

# Land Lines

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF THE LINCOLN INSTITUTE OF LAND POLICY

OCTOBER 2020

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Cities Invest in Open Space

Land Banks Team Up with  
Community Land Trusts

Notes Toward a Just Recovery

# Land Lines

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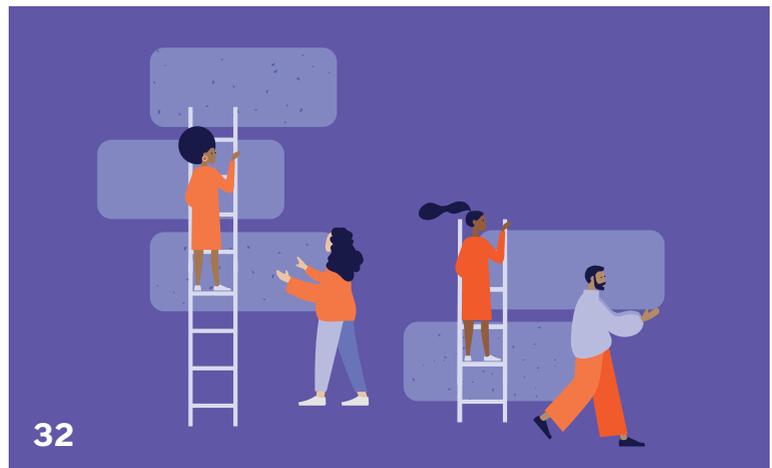
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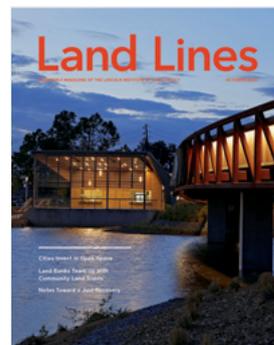
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The boathouse at Scissortail Park, Oklahoma City. Credit: Doug Hoke, courtesy of Scissortail Park Foundation.



## Center for Geospatial Solutions: Think Globally, Map Locally

IN THE 1980s, not long after China had opened up to global trade and commerce, the nation's farmland began succumbing to rapid urbanization. The explosive growth of cities consumed an estimated 7 million to 12 million acres of prime farmland from 1987 to 1995. This pattern led to dramatic changes in the landscape and grave concerns about food security. Aware that no farms meant no food for the country's growing population—and just a few decades removed from a devastating famine that had cost the lives of 20 million to 50 million people between 1958 and 1961—the central government enacted regulations requiring those who converted farmland for other uses to ensure the protection of the same amount of farmland elsewhere.

China's Ministry of Land and Resources tried heroically to meet these zero net loss mandates. But it was impossible to monitor land quality and local land exchange decisions, especially with last-generation management systems like limited data, paper records, and low-resolution maps. Urbanization continued apace, swallowing an estimated 82 million acres of farmland between 2001 and 2013. In most cases, the rich farmlands around growing cities were “replaced” with less productive woodlands and grasslands. To get higher yields from less fertile land, farmers had to adopt more intensive cultivation practices, relying on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation. These technical solutions maintained food security, but at a high cost, including the depletion of aquifers and contamination of soil.

China is now a net importer of grains and future production hinges on finding new sources of water for irrigation. Concerns are growing about food security once more, but something else is changing in China: the land and resources agency—now called the Ministry of Natural Resources—is modernizing the system it uses to monitor and enforce the farmland preservation policy. This includes adopting geospatial data from satellite imagery and other remote sensing to map and evaluate the quality of reclaimed land. It also includes monitoring urban frontiers to better guide development decisions.

**This fall, the Lincoln Institute is taking a major step to expand the accessibility and use of cutting-edge technology, launching the Center for Geospatial Solutions (CGS).**

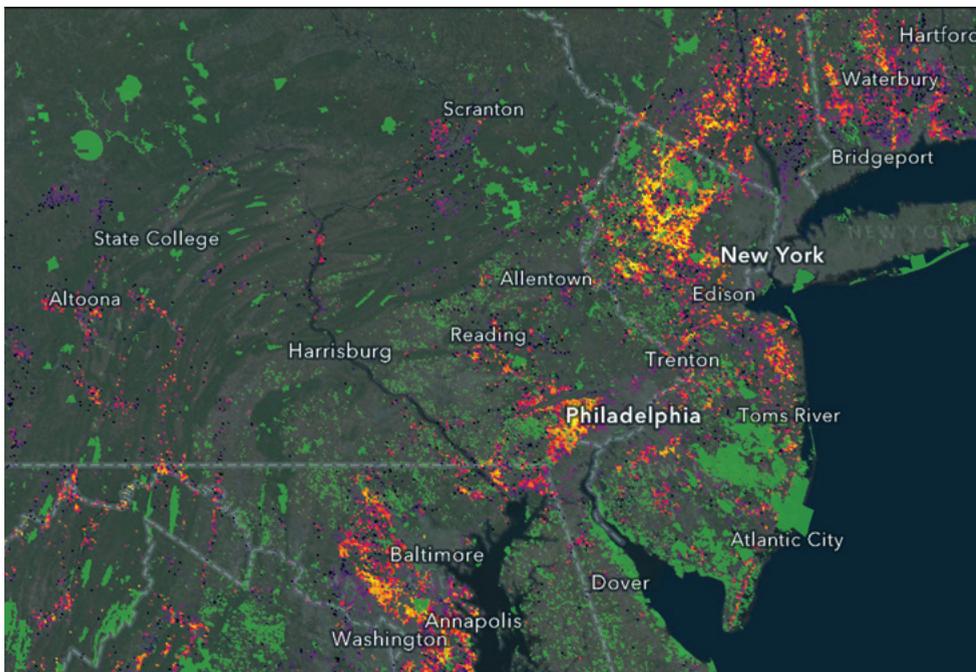
Recent improvements in the quality of satellite imagery and computer analysis methods are making it possible to monitor China's farmland preservation efforts with increasing precision. These improvements also hold great promise for land and water conservation around the globe. This fall, the Lincoln Institute is taking a major step to expand the accessibility and use of such cutting-edge technology by launching the Center for Geospatial Solutions (CGS).

CGS is a new hub of data, expertise, and services for people and organizations across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors working to conserve land and water resources. It will expand access to geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, and other tools that can inform decisions about land and water management. Although these tools have existed for decades, many organizations lack the data, equipment, staff, or expertise to implement them, limiting their ability to achieve their goals and to collaborate with others at large scales. The center will focus on opening access to cutting-edge technology for historically oppressed or marginalized people and communities; governments in low- to middle-income countries, regions, or states; nonprofit organizations with limited resources; and startup businesses, or businesses operating in developing or restricted economies.

We're launching this effort because we know that sweeping reforms like those China implemented to preserve farmland are just the first step toward an intended outcome. To succeed, such policies must be followed by the less

glamorous work of persistent enforcement and monitoring, with adjustments to the rules in response to lessons learned. In addition, if policy makers hope to manage land policy at the national or international level, they need access to the best possible data and precision tools to track and respond to what is happening locally. CGS, led by staff members with deep expertise in mapping technologies, organizational development, public health, and conservation, will provide data, conduct analysis, and build customized tools to respond to increasing demand from organizations of all sizes, with all levels of technical capacity.

CGS builds on the Lincoln Institute's long track record of pioneering ideas that have transformed land policy at national and global levels. Beginning in the 1970s, the Lincoln Institute played a leading role in developing computerized property assessment. This revolutionized how local governments around the world administered the property tax—the most important component of local public revenues in most places. In the early 1980s, the Lincoln



The Center for Geospatial Solutions (CGS) will expand access to geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, and other tools that can inform decisions about land and water management. This CGS map combines social and environmental data to highlight landscapes that are relied on by at-risk species, facing development pressures, and adjacent to existing protected areas (shown in green). Credit: CGS.

Institute convened some 40 land trusts to mobilize efforts to conserve private land in the United States to complement public land conservation. By expanding the scope and use of conservation easements and advocating successfully for state and federal tax breaks for private land conservation, the coalition, which became the Land Trust Alliance, has since helped to protect more than 56 million acres of private land—equal to the land area of Minnesota. And in 2014, we launched the International Land Conservation Network, which connects civic and private land conservation organizations and people around the globe, and has spawned major conservation initiatives on several continents.

With the launch of CGS, we are prepared to apply our expertise to the work of supporting and amplifying today's bold land-based initiatives. Earlier this year, for example, the Campaign for Nature launched an effort to protect 30 percent of the planet's land and oceans by 2030. The "30 by 30 Campaign" seeks to address climate change, support a growing global population, and prevent mass extinctions by protecting critical natural resources and ecosystems, and monitoring and managing their protection in perpetuity. This colossal effort can learn from farmland protection efforts in China and other bold efforts to manage land and resources at national or global levels, and it will benefit from the kind of tools and analysis CGS brings to the table.

An important first question is whether we can leverage the traumas of 2020—a pandemic, devastating wildfires in Australia and the United States, the increasing frequency and severity of weather-related calamities—to forge the political will to take meaningful global action. Can we convince global politicians and voters that the climate crisis or mass extinctions threaten human survival and require the type of coordinated global action sparked by the pandemic? Second, can we sharpen the global goal of 30 by 30 to motivate more specific (and practical) actions at lower levels of geography to avoid unintended consequences? While 30 by 30 is a handy slogan, the 30 percent of lands and

oceans the campaign chooses to protect will have direct bearing on whether we can reverse the climate crisis or avert mass extinctions. We will need to determine which land and other resources to protect, which to protect first, and how to do it. We will need to monitor local actors to make sure their actions are consistent with global goals and strategies. And we'll need to find ways to hold key actors accountable for meeting critical benchmarks. Finally, once we've identified the specific ecosystems we want to protect, we will need legal mechanisms to protect them and means to monitor protection and stewardship in perpetuity. It will require thousands of people equipped with the tools and training to monitor and enforce legal agreements and the authority to do so.

The Lincoln Institute can contribute to this bold global effort by helping the Campaign determine which land and other resources to protect first, how to monitor and manage that protection, and, with the help of ILCN, how to navigate the relevant legal mechanisms across different countries with different legal systems. In parallel efforts, the Lincoln Institute is building distance learning curricula to train local government officials and practitioners to use new land and water management tools and approaches more effectively. CGS can decentralize decision making by providing tools and training that can be deployed locally to support global goals. By making mapping technology universally available, we can enable people and organizations to collaborate and achieve impact in land and water conservation that is orders of magnitude greater than what they can accomplish alone.

The Center for Geospatial Solutions exists to bring new clarity and insight to the business of global land conservation, increasing access to data in the name of building a more sustainable future. Like lifting a fog, applying geospatial technology will enable anyone to see what is happening anywhere on the Earth. It will make the planet feel that much smaller, and the solutions to humanity's toughest problems that much easier to grasp. □



Credit: Courtesy of Mayor Muriel Bowser's Office.

