

City Park Alliance Strategic Project Identification

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Executive Summary

Introduction & Problem Statement

City Park Alliance (CPA) is a nonprofit organization serving as a community voice and advocate for the preservation and improvement of Denver's City Park. For over twenty years, it has worked with the Denver Parks and Recreation Department (DPR) and other City Park campus institutions, such as the Denver Zoo, the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, and the City Park Golf Course, to fundraise and market, host community events and activities, and implement maintenance and beautification projects. Following a lull in organizational activity, City Park decided to revive its role in the community and collaboration on City Park projects. Guidance for City Park's management and development is delineated in the City Park Master Plan (CPMP), recently updated in 2018. The CPMP goals range in nature from being socially focused and striving to "reconnect the community with City Park" to attending to physical, infrastructure-related needs and addressing environmental issues by "improv[ing] ecological function and environmental performance."

Cognizant that the CPMP is the guiding document used by DPR in its management of City Park, CPA identified three subsections in its Recommendations section whose projects it was most interested in supporting - Circulation and Connectivity, Vegetation and Ecology, and Park Uses

and Experiences. Furthermore, CPA was set on ensuring its project choices were fully aligned with its Vision and Mission as well as guided by community sentiment. Given that between the three chosen subsections there were 157 projects from which to choose, CPA needed a mechanism to sort and filter the projects accordingly. CPA enlisted the assistance of Shaima Shahbaz, a student in the CU Denver Masters of Urban and Regional Planning program, to administer community surveys, conduct interviews with stakeholders, and develop a process and tool for narrowing down CPA's choice of CPMP projects. Based on background research and data collection results, Shahbaz formulated specific recommendations to equip CPA to make mission-driven choices regarding its role in the community, support of DPR, and choice of CPMP projects for implementation. This report is the outcome of those efforts.

Background Research

With increasing urbanization, climate-change threats, and ongoing public health issues, city leaders and communities are recognizing public parks as essential places that address social and environmental needs. Parks are now more widely recognized as critical to health and wellness by both the general population and political leaders. Maintaining and increasing access to parks and developing them in ways that respond to communities' needs has become important

to the public and population beyond urban planners and park enthusiasts (Parks and the Pandemic: Report, 2022). As one of Denver's largest parks, City Park provides a safe and beautiful space to socialize, exercise, and reconnect with nature without having to leave the city. Through stakeholder engagement, community advocacy, and project implementation, nonprofit organizations like CPA help municipalities realize the visions detailed in their official plans. The recent economic downturn, staffing shortages, and supply chain issues have affected parks' budgets and project implementation capacities. As a result, public-private partnerships are increasingly recognized as an effective way to achieve timely implementation of city plans as nonprofit and private sector organizations are often able to address gaps municipalities cannot given their own financial and capacity limitations (Feller, 2020).

In order to maintain parks access and develop them in ways that respond to communities' needs, public opinion is integrated into park managers' and partners' decision-making processes. Community engagement is crucial to the planning process as it creates a forum for discussion, critique, questioning, and information exchange between planners and the public. The need for increased collaboration among community, governmental, and non-governmental partners as well as more data-driven decision-making makes use of tools that enable objective decision-making vital. One such tool is the project prioritization

matrix. Prioritization matrices vary in complexity and appropriateness depending on the situation. When there are multiple variables that need to be factored into a project prioritization assessment, the weighted scoring model is useful as it allows for a value-weighted numerical score that is unique to the given scenario. The resulting ranking of projects can then be built on a management team's unique and specific choice of criteria, allowing it to be more explicitly strategic and objective in how it directs its resources. (Gosenheimer et. Al., 2021). For this reason, a weighted scoring model was used to evaluate and prioritize the CPMP projects for CPA's implementation.

Methodology

To determine the community's priorities for City Park, both email and intercept surveys were administered to park users, one-on-one meetings were held with stakeholders (park campus institutions, registered neighborhood organization representatives, and the designated park planner), and content in the CPMP was reviewed and compiled for data analysis. The content from these activities was incorporated into a project prioritization matrix to rank the projects, while contrast and comparison of interview transcripts provided qualitative insights.

Interviews

- One-on-one meetings were held with representatives from City Park Golf Course, the Denver Museum of Nature & Science , and the Denver Zoo.
- The East District Park Planner, Mallory Roybal, responded

to questions regarding DPR's relationship with CPA and ways the two organizations could improve their collaboration.

- Eight representatives from surrounding neighborhood registered neighborhood organizations (RNOs) were interviewed to determine how well connected CPA was to community organizations and whether they were interested in further collaboration with CPA.

