

CONSERVATION

PRESERVING OPEN SPACE IN RAPIDLY DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES – MITIGATING URBAN SPRAWL

The issue

Illinois' park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies manage more than 350,000 acres of open space. These public parks, preserves and natural areas provide the people of Illinois with places for play, relaxation and recreation. Parks are vital community spaces and are highly valued by residents.

Because of the rapid spread of urbanization and development, these open spaces are disappearing at an unprecedented rate. Some communities are vying with developers to acquire land for parks before it is subdivided for housing.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) affirms that all people – regardless of age, gender, race or socioeconomic status – should have access to nearby parks, preserves or natural areas. In order to provide these places for socialization and recreation, open space must be preserved now before development encroaches on the available land. New land is not being made. Once it is gone, it is lost forever.

Background

Very few would argue that parks are *not* assets in a community. But in the course of a community's growth, economic development arguments often speak louder than the voices for parks and open space. With new housing comes retail development, and with both come new tax revenues for villages, cities and schools. Many Illinois communities want and need new income. But prosperity and preservation are not mutually exclusive. Economic development and the conservation of such green spaces as nature preserves, green ways, natural corridors, wildlife habitats and parklands can all be served as communities grow.

Land availability

Illinois ranks 48th in the nation when it comes to publicly accessible open space per capita in state and national parks.¹ Even adding the acreage managed by park districts, forest preserves and conservation districts, the ranking does not improve measurably. In Illinois, Will, McHenry and Kane Counties have seen an average population growth of more than 13 percent over a recent two-year period.² As the population has skyrocketed, home and retail construction has far outpaced set asides for parks and natural areas.

Each year, more than 50,000 Illinois acres are developed and paved as green space yields to urban sprawl.³ Many communities have passed land-cash donation ordinances, which provide a method to ensure that parks will be included in new housing developments. Developers donate acreage within a subdivision to the local park district or municipal agency or they give cash in lieu of the land so that the agency may purchase parkland nearby. Most of these ordinances specify that approximately 10 acres be set aside for every 1,000 new residents.

Public demand for parks

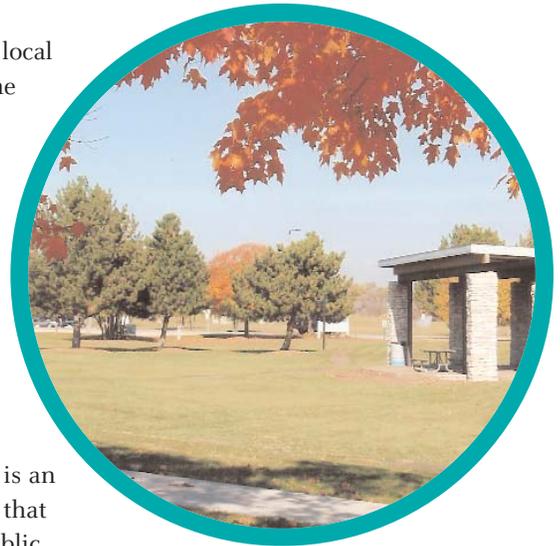
An overwhelming majority in the Chicago area believes that their city or village is growing too fast and that open space should be preserved for future generations.⁴ Part of the mission of public park agencies is to acquire and protect that open space.

In order to meet public demand for parks and open space in Illinois, local and state agencies would need to acquire more than 83,000 acres over the next five years.⁵ When green space is disappearing at the rate of more than 50,000 acres each year, it is easy to see that public agencies are competing with developers for available land to meet the increased demand for recreation areas.

Parks improve property values

A neighborhood park can provide up to a 20 percent increase in housing values for homes facing a park or located in proximity to a park.⁶ Larger community parks, especially passive parks, generally bring even higher values to adjacent homes.⁷

And the people of Illinois know that locating their home near a park is an asset. Statewide, more than 90 percent of registered voters acknowledge that parks and open space help improve property values.⁸ These facts and public perceptions build a strong case for developers to include larger parks as central parts of new subdivisions.



Conclusion

The Illinois Association of Park Districts supports widespread cooperation between local government agencies and private developers to provide open space for parks in every new subdivision or housing development in the state at the rate of at least 10 acres for every 1,000 residents.

The IAPD supports establishing land-cash donation ordinances to save open spaces in communities that currently do not have them and raising the acreage ratio in many communities that do have ordinances.

All communities must establish a park or open space acquisition policy. New housing developments continue to increase, and the people living in those homes expect access to parks, open space and recreational opportunities. Illinois' nearly 400 park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies help provide that space.

ACTION

In 1986, the Illinois Association of Park Districts initiated legislation to create the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) program, and subsequently in 1989, effectively lobbied for legislation to provide a stable source of funding for the program. In addition, the IAPD has worked to secure funding for the Natural Areas Acquisition Fund (NAAF) and advises communities on implementing land-cash donation ordinances. The Association will continue to promote increased funding for OSLAD.

Approved by the IAPD Board of Trustees on August 18, 2006.

¹ Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. "Estimated State and Federal Lands for Recreation: State by State Listings."

² U.S. Census Bureau, population changes between April 1, 2001 and July 1, 2003.

³ Natural Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, *National Resources Inventory 1982-2002*.

⁴ Statewide opinion poll of registered voters in 2002, conducted by Richard Day Research, found that 95 percent of Chicago suburban residents thought their community was developing too rapidly.

⁵ *State Assessment of Public Park and Green Space Needs*, a 2002 report by the Trust for Public Land and the Illinois Association of Park Districts.

⁶ Miller, Andrew "Valuing Open Space: Land Economics and Neighborhood Parks" thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2001.

⁷ Crompton, John L. "Impact of Parks and Open Space on Property Values and the Property Tax Base" 2001.

⁸ Statewide opinion poll of registered voters in 2002, conducted by Richard Day Research.