**Muriel Bowser** vaulted to national prominence this year as a leading voice in the coronavirus pandemic and in the movement for racial justice. Bowser was elected mayor of Washington, DC, in 2014 and reelected in 2018. A leading proponent of DC statehood, she serves in a unique capacity, functioning as a governor and county executive as well as mayor. Since taking office, Bowser has sought to speed up affordable housing production in the District, which is home to 706,000 people across 68 square miles and has a budget of \$16 billion. She has also worked to diversify the local economy, increase satisfaction in city services, and invest in programs and policies that support families. Born and raised in DC, Bowser entered politics in 2004 as an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner in the Riggs Park neighborhood, then became Ward 4 Councilmember in 2007. Recently, she took time out from her duties as mayor of the nation's capital to connect via email with Lincoln Institute Senior Fellow Anthony Flint.

## A Capital Reckoning

**ANTHONY FLINT:** You came into office in early 2015. Was there anything that could have prepared you for 2020, and how do you see the rest of this tumultuous year playing out? Are you confident about the management of the coronavirus?

**MURIEL BOWSER:** As a global city, we are constantly preparing for a wide range of shocks and stresses. However, this is clearly an unprecedented event that has required an unprecedented response. Our residents and businesses have made tremendous sacrifices for the health and safety of our community. As a District, we are fortunate that we went into this crisis strong. That enabled us to immediately begin putting in place a number of resources to protect and support residents, from delivering meals to seniors, to creating free grocery distribution sites for anyone in need, to setting up free testing sites across the city and quickly hiring hundreds of contact tracers. Since the beginning of this emergency, we have been very focused on following the science, listening to the experts, and keeping our community informed. I expect that to continue until we get to the other side of this. Overall, though, I am very proud of how Washingtonians have responded to this challenge.

**AF:** What did the “Black Lives Matter” mural on 16th Street in front of the White House—duplicated in many other cities—tell you about the dynamics of public space and social change?

**MB:** I decided to create Black Lives Matter Plaza when peaceful protests against systemic racism were met with tear gas, and federal helicopters, and soldiers in camouflage roaming our local streets. And what we did was create a place where Americans could come together for protest and redress, for strategizing and healing. Americans nationwide have taken to the streets to demand change.

Mayor Bowser overlooks the Black Lives Matter mural she commissioned on 16th Street, which leads directly to the White House. Credit: Khalid Naji-Allah.



Whether it's through protest or art, or a combination of protest and art, people are using public space to send a clear message that Black lives matter, that Black humanity matters, and that we need to have this reckoning and fix the broken systems that, for too long, have perpetuated racism and injustice.

**AF:** In 2019, you set a goal of creating 36,000 new housing units—12,000 of them affordable—by 2025. What are the key things that need to happen to create more housing options in Washington?

**MB:** When I came into office, we more than doubled our annual investment in DC's Housing Production Trust Fund to \$100 million per year. That's more per capita than any other jurisdiction. And we aren't just investing—we've been getting that money out the door and into projects that are producing and preserving thousands of affordable homes across our city. But we have to do more. As you highlighted, we have a big goal in DC: to build 36,000 new homes by 2025, with at least a third of those units affordable. Last year, we became the first

city in the nation to set affordable housing targets by neighborhood. When we announced those targets, we also hosted community conversations in neighborhoods across DC to discuss with residents the ongoing legacy of redlining and other discriminatory practices and how we can work together to do better. Some of the things we are doing to make this happen are a tax abatement for high-need areas, changes to our inclusionary zoning program, and continuing those big—and strategic—investments in our Housing Production Trust Fund.

**AF:** If the city's economy recovers from the pandemic, Washington is likely to continue its urban renaissance success story. What policies do you have in place to address gentrification and displacement, both residential and commercial?

**MB:** I know that Washington will bounce back from this pandemic. We are still home to more than 700,000 Washingtonians who are resilient, creative, and focused on helping their neighbors get through this; and knowing that, I know we will come back from this.

Going into the public health emergency, we were already very focused on building a more inclusive city and making sure the benefits of our prosperity were felt by more Washingtonians. This pandemic has only amplified the importance of our equity efforts. And as we move forward with our response and recovery, we are still focused on how we advance our goals around housing, jobs, health care, and more. We're still investing more than \$100 million in affordable housing. We're moving forward with our strategic plan to end homelessness and opening new, more dignified shelters all across our city. Our homeownership programs continue. We're looking across the housing continuum to see how we help more Washingtonians stay and build their futures in DC.

And we are also supporting our small businesses and local entrepreneurs. For example, we recently announced a new equity inclusion strategy that will increase access to development opportunities for organizations that are owned or majority controlled by individuals who are part of a socially disadvantaged population.

**AF: What kind of importance do you ascribe to the planning office of your city, and by extension, who is doing a good job in the practice of planning in other cities?**

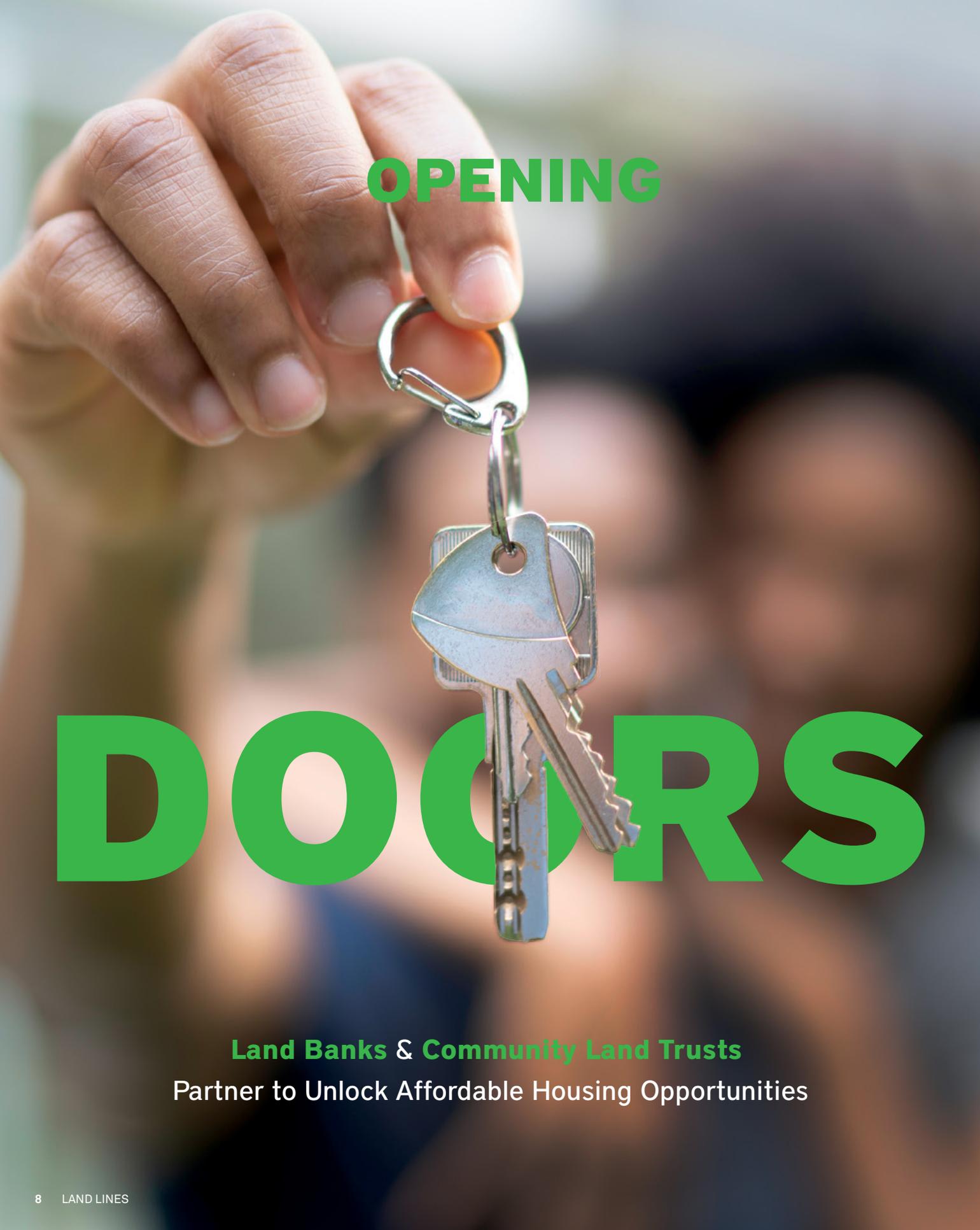
**MB:** It's critical that we not only plan for the long-term growth of DC, but also make sure our growth reflects the values of an inclusive and vibrant city. My Office of Planning plays a crucial role in advancing our housing goals and helping us build a city that works for Washingtonians of all backgrounds and income levels. Because the planning office can provide policy analysis, long-term thinking, and community outreach, as well as the implementation needs around zoning and land use, I consider them one of our housing agencies. They work alongside the traditional housing department, public housing authority, and housing finance agency to address housing and affordability.

In terms of other cities, what's interesting is that across the country, there are so many fantastic things happening at the local level, and cities and towns are building innovative solutions to match their unique needs, from Los Angeles to Gary, Indiana, to Boston. Cities are incubators for innovation, and while we don't always have the same challenges—for example, some cities have a lot of people and not enough housing, others have a lot of housing and not enough people—we are constantly learning from each other.

**“Cities are incubators for innovation, and while we don't always have the same challenges—for example, some cities have a lot of people and not enough housing, others have a lot of housing and not enough people—we are constantly learning from each other.”**

**AF: What can cities do now to address the climate crisis, which grinds on, though eclipsed by the other emergencies that have been more front and center?**

**MB:** Environmental justice must be part of the larger conversation we are having as a nation right now. We know, for example, that the harm caused by manmade climate change disproportionately affects communities of color. Additionally, when we look at the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 is having on Black Americans, that is directly tied to the work we must do to build healthier and more resilient communities. This is all a conversation about equity and justice. In DC, we have a number of programs, like Solar for All, that are focused on fighting climate change while also addressing inequality and other disparities. We don't have to silo these issues; we can and we must focus on all of it. □

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a set of keys. The keys are silver and include a car key and a house key. The background is a blurred crowd of people, suggesting a community or public setting. The word 'OPENING' is written in large, bold, green capital letters across the top of the image.

**OPENING**

# **DOORS**

**Land Banks & Community Land Trusts**  
Partner to Unlock Affordable Housing Opportunities

By Emma Zehner

**EARLIER THIS YEAR**, Kizzy Jefferson closed on her first house. The newly finished three-bedroom, two-bathroom residence in Acre Homes, a historically Black neighborhood in Northwest Houston, sold for \$75,000, less than a third of the city's median single-family home price of \$250,000.

Long considered an unusually affordable city, Houston has experienced the same soaring property values in recent years as many other metropolitan areas in the United States. In the past decade, median home prices in the city have increased by 67 percent, while income has increased by only 20 percent.

