lifted and spring was in the beginning of a beautiful bloom. Naturally, people flocked to their local parks. While it is not uncommon to see parks full of people at the beginning of spring or after several days of being stuck inside because of rain, the issue was compounded by people needing to get out for restorative time and physical activity due to the shelter-in-place ordinance. Park overcrowding typically impacts park department operations and user conflict, but when under social distancing protocols, park overcrowding is a public health and public safety issue.

Due to COVID-19, this is not a time to increase density at parks and along trails--- we must disperse our use. Our friends at the National Park Service, planners in many urban cities, and social scientists have studied and addressed crowding issues for decades. Here are some tips for PARs operating parks and citizens utilizing their local open spaces to follow while respecting the call to socially distance ourselves.



Go to another park!

Lack of knowledge is one prominent reason people cite for lack of park use. The Dallas County Judge, DPARD Director, and DPARD staff did an excellent job immediately responding to the crowding issue by sharing information about and encouraging use at less commonly used parks and trails. To learn about other park opportunities:



Explore your local parks department webpage.

Have a park “swap” with friends and get their recommendations about their favorite less- crowded park, trail, or route and use their suggestions.

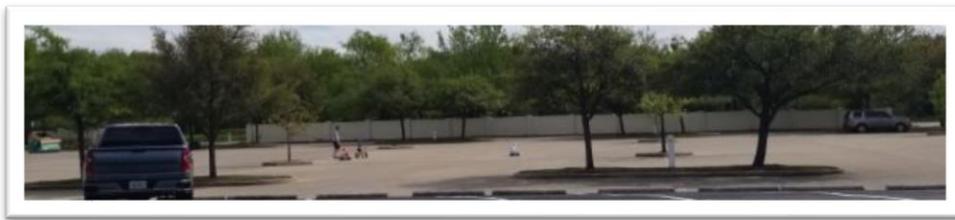
Use online maps and look for parks or search for parks.

Use online forums and tools like USATF Map MY ROUTE to find running and walking route ideas (<https://legacy.usatf.org/routes/>).

Explore park-like areas that are safe and open to public; use like lengthy sidewalk networks, alleys, grassy areas. Follow the lead as we are taught from Stilgoe in *Outside Lies Magic*; Solnit in *Wanderlust*, or any Jane Austin book and feel free to meander-- just enjoying and roaming around in safe place. You do not have to be “going somewhere”.

Be creative with existing spaces and places. There are lot of empty parking lots with nice plantings that make for great walking, child’s biking, and letting your kids run around. Look for spaces where there are enough other users or “eyes on the street” so that you feel safe but avoid high-use, condensed spaces and places.

All you new homeschool teachers who have time and transportation, make it a social studies project to visit other parks and catalog how far they are from home, the mode of transportation options to get there, the distance, what features are in each space, and what experiences or benefits it provides (mental health, physical activity, green infrastructure).



Use Shoulder Seasons

In the National Parks and many tourism destinations, visitors are encouraged to use “shoulder seasons”, which are the times just before and after peak seasons. For urban use the concept of shoulder seasons can be adapted, and park users can:

Go at a different time. If you are working from home and can use an alternative schedule, try to avoid peak use times. Google can help you see when places are used more often. Or you can set up a network with friends or neighbors to communicate with each other about when your favorite park or trail is crowded and when it is less crowded and safe to use.

Go on a different day. I know we all want the perfect weather and many of us are trying to keep to some form of routine. But if you are getting chores done while at home or, like many others, have simply stopped doing chores, use your parks and trails on atypical days. If your business allows alternative or professional work schedules, ask if you can adjust your Saturday long run, ride, or picnic to Wednesday. If you are like my bother and you have P.E. time as part of your newly formed homeschool program, try visiting a local park as part of P.E. on a weekday instead of visiting on the weekend.

Be respectful to users of all abilities and situations

Not everyone can drive to other neighborhoods, walk the same distances, and shift their schedules. If you can be flexible, adjust your routine so that there is space for those who do not have the same resources and alternatives.

Not all park users have the same goals. Be mindful and respectful of other uses. People visit parks for quiet time and restoration, to bird watch, to dance and laugh, or to exercise—as well as for many other reasons. As we move into other people’s favorites spaces, please be mindful that you may be impacting the environment and experience they are familiar with and enjoy.

Think of other users and avoid side-by-side or large, wide groups when walking or running on trails or paths. Limit or do not use long leashes for dogs. Ride bikes at slower speeds. Please keep in mind park users have different goals and experience levels. We need to be as supportive and congruent as possible, not competing for “my space”. We might not PR and will miss out on a good story from the big group, but we will hopefully reduce accidents and unnecessary trips to the overburdened ERs.

Be a supportive driver and remember there are more walkers, bikers, scooters, etc. of all abilities and ages out there at all times of day---every day. Be a supportive pedestrian or biker. Some people are still working on the front line and are driving to work and working long shifts—do not make it harder for them when driving to and from work. Follow the rules of the road and be courteous to each other. Check out Vision Zero for some great safety tips (<https://visionzeronetwork.org/>)

The rain will buy us some time on this issue for a few days but will also add to it once it subsides and we all head back outside.

I love parks and am overjoyed seeing everyone benefit from the spaces and places your cities and PARs work hard to provide. It is up to us to work with them and disperse and not densify in this time for the sake of our public health.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Urban and Municipal Parks, April 2020.

<https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/>

For a hub of Extension resources related to the current COVID-19 situation visit
<https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/coronavirus/>.