

Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee

INFORMATIONAL HEARING

Access to Parks and Open Spaces in California: COVID-19, Other Challenges, and Future Needs

BACKGROUND

2020 was a challenging year for all Californians. As the pandemic took hold, major sectors of the economy shut down, including businesses and places that many Californians turn to for recreation and respite. With many recreational amenities shut down to protect public health, anecdotal information suggests large numbers of Californians looked to get outside. While this is a welcome development, it also placed unprecedented stress on our parks and open spaces and the people who manage and maintain them. The pandemic also appears to have exacerbated existing inequities in access to parks and open spaces with lower income and underserved communities experiencing an even greater lack of access.

This hearing is intended to provide the Legislature and the public with the opportunity to hear from parks and open space entities about the challenges they have faced responding to the ongoing pandemic and other events of 2020, as well as future needs to ensure equitable access to the outdoors in California.

Access

“Access” embodies both physical (e.g., distance to a park) and social (e.g., safety) aspects and varies widely throughout California. According to the Trust for Public Land (TPL), two California cities rank among the top 10 in the nation with parks access [Irvine and San Francisco] while many cities also rank among the bottom third.¹ TPL’s 2020 ParkScore® index found that one in three Californians do not live within a 10 minute walk to a quality park. According to a recent Hispanic Access Foundation report, fifty-five percent of Latinos in California lack access to open space, and significantly fewer acres of green space are present in many Black and Latino neighborhoods when compared to predominantly white neighborhoods.² Intersecting roadways, less acreage, lack of access to transportation,³ lack of safety, and physical condition/maintenance of spaces are just some of the barriers to parks and open space access.⁴

Benefits

Parks and open/green spaces provide numerous benefits to the community, environment, and economy. Use of parks and open spaces is correlated with a number of mental and physical health benefits, including (but not limited to) decreased risk of stress, anxiety, and depression, lessened symptoms of ADD/ADHD,^{4,5} as well as reduced risk of psychiatric illness for those with childhood exposure to open/green space.⁶ Parks and open spaces also provide dual environmental and public health benefits in urban areas as they remove pollution and filter air, provide shade to reduce the urban heat island effect, attenuate noise, absorb water as an alternative to stormwater control systems, and replenish local groundwater reservoirs.⁷

Parks and open space are also highly valued as economic drivers,⁸ as they have been found to increase property values and subsequent tax revenues by as much as twenty percent, draw new businesses and visitors to cities, and are reported to be among the top amenities sought after for people choosing a place to live.

Covid-19, Wildfires, and Other Challenges

The past year presented a number of additional access challenges to parks and open spaces, with intermittent COVID-19 pandemic-related closures preventing physical access for many Californians. Parks and open spaces experienced a dramatic increase in usage for many reasons: as a refuge from the pandemic, space for socially distanced gatherings, exercise, and for the opportunity to be closer to nature. However, the past year also underscored the lack of equitable access to these essential spaces in many communities. Before the pandemic, Bay area parks already saw a surge in popularity with increased visitation and use of outdoor space over the past few years,⁹ but when public health orders limited activity to the outdoors, the increased patronage sometimes overwhelmed the facilities. Increased visitation also resulted in parks employees battling more litter and less people picking up after their dogs, requiring more signage and operational costs. These same parks lost normal revenue from more social activities such as weddings, camping, or recreational rentals. Meanwhile parks and open spaces with already minimal facilities were overwhelmed by increased visitation, often lacking the necessary bathroom facilities and directional signage to prevent ecological damage.

The 2020 California wildfire season was also characterized by a record-setting number of acres burned, with nearly 10,000 fires burning more than 4.2 million acres – more than 4 percent of the state’s roughly 100 million acres of land.¹⁰

Positive Outcomes

While data from 2020 is not available for every open space and park location, state and local parks experienced up to a seventy-five percent increase in use,⁹ underscoring the importance of parks and open spaces. Recreational use also increased, with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) reporting sales of nearly two million sport fishing licenses, an eleven percent increase from 2019. Hunting license sales also increased by 9 percent, with about sixteen percent of the licenses purchased by first time license-holders.

The Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS) program is a distance learning program that has served K-12 teachers, students, and education partners with live or on-demand video presentations from California State Parks locations for more than 15 years. In 2020, usage increased about 300 percent from previous years, and availability of these resources were essential to distanced learning opportunities.

Existing Funding

Now more than ever, parks are an essential component of health, economic, and recreational equity. Recent propositions, such as Proposition 68 (2018) and Proposition 84 (2006), provided funding to improve existing and build new parks in park-poor areas. Much of the park- and open space-related funding in these propositions has been fully allocated by the Legislature. Federal programs such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) provide funding to support

federal, state, and local lands and waters, investing in recreational opportunities and public access. The recent permanent reauthorization and funding of the LWCF offers an opportunity for sustained federal funding to California for these purposes. While state-issued bonds and LWCF have done a lot to create new, or **rehabilitate existing, parks and open spaces, these funding sources are not able to be used for operations and maintenance (or “stewardship”) costs to ensure these resources provide a high quality experience over time. Funding sources such as the General Fund, special funds, fee revenue, and local or regional assessments can be used for stewardship costs as well as establishing new parks and open spaces.**

Future Needs

The events of the past year exacerbated many of the existing issues present in parks and open spaces. Severe drought and wildfires now pose an annual risk to existing outdoor space, leaving fire prevention and preparation as a top priority to protect these spaces and the communities around them. Many open spaces already operating in a deficit now have an even greater need for funding and maintenance, while the lack of equitable park access will have a profound impact on underrepresented communities and related health outcomes for decades to come. Identifying a sufficient and sustainable source of funding for stewardship remains a challenge in many regions of California.

REFERENCES

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FURTHER READING:

Urban green space cooling effect in cities: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844019300702>

World Health Organization review on urban spaces and health:

https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/321971/Urban-green-spaces-and-health-review-evidence.pdf

Effects of Urban Green Space on Environmental Health, Equity and Resilience:

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-56091-5_11

Urban Green Space: Creating a Triple Win for Environmental Sustainability, Health, and Health Equity through Behavior Change: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6888177/>

Screening for park access during a primary care social determinants screen:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32316482/>