"It takes two to three incomes to afford most houses," said Jefferson, a Houston native and single parent who works in the healthcare industry. As a veteran, Jefferson had tried for years to get a VA-backed loan to buy a house in her hometown. Last fall, she was walking out of her local library and saw a flier for the Houston Community Land Trust (HCLT). She attended an informational meeting in January, and by the beginning of April she had become a homeowner.

Jefferson purchased her home through the New Home Development Program (NHDP), a collaboration of the City of Houston, the Houston Land Bank, and the HCLT. Launched in 2018, NHDP was created to provide newly constructed, affordable single-family homes to homebuyers with a household income of 80 percent or less of area median income (AMI). The program is working to address systemic racial disparities and discriminatory practices that have shut Black people and other people of color out of homeownership opportunities. The city's Black homeownership rate is 32 percent, compared to the white homeownership rate of 57 percent.

Houston's NHDP is part of a recent push to think about how land banks and community land trusts can collaborate to address systemic racism and expand affordable housing opportunities. It's an effort that has gained even more



Houston native Kizzy Jefferson bought her first home this year through a program run by the city, the local land bank, and the Houston Community Land Trust. Credit: Courtesy of Kizzy Jefferson.

urgency as a result of the housing insecurity now in plain view due to COVID-19. Representatives from the Houston partnership are working alongside peers from Portland and Atlanta as part of the 36-month Catalytic Land Cohort. The program is run by Grounded Solutions Network and the Center for Community Progress with initial funding from Wells Fargo; the two nonprofits have also worked with other communities, including Albany, New York, to explore similar potential collaborations.

Land banks and community land trusts haven't historically coordinated their work: land banks typically purchase properties in weak markets with the goal of bringing them back to productive use, while community land trusts have focused on ensuring affordability in hot markets. But by joining together, these entities can serve as an important tool in expanding homeownership opportunities.

Land banks and community land trusts haven't historically coordinated their work . . . But by joining together, these entities can serve as an important tool in expanding homeownership opportunities.

Credit: FG Trade/iStock

“We are thinking about how we can empower municipal land banks to acquire the properties they are best equipped to manage, and how we can create [an effective] nonprofit-driven market acquisition strategy,” said Dr. Akilah Watkins, president and CEO of the Center for Community Progress. “We want to make that pipeline to the land bank and then the community land trust as smooth as possible.”

Watkins emphasized that COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus issues related to housing affordability in the United States, and said these collaborations can play an important role in recovery. In Houston, for example, interest in the New Home Development Program remains strong; despite moving operations online, HCLT continues to receive about one application from a potential new homeowner per day.

The current economic crisis also means more land is likely to be bought and sold, and

land banks can play a role in keeping it available and affordable. “This is a very advantageous time for land banks to scoop up land so they can begin to hold that land, and, in conjunction with local stakeholders, begin to develop what a broad vision around land looks like,” Watkins said.

Adriane Bond Harris, director of Connecting Capital and Community at the Lincoln Institute’s Center for Community Investment, agreed that this is a pivotal moment to consider the potential of such partnerships. “There may be opportunities to use recovery dollars for land acquisition, and if there are cities with existing CLTs and land banks that truly will be an opportunity for them,” she said. “Given the housing crisis as well as the potential for private developers to buy up vacant land, this is an opportunity for cities to start planning how they might expand their toolkits to gain greater affordability within communities.”

## NEW COMMUNITIES

The first community land trust in the United States was formed in Albany, Georgia, in 1969 by Civil Rights leaders Slater King, Charles and Shirley Sherrod, John Lewis, and others. They piloted the model as a way for Black farmers to gain access to land for housing, farming, and other enterprises. New Communities Inc. operated as a series of agricultural cooperatives and homes on 5,700 acres of land owned by the community nonprofit. At the time, it was the largest tract of land owned by Black residents in the country.

In 1985, facing extreme drought and the refusal of the former Farmers Home Administration to provide an emergency loan, New Communities was forced to give up the land. In 2009, the trust won \$12 million as part of a larger settlement to pay Black farmers for USDA’s discrimination; New Communities bought 1,600 acres and has since developed Resora, a retreat center and working farm built on the original ideals.



Credit: Equity Trust Inc., Dawn Makarios, and New Communities Inc.

## Complementary Strengths

Today, over 270 community land trusts operate in the United States. Community land trusts, a shared equity housing model with roots in the Civil Rights movement (see sidebar), can take a variety of forms. They typically operate as private nonprofits run by staff, a board, and community members, and are funded through a combination of grants, donations, membership dues, developer fees, federal funds, and other sources.

When residents buy a home through a community land trust, they usually purchase the home itself but lease the land from the trust. The owners agree that if they sell the home they will do so at a restricted price, which preserves long-term affordability. Although there is wide variation among CLTs in the United States, a 2019 report published by Grounded Solutions Network and the Lincoln Institute found that the “typical” owner of a CLT home realized a \$14,000 gain when reselling a shared equity home after an average of five years (Wang et al., 2019).

The report illustrated the way community land trusts can prevent displacement while helping residents build equity. It also found that the percentage of households of color in the shared equity sector grew from 13 percent between 1985 and 2001 to 43 percent between 2013 and 2018. The authors credited the increase to expanded community understanding of these tools as well as a shift on the part of affordable housing providers to support residents of color.

Each of the three cities in the cohort has a strong focus on serving communities of color, and Grounded Solutions Network CEO Tony Pickett said racial justice is a critical component of the work. “As two Black-led national community development organizations, Grounded Solutions Network and the Center for Community Progress are [working] toward realizing the dream of homeownership for families of color who have been denied access to the American dream for far too long,” he said. “If we all care about racial justice, we must also care about providing homes with lasting affordability.”

	Land Banks	Community Land Trusts
<b>Legal Structure</b>	<b>Public entity</b> (may be a nonprofit or public authority)	<b>Private nonprofit</b>
<b>Governance</b>	<b>Board/governance defined by state statute/ intergovernmental agreement</b> (mix of government/private/community)	<b>Tripartite board</b> (leaseholders, community members, and external stakeholders)
<b>Mission</b>	Acquire tax-delinquent, vacant, abandoned property and connect to responsible end use/user	Acquire and hold land permanently for public good (e.g., affordable housing)
<b>Acquisition</b>	Special acquisition powers or preferred access to property (e.g., tax or lien foreclosure)	Status as nonprofit may allow for preferred access from local government
<b>Management/Maintenance</b>	Manage/maintain vacant and abandoned property, hold land tax exempt	Steward property, may hold land tax exempt
<b>Disposition/End Use</b>	Dispose of property to responsible transferee according to community goals	Permanently hold land for public good

Credit: Courtesy of Grounded Solutions Network and Center for Community Progress.

In Houston, 96 percent of HCLT homeowners are Black and 4 percent are Hispanic. Seventy-five percent of Atlanta Land Trust homeowners are Black. In 2019, almost 70 percent of new homeowners working with Portland's CLT identified as households of color.

"Often when we talk about affordable housing, we talk about the three Ps: protect tenants, preserve communities, and produce housing," said Harris of the Center for Community Investment, who helped form Nashville's first community land trust as director of the Mayor's Office of Housing from 2015 to 2018. "I think the fourth element the CLT provides is power. They are the ones that are really working with residents to understand what it means to own a home through a community land trust, and what it means to build and sustain equity, now and for future generations."

Land banks are public or quasi-public entities run by city or county governments that work largely in weak and distressed market areas. Land banks acquire vacant, abandoned, or tax-delinquent properties with the goal of returning them to productive use. Through state enabling legislation, the over 200 land banks in the United States are granted unique powers to remove delinquent taxes and other financial barriers to these conversions. Most land banks are funded by local, state, and federal funds, as well as philanthropic commitments, land sales, and fees and interest from delinquent taxes.

The number of land banks grew following the Great Recession; prior to that economic downturn, only about a dozen land banks existed in the United States. In the fallout from the current pandemic, there is a greater understanding of the role land banks can play in community-centered recovery, as evidenced by the introduction in June of the bipartisan National Land Bank Network Act of 2020. There is also awareness of the dangers of allowing vacant property to be snatched up by private equity firms.

Collaboration between land banks and community land trusts has a certain logic, said John Emmeus Davis, editor of the Lincoln

Institute book *The Community Land Trust Reader* (Davis 2010). "Land banks have a disposition problem," he once wrote (Davis 2012). "Land trusts have an acquisition problem."

With some exceptions—including the Houston Land Bank, which exclusively provides affordable housing—most land banks have had an emphasis on acquiring property and conveying it into productive use, not necessarily creating long-term affordability. Land trusts, meanwhile, are expert stewards, but don't have many ways to acquire properties. Land banks are also able to hold property tax exempt, which has the potential to reduce the price of acquisition for interested land trusts. "I have become even more convinced over the years that the land bank and the land trust solve the greatest flaw that each one of them has," Davis recently said.

While there have been cases over the years of land bank authorities or municipal agencies giving publicly owned land to a community land trust, these transfers have not been conducted in a systematic way. Davis cited examples in Boston, Philadelphia, and Denver, which was the site of a visit by the cohort last spring. By more intentionally bringing the two types of groups together, greater scale is possible, according to Davis. There are some basic best practices for making this work, he said: "The land bank has to prioritize affordable housing in its disposition policy. How exactly this works is going to depend so much on local conditions and local priorities."

Proud Ground, the community land trust in Portland, Oregon, maintains a portfolio of 350 affordable homes. Credit: Proud Ground.



## Partnerships in Practice

In 2018, the city of Albany undertook a pilot project to formalize the relationship between the city’s land bank and land trust. The Albany County Land Bank and Albany Community Land Trust jointly applied for and received a technical assistance grant from the Center for Community Progress. The process helped identify “where the land bank strengths could offset the weaknesses in the land trust model, the barriers to the mission, and vice versa,” said Adam Zaranko, executive director of the land bank. “It was one of those Eureka moments. Why hadn’t I thought about this before?” Though the land trust and land bank worked in neighboring offices, they had no official relationship.

Out of these discussions came the city’s Inclusive Neighborhoods Program. Through this program, the land bank makes certain properties available for sale to the land trust at a discounted price. The land trust has several weeks to exercise its first right of refusal. If the land trust expresses interest, the land bank’s board of directors reviews the offer. This arrangement is possible because, under the statutory authority of the land bank, the board of directors can decide property dispositions based on the best outcome and not necessarily the highest offer.

Zaranko emphasized that the program aims to distribute land trust properties throughout the city, not just in certain neighborhoods. The partnership, he said, is helping to demonstrate that land banks and land trusts have a role to play in both weak and strong markets. This is particularly true in “dual market” cities like Albany, where a few blocks can make a significant difference in the level of investment.

	Median Home Price (Metro Area*)	Community Land Trust Median Home Price
Atlanta	243,200	<b>163,900</b>
Portland	425,850	<b>219,000</b>
Houston	250,800	<b>75,115</b>

Note: All metro-area median home prices are for Q1/Q2 2020. Prices reflect the median cost of a single-family home in the following metro areas: Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta, GA; Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA; Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX.

Sources: National Association of Realtors, Atlanta Land Trust, Houston Community Land Trust, Proud Ground.