Surveys

- A Park User survey of 13 questions was administered to CPA's contacts via email and text, and to park users through an intercept survey. Seventy-six participants responded to questions focused on their demographics, activities, and priorities for City Park.
- CPA's eight board members and its executive assistant responded to 11 survey questions addressing their thoughts on CPA's role in the project implementation process and the types of projects appropriate for CPA's involvement. Survey questions also touched on CPA's relationship to DPR and volunteer engagement.

Project Prioritization Matrix

A project prioritization matrix was used to score and rank a list of 157 CPMP projects sourced from the Circulation and Connectivity, Vegetation and Ecology, and Park Uses and Experiences subsections of the CPMP Recommendations section (as chosen by CPA). The criteria that comprised the matrix's scoring system was based on: DPR's project priority levels, the results from the Park User survey question

regarding park areas for improvement, the results from the two CPA Board survey questions regarding vision and mission alignment, and the results from the CPA Board survey question regarding project type feasibility. The summed scores of each project row in the matrix were calculated and converted to produce a final score out of 100. By basing the criteria on DPR's project priority levels and the survey results, the final score of a project in the matrix effectively represented a project priority level that reflected the CPA board's values and capacity as well as the community's interests.

Key Findings

Data collected through digital surveys and one-on-one interviews provided updates on the state of community relations and priorities. The project scores from the project prioritization matrix produced a shortlist of projects for CPA's implementation.

Campus Stakeholders

One-on-one meetings were held by the author with representatives from City Park Golf Course, Denver Museum of Nature & Science , and the Denver Zoo. Variation in their responses indicated that CPA's levels of engagement, communication, interaction, and collaboration with campus stakeholders differed. This variation reflected the differing desire among campus stakeholders for communication and collaboration with CPA. Where collaboration existed, there was clarity about involved parties' goals and roles.

DPR Park Planner

The East District Park Planner, Mallory, reported that the relationship between CPA and DPR was on track overall with sufficient communication and useful exchanges.

RNO Reps

The differences in how area RNOs perceived their roles and responsibilities in relationship to the CPMP was related to differences in their organizational capacity and desire to communicate with DPR. Many of the representatives did not believe it was their responsibility to prioritize implementation of CPMP projects. But those whose neighborhoods were adjacent to City Park were generally interested in additional project collaboration with CPA.

Park Users

More than half of the participants in the Park User survey lived in neighborhoods adjacent to City Park or City Park Golf Course indicating that it is surrounding neighborhood residents who most access City Park. Survey results communicated that park users' top attractions to City Park were its trees/wildlife, lakes/fountains, and walking paths, with their top activities being walking or running, going to an institution, and playing at playgrounds. Protection of natural features and tranquility, improved walking and biking experiences, and preservation of the park's historic legacy (roads/trails/fields/picnicking) were the top three chosen areas for improvement.

CPA Board

Consistent responses to the CPA Board survey questions regarding vision and mission alignment communicated that the CPA board has a shared understanding of the types of CPMP projects that best match their vision and mission. Park Uses and Experiences was ranked the Recommendations subsection most aligned with both. Responses to another survey question illustrated the board's prioritization of residents, showing its genuine commitment to serving as the "community's voice." "Hosting a social event" was ranked as the organizational activity CPA was most capable of carrying out while "structure and building maintenance" was ranked what CPA was least capable of implementing. Fundraising and marketing as well landscaping were seen as the next most feasible. Regarding the project subcategories within the CPMP, "planting and maintaining gardens, trees, and vegetation" was ranked as the the most feasible.

Project Prioritization Scoring Matrix

By applying the DPR project priority level of three to the CPA-chosen recommended projects subsections, the initial list of 157 projects was filtered down to a group of 43. The author then scored the list of 43 projects according to how well they met the other four criteria in the matrix. The outcome was a shortlist of six CPMP projects that all scored 100% because they received the highest score of three for all criteria: DPR Priority Level, Community Improvement Priorities, CPA Vision Alignment, CPA Mission Alignment, and Project Type Feasibility. Of the six projects, four were in subcategories related to vegetation maintenance and two

were in subcategories related to multimodal mobility and access. The vegetation maintenance projects varied in their specific goals and requirements but generally addressed needed additions to established groves or gardens. The multimodal mobility and access related projects focused on museum parking and access to it as well as improving pedestrian access overall by repairing or adding trails and road crossings to create greater connectivity.

Recommendations

Communication

There was no one-size-fits-all approach to communication evident in the feedback from the different community and stakeholders groups. Rather, the key to effective communication for CPA is to calibrate its level of communication to different parties' needs and disseminate information to cultivate shared understanding.

Knowledge Acquisition

Stakeholder input made evident that incorporating regular learning about stakeholders' procedures and the conditions within which they function will gain CPA credibility and influence.