While land banks are usually associated with weak markets, they can also help to convert vacant and abandoned properties in strong neighborhoods into affordable housing. Meanwhile, community land trusts can attract investment in weak market neighborhoods, while protecting affordability.

“The idea is over time to create pockets of permanent affordable housing in neighborhoods that otherwise the market wouldn’t accommodate, instead of placing all affordable housing within disinvested, formerly redlined neighborhoods,” Zaranko said.

The partners in Albany are currently in the process of closing on their first property, a three-bedroom house located in Buckingham Pond/Crestwood, a neighborhood with few vacant properties.

While land banks are usually associated with weak markets, they can also help to convert vacant and abandoned properties in strong neighborhoods into affordable housing. Meanwhile, community land trusts can attract investment in weak market neighborhoods, while protecting affordability.

In Houston, the focus is on preserving affordability throughout a city that is gradually becoming unaffordable. Through the New Home Development Program, homebuyers can purchase their home in one of two ways. The “traditional purchase option” provides buyers with up to \$39,900 in assistance. The second option, the one Jefferson used, sells NHDP homes to buyers at a below-market price (starting at \$74,615 for a three-bedroom house). Under this model, through one sale, the buyer and community land trust buy the house and land respectively. The homebuyer then enters into a long-term ground lease with the land trust. The land trust keeps the property affordable in perpetuity. Monthly payments currently range from \$592 to \$739 for a three-bedroom house.

“The city serves as the master developer,” said Ashley Allen, executive director of the HCLT. The city selects builders and funds construction on land bank properties that it has designated for this program. The land trust is positioned as

one possible buyer. Allen added that programs outside of the formal NHDP program can also help the land trust. HCLT has relationships with builders and community-based organizations and, as long as the land bank has prequalified these builders and organizations to purchase property, the land bank is also contributing to affordable homes that could be brought into the community land trust’s portfolio. “If they can continue to make sure that those community builders get land, they are helping us create more permanent affordable housing. We can then put those homes into the land trust. Even through these less direct channels, the land bank plays a part in making sure permanent affordable housing gets on the ground.”

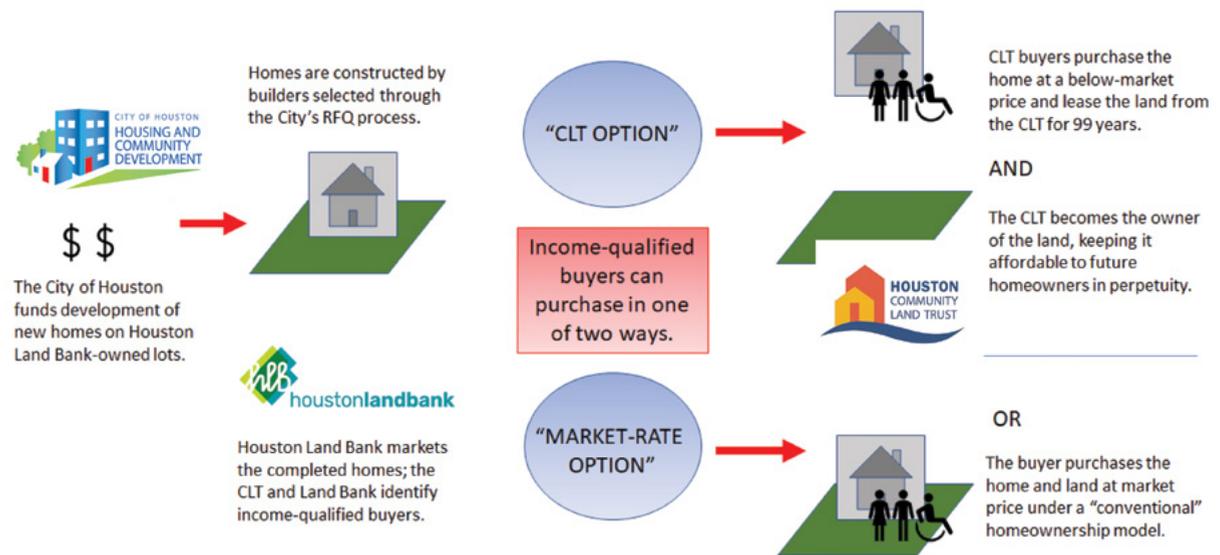
The HCLT is also focused on another important element, Allen said: climate proofing homes. The land trust educates homebuyers about climate resilience and serves as a check on affordable housing developers that might otherwise build on floodplains.



In Houston, where the median home price for a single-family home is about \$250,000, a partnership between the city, the local land bank, and the Houston Community Land Trust is expanding the stock of available affordable housing. Credit: HCLT.

## HOUSTON'S NEW HOME DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

A City of Houston, Houston Land Bank, and Houston Community Land Trust Partnership



Credit: Houston Land Bank.

Another partnership model, pioneered by the Maggie Walker Community Land Trust (MWCLT) in Richmond, Virginia, merges the entities into one. In 2016, the Land Bank Entities Act, passed by the Virginia General Assembly, allowed localities to designate existing nonprofits to serve as land banks. The Richmond City Council voted to have the MWCLT serve as the city's first land bank.

The land bank can acquire land in three ways: by purchasing certain tax-delinquent properties from the city for \$2,000 to \$3,000 each, receiving donated property, or purchasing land on the open market. To fulfill the land bank's main goal of creating affordable housing, at least 25 percent of acquired properties are set aside for development by the MWCLT. The rest are developed by nonprofit affordable housing developers (who may choose to place their finished homes in the MWCLT's pipeline) or transferred to other entities who, with community oversight, can repurpose the land for retail or commercial use, historic preservation, public space, or urban agriculture.

"By pairing a community land trust and a land bank, the MWCLT is able to combine these

symbiotic functions as a way to ensure that properties transferred to the land bank are strategically used to achieve community goals," wrote Virginia Commonwealth University graduate student Matthew Becker, who helped outline an implementation plan for the partnership (Becker 2018). "Additionally, the MWCLT should use the land bank as a property pipeline that will support the development of affordable housing and other community uses that will last in perpetuity."

In 2019, the MWCLT sold 14 homes, with an average sale price of \$155,000—30 percent lower than the city's median sale price.

The land trust is also focused on another important element: climate proofing homes. The trust educates homebuyers about climate resilience and serves as a check on affordable housing developers that might otherwise build on floodplains.



Establishing partnerships between land trusts and land banks can also lead to other advances in the affordable housing ecosystem, noted Amanda Rhein, executive director of the ALT. Rhein said the pilot program will serve as a model for how the land trust can work with other public entities, such as the Atlanta Housing Authority. “They will now view such a relationship as less risky because there is already precedent we can point to,” she said.

In Portland, Oregon, the land trust is also working quickly to prevent displacement in the face of a proposed infrastructure project—in this case, a light-rail expansion. The new project could affect thousands of units, either by demolition or as a result of increased land values; the expansion of TriMet’s MAX yellow line in 2000, which displaced over 16,000 residents in North and Northeast Portland, serves as a warning. Proud Ground, a community land trust with 350 homes in its portfolio, is exploring the concept of land banking as a way to scale affordable housing preservation and production and prevent a repetition of past patterns.

“If we are going to build enough affordable housing to get in the way of this potential displacement, then we need to increase our inventory significantly,” said Brian Harper, senior

regional planner at Metro, the area’s regional planning agency. “Affordable housing developers tend to be really reactionary, in terms of land acquisition. What a land bank would allow you to do is to purchase and hold land and make decisions proactively.”

The state of Oregon doesn’t currently have any land banks, but the Portland region is exploring the possibility of a regional land bank concept. “We don’t have as many dilapidated or abandoned properties—yet,” said Diane Linn, executive director of Proud Ground. “The asset we do have is a lot of the public entities in the community own a lot of land. We are trying to establish an entity that can hold land and disperse it for affordable housing projects effectively.”

The Center for Community Progress believes such a step could be transformative. “Just as Metro is a profoundly successful experiment in regionalism unparalleled in the country, the Portland Regional Land Bank could be a model for regional collaboration in land banking,” concludes a paper the organization published earlier this year. “By . . . using a combination of intergovernmental agreement powers and the existing Oregon Land Bank statute, it will become a model for an efficient, effective, and equitable regional land bank in the United States” (Alexander 2020).



The Atlanta Land Trust has helped these and other local residents attain and sustain homeownership. The organization is now partnering with the Fulton County/City of Atlanta Land Bank Authority to identify new opportunities to create and preserve affordable housing options. Credit: Atlanta Land Trust

## Implementation Challenges

As promising as these collaborations seem, they do not come without challenges. One such challenge is introducing and explaining the very idea of a land trust to stakeholders. ALT has hosted engagement meetings in Atlanta to introduce the community land trust model to realtors, potential buyers, community members, and others, and created a local stakeholder group to make sure their work reflects the needs of the community.

“A lot of times in communities of color, we haven’t always been privy to different types of models of housing,” said ALT board member Lamont. “[Historically, our options have been] you can either get a traditional loan or you are going to be a renter . . . It becomes vital to have conversations about this model. This too can be an option if this works for you.”

Houston’s community land trust has also conducted grassroots outreach to its focus communities and has initiated conversations with residents in the neighborhoods it plans to move into in the coming years. “The New Home Development Program is built around homebuyer choice,” said Sam Dike, former vice president of community and partnerships at the Houston Land Bank. “Land trusts are relatively new in Houston, and Houstonians now have the opportunity to learn about two different homeownership models and choose what model works best for their needs. With the introduction of the Houston Community Land Trust, the traditional homeownership model is not the only option for homebuyers.” Dike explained that the vast majority of homeowners in the New Home Development Program have decided to buy their homes through the land trust model.

Explaining the concept of shared equity can be a challenge. Some residents question the ground lease restrictions that limit resale value and wonder whether this prevents people from fully reaping the traditional benefits of homeownership. Linn explained that Portland’s resale formula aims to maximize the benefits for



A Proud Ground home in Portland, where a proposed light-rail expansion could affect thousands of housing units. Credit: Proud Ground.

homeowners. It allows homeowners to receive every dollar they paid on their principal, recoup the cost of major repairs, and receive 25 percent of any increase in the home’s value. This can equate to \$80,000 cash after 10 years, said Linn.

According to Grounded Solutions Network, CLT homeownership can also serve as a step toward traditional homeownership; 60 percent of CLT homeowners who decide to sell later buy a market-rate home.

On the land bank side, challenges can include conveying to those in the community investment space the legal aspects of the work, ranging from how to create a land bank to how to clear title. “It takes quite a bit of skill and patience,” Harris said. “It is not as easy as just donating land. It really does require some structure.”

Harris emphasized that to scale these partnerships, communities considering creating land banks should prioritize decisions around state and local policy, as well as the legal and infrastructural work required to ensure that the properties are ready to be developed in the disposition process. Representatives from Houston, Portland, and Atlanta also acknowledged that, although the properties are sold at a discounted price, land banks and land trusts still have significant work to do to raise enough money to make these properties appealing and financially feasible for buyers.

## Next Steps for the Cohort

The next two years of the Catalytic Land Cohort will be spent working on financial investment models for pilot programs to achieve regional scale and determining how partnerships between land banks and community land trusts could be relevant in other cities, especially in the context of COVID-19. Grounded Solutions Network and the Center for Community Progress are also actively seeking additional funding for the cohort.

Grounded Solutions Network has committed to a national goal of identifying and working with partners in 60 regions to preserve or create a total of 1 million new homes with lasting affordability. In July, the Center for Community Progress announced the launch of a National Land Bank Network to meet this critical moment. The network will provide training to practitioners and highlight the accomplishments of land banks, with a focus on advancing the field.

In addition to ongoing work to help residents under financial stress due to COVID-19, partners in Portland will work to secure local government and community support for the development of a Portland Regional Land Bank. Part of this work will involve using a new mobile toolbox to engage communities of color. The team will also work to define and communicate to local governments and agencies what types of properties are most suited for lasting affordability and attempt to share data about existing land holdings across local governments and agencies. This increased transparency and coordination could help the team identify properties that are available immediately for development. “We want to plan ahead of what might happen to the economy and land values,” said Linn. “We want to establish a solid land banking program so we can be ready to go as opportunities present themselves.”

In Houston, HCLT will explore expansion to new communities and additional ways to add land to its portfolio. In Atlanta, ALT and the Land Bank Authority will work through the 14 houses in their pilot program and aim to identify additional financial resources to support work around ALT’s land acquisition strategy.

Newly abandoned commercial property as a result of COVID-19 could play a role in how these partnerships unfold, Watkins noted. “Cities are still in the rapid response phase, doing rebuilding and reparative work, but something many cities are asking is what are we going to do with this overabundance of commercial real estate and what will come back?” Watkins added that the impacts of the pandemic make figuring out these partnerships more important than ever. “I think that we are in this very unique position based on what we learned from the 2009 crisis,” she said. “We need to act quickly and decisively.” □

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# ROOM

# TO

**The Pandemic Has Underscored  
the Need for More Urban Parks.  
So What Comes Next?**

# ROAM

By Kathleen McCormick

**IN COMMUNITIES** across the country, parks and open space have seen dramatic increases in use this year as people sought refuge and respite from the COVID-19 pandemic. With public health guidelines recommending staying close to home, urban residents have been using public spaces in unprecedented numbers as places to exercise, be closer to nature, and socialize, dine, or shop at social distances. They have used public spaces to access essential services and to hold protests and demonstrations. The pandemic has elevated the value of parks and open space and has underscored the benefits for cities of creating more public spaces and more equitable access to them. It also has highlighted significant challenges, including how to pay for parks in the face of a looming fiscal crisis.

In many cities, the pandemic prompted city leaders to implement workarounds in neighborhoods without access to parks. The success of adaptive projects like widening sidewalks and bike lanes or closing streets to traffic has encouraged cities to continue to think creatively for the long term. COVID has also prompted discussions about how reimagining public space and creating new collaborations between public agencies could help city leaders make progress toward key urban goals, such as encouraging safer active-mobility options, expanding access to opportunity in underserved neighborhoods, converting vacant or underused land for public use, and developing greater climate resilience. Underlying all of this, the push for creating and maintaining traditional parks—and ensuring equitable access to them—continues.

“The pandemic has proven that parks are essential infrastructure,” says Adrian Benepe, who served until this fall as senior vice president and director of national programs for the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and was parks commissioner for the city of New York from 2002 to 2012. “It’s a

great paradox that parks have never been more used or appreciated than now. Everything else was shut down, and parks were a last refuge.”

Even before COVID, parks and recreation had been identified as a growing priority for cities in every region of the United States. According to a 2019 analysis conducted by the National League of Cities, some 63 percent of mayors had outlined specific plans or goals related to parks and recreation in recent “state of the city” speeches, compared to just 28 percent in 2017 (Yadavalli 2019).

As the pandemic continues, many city leaders are asking themselves key questions:

- **What have we learned about public parks and open space during the pandemic?**
- **What are the best practices for providing access to and expansion of public spaces?**
- **How do we reach out and listen to all communities about their open space needs?**
- **How can we think differently about our city’s spatial assets, and—perhaps most important—where do we find the land and financial resources to develop new ones?**

“The pandemic has proven that parks are essential infrastructure. It’s a great paradox that parks have never been more used or appreciated than now. Everything else was shut down, and parks were a last refuge.”

Credit: portishead1/iStock.

## Parks, Public Health, and Economic Recovery

Across the country, up to 30 percent of urban land typically is occupied by paved streets and parking lots. Parks and open space, by contrast, occupy only 15 percent of urban land. But a national survey conducted in May for the 10 Minute Walk coalition, which includes TPL, the Urban Land Institute, and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), confirmed the crucial role of local parks and green spaces in maintaining physical and mental health and helping communities navigate toward recovery. Some 81 percent of the 1,000 survey respondents said increasing access to local parks and green spaces would help people enjoy the outdoors safely as states reopened (10 Minute Walk 2020). Two-thirds agreed that parks were important in maintaining physical and mental health, that access to local parks had become more important during the crisis, and that their quality of life would improve with

Two-thirds of respondents agreed [parks] were important in maintaining physical and mental health, that access to local parks had become more important during the crisis, and that their quality of life would improve with better access to a park or green space near home.

better access to a park or green space near home. Urban respondents were most likely to value nearby green space.

These data points are backed up by years of research indicating that parks and open space provide many “cobenefits” for urban areas, where 80 percent of the U.S. population lives. Studies show that park use can lower the risk of stress, obesity, respiratory problems, cancer, and diabetes. Increased exposure to green space has also been linked to higher cognitive abilities, reductions in aggressive behaviors, and a stronger sense of community.

A cyclist rides through Central Park during the coronavirus lockdown in April. The park was famously dubbed “the lungs of the city” by its designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, and other 19th century parks advocates. Credit: Christine McCann/iStock.





Campus Martius Park, built in downtown Detroit in 2004, has provided residents and visitors with access to green space while helping to catalyze more than \$1 billion in nearby real estate investments. Credit: Michigan Municipal League via Flickr CC BY 2.0.

“The data are clear: Parks and green space soothe and console us, relax and restore us, reduce our anxiety, depression, and stress,” says physician and epidemiologist Dr. Howard Frumkin in *Parks and the Pandemic*, a TPL special report (TPL 2020b). Frumkin, a professor emeritus at the University of Washington School of Public Health, advised: “In this and in future pandemics, we’ll want to combine physical distancing and other infection-control measures with universal access to parks and green space, to help everyone get through hard times as safely as possible.”

In addition to public health benefits, parks and open space are highly valued as economic drivers. In a 2019 NRPA survey, 85 percent of respondents said they seek high-quality parks and recreation amenities when choosing a place to live (NRPA 2019). A March 2020 NRPA poll revealed that 94 percent of respondents recognize the importance of governments investing in infrastructure that promotes economic activity, including parks and trails (NRPA 2020).

Proximity to parks increases property values as much as 20 percent, which in turn increases local tax revenues. High-quality public parks and open space also draw new businesses and visitors to cities. In Detroit, the \$19 million, 2.5-acre Campus Martius Park helped attract new companies and redevelopment to downtown after it opened in 2004. In recent years, it has attracted over 2 million visitors annually and has helped catalyze more than \$1 billion in real estate investments around the park, with billions

more development dollars projected in a pipeline that would also lead to thousands of jobs.

Urban areas also derive multiple environmental benefits from parks and green space. Trees absorb pollution, producing billions of dollars in savings from cleaner air; their shade helps reduce the heat island effect by lowering urban temperatures. The ability of parks to absorb water is increasingly valuable, not just in coastal areas and riverfront communities, but also in cities seeking to control stormwater through green infrastructure. As part of Philadelphia’s \$4.5 billion, 25-year Green City, Clean Waters program—a collaboration between the Parks and Recreation and Water departments that aims to capture 85 percent of the city’s stormwater runoff—the city pledged to add 500 acres of parks and green spaces in underserved neighborhoods. Other local initiatives, including the School District of Philadelphia’s GreenFutures plan, the Rebuild Initiative, and TPL’s Parks for People Program, are contributing to the effort to expand access to public green space in the city.

“In this and in future pandemics, we’ll want to combine physical distancing and other infection-control measures with universal access to parks and green space, to help everyone get through hard times as safely as possible.”

## Ensuring Access for All

In recent years, cities have been exploring ways to create more urban parks and open space, but “what’s unique at this moment is people are finally noticing inequities in park access and the urgent need for public parks close to where people live,” says Alyia Gaskins, assistant director of health programs for the Center for Community Investment (CCI) at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. In the context of recent demonstrations and discussions about race and racism, she says, “people are noticing that Black and brown communities are not only at greater risk from COVID-19, but also frequently excluded from the very health benefits parks provide.”

Across the country, more than 100 million people lack safe and easy access to parks within a half-mile of home, says TPL. That number represents about 28 percent of the U.S. population, including 28 million children. In the nation’s 100 largest cities, 11.2 million people lack easy access. The organization says ensuring everyone in those cities has a nearby park would require adding 8,300 parks to the 23,000 that exist.

Even where parks are available, inequities exist. A TPL study released in August reported that across the United States, parks serving primarily nonwhite populations are half the size of parks that serve majority white populations and five times more crowded. Parks serving majority low-income households are, on average, a quarter the size of parks that serve majority high-income households, and four times more crowded (TPL 2020a).

During the pandemic, states and cities have varied widely in their approaches to parks and open space. Some cities closed waterfronts and limited park access. Others sought to manage crowds by implementing controls such as timed entries or one-way signs. At the popular Katy Trail in Dallas, where visitors at a single entrance increased from 22,834 in early March to 34,366 by late March, officials instituted a voluntary system that allowed access on alternate days based on the first letter of a visitor’s last name. Some cities prohibited parking at packed parks, prompting



During the pandemic, cities have taken steps ranging from limiting access to parks and playgrounds to closing them entirely. Credit: ablokhin/iStock.

equity questions on behalf of people who did not have the proximity or ability to walk or bike there.

Other cities addressed the surge in demand for parks by converting streets into pedestrian-friendly spaces. During the initial months of the shutdown, “parks became the most valuable resource in the city,” says J. Nicholas Williams, director of the Oakland Parks, Recreation, and Youth Development Department. To offer room for recreation in neighborhoods where parks were overcrowded or nonexistent, Oakland closed 74 miles of streets to all but emergency vehicles and local traffic in April. The city relied on a network of streets identified in a 2019 bicycle plan that had been developed with the participation of 3,500 residents.

The Slow Streets program—some version of which has been enacted in cities from Tucson, Arizona, to Providence, Rhode Island—was well received by many Oakland residents, but was also criticized for its initial focus on predominantly white neighborhoods. Working with residents and community groups in more racially and economically diverse areas such as East Oakland, Slow Streets expanded into new neighborhoods and launched “Slow Streets: Essential Places,” which improved pedestrian safety along routes to essential services such as grocery stores, food distribution sites, and COVID-19 test sites.

The Slow Streets program continues, but Williams says Oakland, whose population grew 10 percent in the past decade to 433,000, faces a greater need: “Oakland continues to grow . . . we have to set aside more park land and more equitable access to parks and open space.”

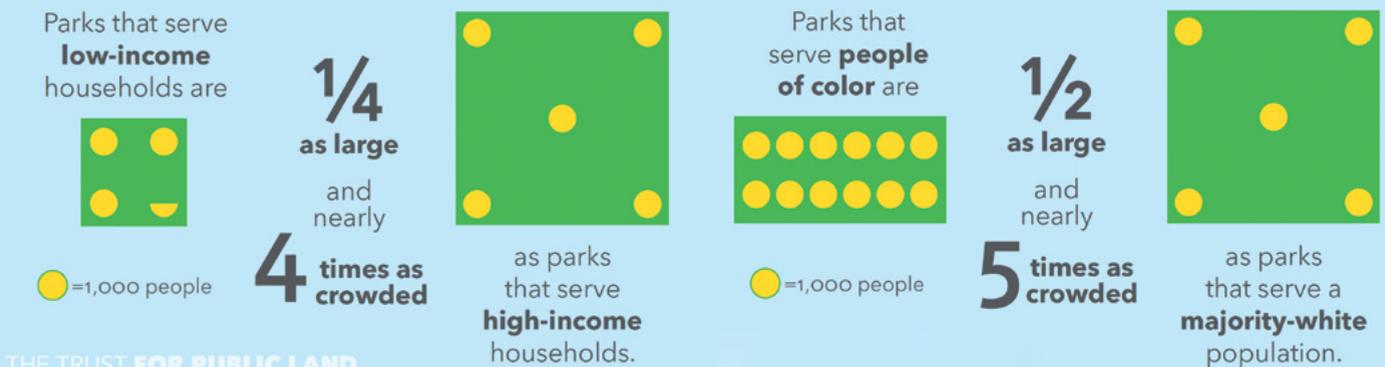
## Equitable Park Planning

“City parks are at the center of resilient and equitable cities,” says Catherine Nagel, executive director of City Parks Alliance (CPA), an independent nationwide organization that has worked with mayors to leverage more than \$190 million to build urban parks in underserved communities. “Our research shows some of the ways cities can leverage the equity, health, and environmental benefits of parks are to identify new sources of funding, new cost-sharing partnerships, and new [sources of] support.”

Cities are funding parks with adjacent sectors, drawing on or partnering with water, housing, and health departments, and “leveraging outside of the traditional park world,” Nagel says. Property developers are building public parks, and cities are partnering with business improvement districts and nonprofit organizations for programming and management responsibilities. “Parks are more complex than people think,” Nagel says. “They need intensive programming and maintenance, ongoing revenue streams, and the ability to interface with and reflect community user and local needs.”

“City parks are at the center of resilient and equitable cities. Our research shows some of the ways cities can leverage the equity, health, and environmental benefits of parks are to identify new sources of funding, new cost-sharing partnerships, and new [sources of] support.”

With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CPA has worked on initiatives that analyze how cities are reallocating money to address equity concerns, how they’re leveraging funding from adjacent sectors, and how they’re innovating for equity and sourcing funding. CPA’s Equitable Park Funding Hub, an interactive online database set to launch this fall, will feature park funding opportunities related to brownfields, workforce development, community development, conservation, climate mitigation, and water and green infrastructure.



Credit: Trust for Public Land.

The community-led Platte Farm Open Space project repurposes 5.5 contaminated acres in a Denver neighborhood. Credit: Groundwork Denver.



The Groundwork USA Network shares examples of park and green infrastructure projects that focus on community ownership and health equity gains for long-term residents in *Reclaiming Brownfields* (Groundwork USA 2017). In one project, Groundwork Denver helped with visioning, planning, and fundraising to transform a 5.5-acre brownfield site into the Platte Farm Open Space for the Globeville neighborhood in North Denver. Residents of the predominantly low-income Latinx neighborhood, which is surrounded by former industrial sites and bisected by interstates, led the project to restore native shortgrass prairie and install a pollinator garden and paved walking and biking trails. A \$550,000 grant from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment paid for construction and maintenance, which will be completed by the City and County of

Residents of the predominantly low-income Latinx neighborhood, which is surrounded by former industrial sites and bisected by interstates, led the [Platte Farm Open Space] project to restore native shortgrass prairie and install a pollinator garden and paved walking and biking trails.

Denver Departments of Parks and Recreation and Transportation and Infrastructure.

The Denver project illustrates how cities can reimagine current assets. While most don't have large tracts of vacant land, says Benepe of TPL, they could creatively retrofit brownfields, abandoned industrial sites, sanitary landfills, or railroad and utility rights of way, as high-profile projects like the High Line in New York and Millennium Park in Chicago have shown. Benepe says every city should analyze the equity of its park system and identify potential park and open space sites in underserved neighborhoods.

CCI's Gaskins says the first step in equitable park planning is to "be in conversation with communities to get their vision for what they want parks to be, whether that's building new parks or reimagining existing spaces." Proximity and access are important, she says, "but it's also the quality of the park and whether people feel welcomed and safe"—both in the park and en route to it.

Particularly in neighborhoods affected by gentrification, longtime residents often don't feel like amenities such as parks that are introduced with new development are intended for them, Gaskins says. With new development, planners and other city officials should ensure a robust community engagement process. "Parks are more than infrastructure," she says. "They offer access to programs and services, gathering spaces, and job opportunities that are also important for advancing health equity."

## Paying for Parks in Lean Times

Following the 2008 financial collapse, parks budgets were cut early and were among the last municipal budget items to recover. From 2009 to 2013, park spending dropped 21.2 percent, says NRPA, and by 2013, parks and recreation represented only 1.9 percent of local government expenditures. Deferred park maintenance for many large cities has been estimated in the billions of dollars.

Will parks budgets meet the same fate in the age of COVID? A late-June NRPA survey of more than 400 parks and recreation leaders found that two-thirds of their agencies had been asked to reduce operations spending between 10 to 20 percent for the fiscal year in effect on July 1, and 57 percent were facing 50 to 59 percent median reductions in capital spending. One in five reported their capital budgets had been zeroed out (Roth 2020).

Park advocates warn that city park systems have reached a critical tipping point, with heavy use and COVID-related budget cuts risking irreversible damage in 2020 and beyond. Some say priority funding for maintenance is critical to ensure that parks and green spaces are safe, attractive, and used, while others say investments in new capital projects would do more to help stimulate the economy for COVID recovery.

Rachel Banner, NRPA director of park access, notes that park budgets that rely more on property taxes, which have been stable during the pandemic, may be in better shape than those that rely primarily on sales tax revenues. “Diversity in revenue streams is important,” says Banner. “Think about what’s important for resiliency in an economic downturn, like drawing from a variety of sources.”

One successful strategy NRPA has seen is to allocate a standard proportion of the general fund to parks and open space, “especially now that they are absolutely essential.” To address park equity in the capital budget, Banner says, some cities use prioritization criteria related to factors such as the quality of park space, age of

equipment, ADA compliance, and neighborhood demographics including income, race, health outcomes, and car ownership.

In many cities and counties, dedicated tax campaigns have shown success in generating a significant portion of parks and open space funding. In March, Oakland voters passed Ballot Measure Q to create a 20-year tax, with 64 percent of the resulting revenues directed for parks, landscape maintenance, and recreational services beginning in FY 2020–2021. The success of Measure Q demonstrated that city residents have “turned a corner in recognizing the value of parks and open space,” says Oakland parks director Williams. While Measure Q doesn’t provide funding for new parks and open space, he says, it does address equity by providing funds to maintain and program smaller community and pocket parks. The measure was projected to bring in \$13.4 million for parks in FY 20–21, a figure that hadn’t changed as of the city’s mid-cycle budget review this summer but will continue to be reviewed, Williams says.

Other successful ballot efforts include Denver’s Measure 2A, passed in 2018 and known as the Parks Legacy Fund. Between 2012 and 2017, the city’s population grew 11 percent, but park space increased by only 5 percent; the city also faced \$130 million in deferred park maintenance. Combined with general funds, the Parks Legacy Fund was projected to produce \$37.5 million a year to renovate parks, acquire land, and build new parks, trails, and open spaces, prioritizing high-need communities. The city expects to revise its budget to reflect COVID-related impacts this fall.

Park budgets that rely more on property taxes, which have been stable during the pandemic, may be in better shape than those that rely primarily on sales tax revenues.

Scissortail Park opened in Oklahoma City in late 2019. The park, which sits on a former brownfield, was funded in part through a voter-approved sales tax. Credit: Steve Johnson, courtesy of Scissortail Park Foundation.



Last year, a ballot measure in New Orleans created hundreds of millions of dollars for parks over 20 years, with a priority for lower-income areas, says Bill Lee, TPL senior vice president of policy, advocacy, and government relations. Despite COVID's impact on local economies, Lee is optimistic about other ballot-related funding prospects: "More than three-quarters of these measures pass in good and bad economic times, in red and blue states, because people see the value of parks and open space."

Oklahoma City can attest. In November 2019, the city opened a 36-acre portion of Scissortail Park in the downtown core, on brownfield land that formerly featured abandoned buildings and junkyards. This first phase of the \$132 million project features amenities such as a playground, interactive fountains, roller rink, café, performance stage, lake with boathouse and boat rentals, demonstration gardens, farmers' market, lawn and promenade, and nearly 1,000 trees.

Scissortail Park is located next to the city's new convention center and near the downtown library, arena, ballpark, and streetcar, all of which received funding from the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) tax, a voter-approved penny sales tax created in 1993 to pay debt-free for projects to revitalize downtown and improve

the city's quality of life. A public-private partnership, the park also has benefitted from millions of dollars in donations, and it earns income from event and equipment rentals, sponsorships, food and beverage concessions, memberships, and grants. Ten years in planning and construction, the park by 2022 will include another 34 acres that will extend to the Oklahoma River with sports fields and natural areas, accessed by a bridge across Interstate 40.

Scissortail Park received a key allocation from the third round of MAPS funding; in December 2019, voters approved a fourth MAPS round, with \$140 million dedicated to transforming the city's neighborhood and community parks and sports facilities, part of a \$978 million neighborhood and human services ballot measure.

"Scissortail is our cultural commons for downtown," says Maureen Heffernan, CEO and president of the Scissortail Park Foundation, which manages the park and has kept it open with limited events and programming during the pandemic. Many people have expressed gratitude for Scissortail Park and the city's nearby Myriad Botanical Gardens, which Heffernan also manages. "More than ever, beautifully maintained green space in urban areas has been a

critical resource for people to enjoy and destress over the last few months,” she says. Urban parks “are something everyone wants and wants to fund, and they’re transformative,” Heffernan notes, adding that Oklahoma City “does not normally like to raise taxes, but residents have approved this MAPS tax because these tangible projects make a dramatic difference in people’s quality of life here.”

Park advocates also are looking to federal legislation for funding. The Great American Outdoors Act, signed into law in August, includes permanent funding from offshore oil and gas fees for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), making \$900 million per year available for public lands, including city parks and trails. LWCF’s Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program is a source for annual grants for urban areas with more than 50,000 residents, providing \$25 million last year in grants ranging from \$300,000 to \$1 million, with priority given to projects in low-income areas that lack outdoor recreation opportunities.

Parks advocates also have their eye on potential federal stimulus funds. In May, 100 organizations, including TPL, CPA, NRPA, the American Planning Association, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors, asked Congress to include \$500 million for jobs related to building or renovating parks in low-income urban areas as part of a future coronavirus stimulus package.

“More than ever, beautifully maintained green space in urban areas has been a critical resource for people to enjoy and destress over the last few months . . . . [Urban parks] are something everyone wants and wants to fund, and they’re transformative . . . residents have approved this tax because these tangible projects make a dramatic difference in people’s quality of life here.”

## Public-Private Partnerships

In some cases, partnerships with nonprofits make the creation of parks possible. The Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC), a Cleveland-based nonprofit, has conserved over 60,000 acres and created over 155 parks and preserves in the region since the late 1990s. WRLC has raised over \$400 million to help land banks demolish 40,000 abandoned or vacant properties throughout Ohio, securing land for low-income communities until it can be redeveloped into parks, green spaces, or sites for affordable housing and other purposes.

Through its Reforest our City program, WRLC has planted more than 10,000 trees in Cleveland; WRLC bought a landfill on a linear site next to the zoo, cleaned up contamination, and developed the 25-acre Brighton Park with a walking/biking trail. Located in a densely populated area, the \$1 million park, due to open in October, will be planted with 1,000 trees next year, and will be managed by the Metroparks District, says Jim Rokakis, WRLC vice president and coauthor of *The Land Bank Revolution* (Rokakis 2020). WRLC is also creating six neighborhood parks in Cleveland’s Mount Pleasant neighborhood that it will own or manage.

Other cities rely on business and philanthropic support to fund parks. About 90 percent of the \$19 million cost for Detroit’s Campus Martius Park and surrounding infrastructure was funded by Detroit corporations and foundations. Owned by the city, the park is managed by the Downtown Detroit Partnership. The Indianapolis Cultural Trail, an eight-mile pedestrian and bike trail connecting eight cultural districts in downtown Indianapolis, is undergoing a \$30 million expansion with \$20 million from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., \$5 million from the city, and \$1 million from the Anthem Foundation.

Cities are also partnering with private developers to build and operate new parks and open space. Since 1993, New York City’s waterfront zoning has required developers to provide public access to the waterfront. The zoning has led to the redevelopment of industrial sites into

The construction of Domino Park in Brooklyn, New York, opened this stretch of waterfront to the public for the first time in 160 years. Credit: Shinya Suzuki via Flickr CC BY 2.0.



multiple parks that provide public access and build climate resilience.

The six-acre Domino Park on Brooklyn's East River, opened in 2018, is part of an 11-acre site that will include the adaptive reuse of the historic Domino Sugar refinery and 3.3 million square feet of mixed-use development with 2,200 housing units, 700 of them affordable. Brooklyn-based developer Two Trees Management, which invested \$50 million to build the park and spends \$2 million annually on operations, worked closely with the community to identify needs such as a short access road to make the park feel truly public. The park, designed by James Corner Field Operations, includes a waterfront esplanade, recreation facilities, interactive fountains, a five-block artifact walk of salvaged factory machinery, and 175 trees. It provides public waterfront access for the first time in 160 years.

Another promising financing option is land value return, a mechanism through which cities recover the increases in property value triggered by rezoning or by investments in infrastructure. Also known as land value capture, this tool "will be an effective way for cities to convert underutilized spaces into parks and open space," says Enrique Silva, the Lincoln Institute's director of international initiatives.

Silva says cities could recover zoning-related increases in land value to secure land and pay for

park development. Cities also can recover value through higher property tax assessments that lead to higher municipal tax revenues. City-owned vacant sites intended for buildings the cities can't currently afford to build could also become temporary or permanent parks and lead to additional land value capture opportunities, he says. Municipal planning tools such as special assessments and transferable development rights also can help fund parks, open space, and infrastructure improvements.

Parks and open space can increase value in the form of climate resilience and now, with COVID, will be viewed as adding social value, says Silva. "There's increasingly a sense that an investment in parks and open space as public infrastructure is an investment worth making, one that will have increased relevance as more public space is needed," says Silva. "To the extent that COVID is forcing everyone to rethink public space and there's a premium on open space in cities," he says, steps including converting streets for pedestrian use and establishing new parks and open spaces are "where planning is going to lead." □

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**Kathleen McCormick**, principal of Fountainhead Communications in Boulder, Colorado, writes frequently about healthy, sustainable, and resilient communities.

## SURVEY ON PANDEMIC AND PUBLIC SPACES

A global survey conducted by Gehl, the Copenhagen-based design and planning firm that reimaged Times Square in New York City for pedestrians and bicyclists, reveals the importance of public space during the pandemic. Some 2,000 respondents from 40 U.S. states, 68 countries, and nearly every continent, about two-thirds of whom hailed from urban areas, shared views on the value of public space in their daily lives:

- 66 percent used nearby public spaces at least once a day, and 16 percent used them several times a day.
- Top public space destinations included the neighborhood street and sidewalk (87 percent), essential places like grocery stores (72 percent), neighborhood parks (67 percent), and stoops, yards, or courtyards (59 percent).
- Two thirds reported walking more during the pandemic; among car owners, that figure was 69 percent.

Gehl's suggestions for improving access and reducing overcrowding of parks and open spaces include:

- Reallocate space to allow for more physically distant walking, biking, and rolling through sidewalk extensions, parking lane closures, or street closures at the block or multiblock level.
- Prioritize space reallocation measures in neighborhoods without walkable (less than 15-minute) access to parks and essential services.
- Manage flow into more congested public spaces by expanding the number of entrances or by designating gateways as entry-only or exit-only.
- To support seniors and other vulnerable populations, ensure new public spaces create opportunities for sitting at safe distances, not just moving through.

Source: Gehl (<https://gehlpeople.com/blog/public-space-plays-vital-role-in-pandemic>).

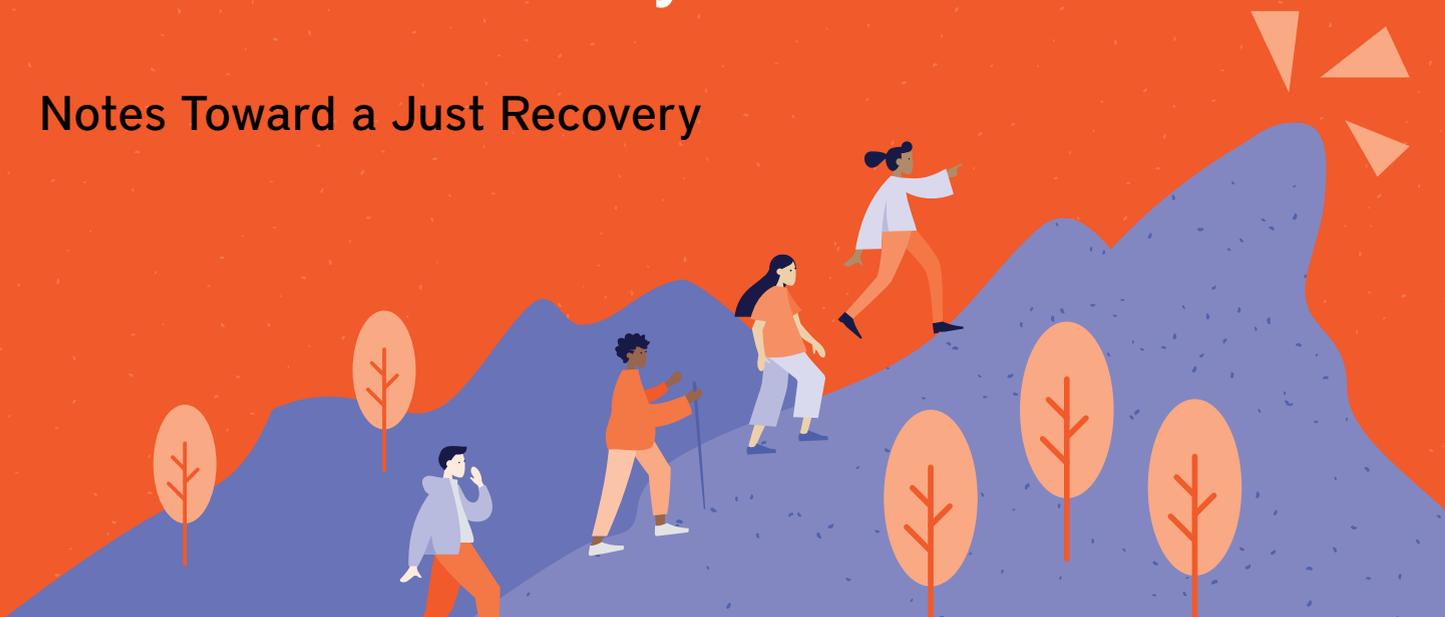
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# COVID-19, Structural Racism, and Community Investment

## Notes Toward a Just Recovery



*The following is an excerpt from an issue brief by the Center for Community Investment at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. To read or download the full brief, visit <https://bit.ly/cci-ajustrecovery>.*

**CRISES BY THEIR VERY NATURE** are times of disruption. Our customary activities and ingrained mental models, things that seem natural and inevitable, can fall by the wayside. As the COVID-19 pandemic has escalated, our normal routines—commuting to work, gathering with family and friends, going to the movies, sending kids out the door to school—have gone out the window. In response to George Floyd’s murder and the persistence of police violence, Americans have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers and places demanding action to address entrenched structural racism.

It is a time of great uncertainty. Yet this kind of disruption and discontinuity can also be a time of invention and shifts in mental models. Think of the new institutions, new policies, and new routines that emerged from the Great Depression and World War II. We now have an opportunity to imagine a different future, one that uproots the structural racism that has been so central to the development of this country. As we go forward, we can draw lessons from prior crises, including the critical importance of centering racial justice to avoid creating solutions that maintain existing inequities—or create new ones, often for generations to come.

The magnitude of the moment calls for bold leadership. At the Center for Community Investment, we are supporting leaders who are attending to the needs of their communities in ways that position them for equitable long-term recovery, rethinking, and rebuilding.

What can community leaders and their allies and supporters in the community investment field do now to respond to this historic moment? We have identified some guiding principles for this work (described in depth in the full brief):

- **Center racial justice and Black communities.**
- **Bring the work as close to communities as possible.**
- **Spend according to your values.**
- **Prepare for the long haul.**
- **Lead with courage.**

The following strategies can help lay the groundwork for a just recovery built on the foundation of these principles.



## Start from the Future

As we consider our options, it is natural to start from current activities and plans. We are emotionally invested in them and have worked hard to garner clarity and buy-in. Yet our circumstances have changed profoundly, and business as usual won't get us where we need to go.

One way to unhook ourselves from the tyranny of existing activities is to take time to imagine what future success will look like and allow that imagined future to shape the choices we make in the present. Beginning this way allows leaders to step out of the constraints of the present and really consider what might be possible.

For example, some communities are starting to rethink their budgets, in particular the funds allocated to the police department. Rather than starting with how municipal funds are currently

distributed, begin by imagining the future you want for your community. Does everyone have a home? Do schools have smaller class sizes? Do community members take responsibility for the safety of their neighborhoods?

Once you have a vision, you can explore how the budget would need to be reallocated to make that vision a reality. Many communities have enacted temporary emergency legislation to protect renters from eviction or establish rent moratoria. Imagine a future in which eviction protections have been made permanent and forgiveness or other creative measures to ease rent burdens are in place. What are the actions you would have to take now to make such a future possible? By digging into the details of the future you want to help create, you can begin to liberate yourself from the confines of the status quo and the uncertainty clouding our short-term horizon.

## Triage the Work

Effectively addressing the current crisis and achieving your vision for the future means making tough decisions. No one has the time or resources right now to do everything.

To help organizations and leaders think through what you need to do, what it's possible for you to do, and how you should prioritize and sequence your work, we offer a triage tool at <https://centerforcommunityinvestment.org/blog/reimagining-strategy-context-covid-19-crisis-triage-tool>.

Our triage tool helps you prioritize strategies and activities based on the results you seek now, assessing the relative feasibility and impact of each item on your current agenda in light of your new circumstances. Once you have sorted your strategies and activities into the tool's five categories (current priority, emerging expanded priority, pause, unknown, and let go), it is important to ask the following questions:

- How do the activities in the current and emerging/expanded priority boxes advance us toward the result we seek to achieve?
- Do we have the capacity to do these activities? If not, what else do we need to shift, pause, or let go of to make space for critical work?

The triage process can be undertaken at multiple levels—a single leader sorting their work, an organization examining its portfolio, a collaboration resetting its priorities. At any level, a triage stance can help you uncover or refine a set of emergent priorities—whether it is work that was not on the table before these crises but now must be attended to or existing work that must now be recast or given higher priority. For example, leaders who were committed to expanding the number of Black- and Latinx-owned businesses are now working to protect existing businesses, which means they must shift their focus away from new entrepreneurs. Similarly, communities around the country that were working on issues of affordable housing are now finding that they must redouble their efforts to protect residents so they can stay in their housing, which means slowing their efforts to produce new units.

Each of these pivots produces new work that must be staffed and resourced. This requires making tough choices, a planning step that cannot be avoided. At the same time, these emergent priorities also provide the opportunity to lay the groundwork for longer term system interventions that advance racial equity: finding new ways to keep people in their homes can help expand a community's housing strategies, while strengthening the environment for local businesses can ultimately enable the success of new Black- and Latinx-owned businesses.



## Get Started, Get Going . . . and Keep Racial Justice at the Forefront

It may feel difficult to plan for an uncertain future at a time when community needs are overwhelming and things are changing quickly. However, it is more important than ever to start moving on the long-term community needs you have identified. So where can you begin?

### BUILD ON WHAT'S WORKING

- Is there a local CDFI that is more effectively reaching Black and Latinx borrowers?
- Is there a promising demonstration project working in two neighborhoods that could be extended to three more?
- Does your community have a land bank that is handling 30 properties effectively? What would it take to double that number? How can their approach be replicated?

Identify existing capacity to achieve the results you seek, then ask yourself, how can that capacity be reinforced and increased to produce larger results?

### CHUNK THE WORK

Figure out what needs to happen and divide it up. Give different people or departments responsibility for different chunks. If you are part of a cross-organizational collaborative, think about how work can be allocated explicitly among the partners in ways that build upon their strengths.

- Who has deep relationships in the community that can be leveraged?
- Who has experience applying for government or philanthropic grants?
- How can groups work together in a spirit of racial equity so that resources and responsibility are appropriately shared?

Once people begin to see progress and results, it is easier for them to get on board because in the end you have to act in order to collaborate.

### PICK A SLICE OF THE WORK AND BEGIN

In times like this, it is easy to get paralyzed by the sheer volume of work to be done and the volatility that surrounds us. It is tempting to overthink decision making and prioritizing. The question of where to start can ensnare us as we try to mitigate risk and find the right answer. The right answer turns out to be that there's no right answer, or at least no right answer we can discern from here. We have to begin in order to find what will work. So begin.

### MOVE QUICKLY AND PAY ATTENTION TO EQUITY

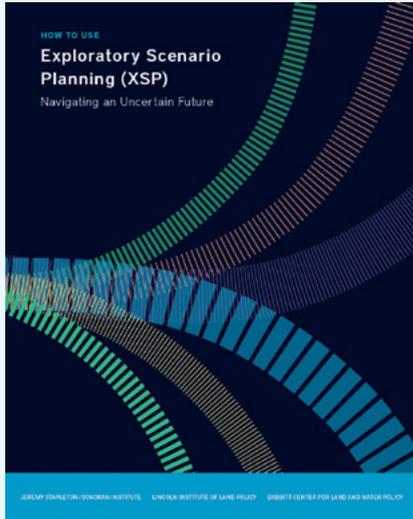
In a crisis situation, speed matters. It is easier to contain the spread of disease than to mitigate the effects of a pandemic, easier to keep people in their homes than to deal with the displacement and vacancies caused by evictions and foreclosures, and easier to keep businesses operating and help people keep their jobs than to deal with the economic shocks of unemployment and the loss of critical services. But moving quickly can lead to privileging existing channels, products, and relationships, which in turn can shut out people and communities of color, as was the case with the CARES Act. At every stage of the work, attend to the racial equity implications of the strategies you advance and choices you make.

*For more strategies and advice, read the full brief at <https://bit.ly/cci-ajustrecovery>.*

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## How to Use Exploratory Scenario Planning (XSP): Navigating an Uncertain Future

*Jeremy Stapleton/Sonoran Institute, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy*

This comprehensive manual demonstrates how to use exploratory scenario planning (XSP) to build the collaborative capacity needed to adapt to rapid urbanization, climate change, economic volatility, inequity, and other forces within or beyond our control. Exploratory scenario planning recognizes that the future is uncertain, and can help communities consider a range of possible futures and craft an adaptive management plan that actively responds to changes on the ground as the future unfolds. Designed for urban planning professionals, government officials, students, and scholars, this handbook defines XSP and its applications, guides the reader step-by-step through the process, and recommends best practices. Case studies illustrate practical lessons learned from previous applications of the process, showing planners how to use XSP most effectively. Sample workshop agendas and templates enable practitioners to create exploratory scenarios, analyze outcomes, and develop robust strategies for the future.

[www.lincolnst.edu/publications/policy-focus-reports/how-use-exploratory-scenario-planning-xsp](http://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/policy-focus-reports/how-use-exploratory-scenario-planning-xsp)

## COVID-19 and Community Development: Considerations for Affordable Housing and Healthcare Partnerships

*Kelly J. Kelleher MD, MPH, Robin Hacke, and Rebecca Steinitz*

The consequences of COVID-19 in the United States are becoming increasingly apparent, especially for families and young children. This issue brief from the Center for Community Investment (CCI) at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy explores the economic effects of the pandemic, the disruptions it will cause for healthcare organizations and resulting implications for their housing investments, the impacts of these disruptions on children, and the local opportunities and challenges this sequence of events may generate for affordable housing partnerships.

<https://centerforcommunityinvestment.org/resource/covid-19-and-community-development-considerations-affordable-housing-and-healthcare>

## Betterment Contributions in Latin America: Experiences, Challenges, and Opportunities

*Óscar Armando Borrero Ochoa and Julieth Katterine Rojas Ruiz*

**SPANISH | ONLINE ONLY** A prominent land-based financing approach in Latin America, betterment contributions are payments made by property owners for infrastructure investments—particularly in public transportation and roads—that generate an increase in the value of their property. This report summarizes a series of studies on the experience of Latin American jurisdictions in the use of betterment contributions, including legal and institutional considerations, methods and procedures for implementation, and revenue figures from cities across the region.

[www.lincolnst.edu/publications/policy-focus-reports/contribucion-mejoras-en-america-latina](http://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/policy-focus-reports/contribucion-mejoras-en-america-latina)



An urban regeneration project in the city of Guangzhou. Credit: Lan Song.

The Pearl River Delta Region in Guangdong Province is one of the world's fastest-growing areas. Over the last 40 years, rural land there has been extensively converted for industrial and urban use. With this rapid expansion putting spatial and ecological pressure on the area, officials launched a province-wide urban regeneration pilot program in 2009. By the end of 2019, the province had completed nearly 8,000 projects on a total of 124 square miles, rebuilding neighborhoods, relocating factories, and creating public spaces focused on local history and culture. The Peking University-Lincoln Institute Center for Urban Development and Land Policy (PLC) is working with the province to evaluate the economic, social, and environmental impacts of the program and explore solutions including land value capture, benefit sharing, and other efforts to address spatial inequalities.

To learn more about the work of the Peking University-Lincoln Institute Center for Urban Development and Land Policy, visit [www.lincolnst.edu/china-asia](http://www.lincolnst.edu/china-asia).

**“Guangdong Province is leading the practices of land redevelopment and urban regeneration in China. The post-evaluation carried out by the PLC traces the history of the 10-year pilot program, summarizes success factors, identifies future challenges, and offers policy recommendations. The work is expected to contribute to the improved practices and better outcomes of urban regeneration in Guangdong and other provinces.”**

— YUMIN YE, PROFESSOR OF URBAN PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT, RENMIN UNIVERSITY OF CHINA, AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CHINA URBAN ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION

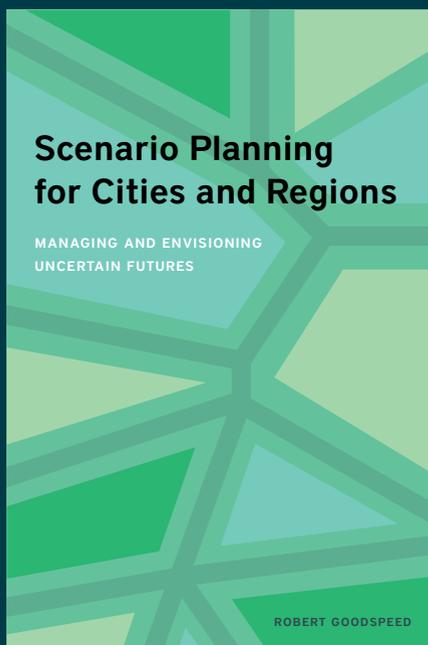
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“This masterwork on scenario planning is wonderfully accessible and deeply grounded in planning theory and systems thinking about interconnections and uncertainties. Robert Goodspeed has created the best explanation I’ve ever seen for understanding this planning strategy that is so urgently needed for guiding our cities through the turbulent 21st century.”

— Dowell Myers, Professor of Policy, Planning, and Demography,  
Sol Price School of Public Policy, University of Southern California

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