CPMP Project Choice






The final shortlist of projects for CPA's implementation was the outcome of connecting DPR and community priorities with CPA's overarching goals through use of a project prioritization matrix. Considered along with the

qualitative feedback provided in stakeholder interviews, CPA can proceed with the implementation of one or more of the following projects (as described in the CPMP) with full confidence that they are all aligned with the organization’s values as well as responsive to the community’s needs and local government’s priorities:

- 1. Southeast Corner and Southeast Meadow**
(subcategories: trees and landscaping): Provide physically and visually linked spaces of naturalistic plantings and features integrated with the patterns of established forested groves, living collections, and South Meadow.
- 2. Southeast Corner and Southeast Meadow**
(subcategory: landscaping): Improve Lily Pond as a centerpiece of the southeast corner and expand its setting as a garden.
- 3. Dustin Redd Playground** (subcategories: trees and landscaping): Design new plantings to respect the established park composition of the meadow while integrating the play area and related spaces. Preserve established spatial patterns.
- 4. North Meadow** (subcategory: trees): Preserve the established topography and groupings of trees surrounding the meadow.

- 5. Museum Parking and Access** (subcategories: micromobility, pedestrian access and comfort): Improve access for pedestrians, bicycles, and bus riders.
- 6. Circulation and Connectivity** (subcategories: pedestrian access and comfort): Improve pedestrian circulation and safety by repairing existing trails, adding new trails, and providing select road crossings and clear routes into City Park, City Park Golf Course, and institutions.

Community Engagement

Data Source:	Park User Survey		CPA Board Survey		CPMP
Topic:	<div>Q12</div> <div>Community Improvement Priorities</div> <div></div> <div>Natural Features & Tranquility</div>	<div>Q1</div> <div>Vision Alignment</div> <div></div> <div>Park Uses & Experiences</div>	<div>Q2</div> <div>Mission Alignment</div> <div></div> <div>Park Uses & Experiences</div>	<div>Q9</div> <div>Project Type Feasibility</div> <div></div> <div>Independently Implementable</div>	<div>DPR</div> <div>Implementation Priority Table</div> <div><div>1</div><div>2</div><div>3</div><div></div><div>Highest Level - 3</div></div>

Project Prioritization Matrix:

Categories and Criteria

Criteria based on the results from questions #1, #2, and #9 in the CPA Board survey, Scored on a scale from 1-3

Criterion based on the results from question #12 in CPA's Park User survey. Scored on a scale from 1-3

Q12 Q1 Q2 Q9

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	I
1	Principle	#	Focus	Project	Subcategory	DPR Priority Level	Community Improvement Priorities	CPA Vision Alignment	CPA Mission Alignment	Project Type Feasibility	Raw Score	Highest Possible Score	Final Score
2	Circulation and Connectivity	9.2	Bicycle Routes	Improve bicycle connections from surrounding streets and routes to improve navigation and safety to and within the park.	Micromobility	3	3	3	3	3	15	15	100

Defined by the City Park Master Plan

Grouped by the author for further subfiltering of projects

Indicate the score the project was assigned for how well it met the criterion in the given column

The project's final score out of 100

The highest score a project could receive if it was given the highest score in every category

DPR

Specified in the City Park Master Plan Implementation Strategy section

Sum of the DPR Priority Level, Park Amenity Popularity, and CPA criteria scores

Project Prioritization Matrix:

Final Recommended Projects

Principle	#	Focus	Projects	Subcategory	DPR Priority Level	Community Improvement Priorities	CPA Vision Alignment	CPA Mission Alignment	Project Type Feasibility	Raw Score	Highest Possible Score	Final Score
Park Uses and Experiences	28.1	Southeast Corner and South Meadow	Provide physically and visually linked spaces of naturalistic plantings and features integrated with the patterns of established forested groves, living collections, and South Meadow.	Trees Landscaping	3	3	3	3	3	15	15	100%
Park Uses and Experiences	28.5	Southeast Corner and South Meadow	Improve Lily Pond as a centerpiece of the southeast corner and expand its setting as a garden.	Landscaping	3	3	3	3	3	15	15	100%
Park Uses and Experiences	30.2	Dustin Redd Playground	Design new plantings to respect the established park composition of the meadow while integrating the play area and related spaces.	Landscaping	3	3	3	3	3	15	15	100%
Park Uses and Experiences	31.1	North Meadow	Preserve the established topography and groupings of trees surrounding the meadow.	Trees	3	3	3	3	3	15	15	100%
Park Uses and Experiences	39.3	Museum Parking and Access	Improve access for pedestrians, bicycles, and bus riders.	Micromobility Pedestrian Access & Comfort	3	3	3	3	3	15	15	100%
Park Uses and Experiences	41.5	Circulation and Connectivity	Improve pedestrian circulation and safety by repairing existing trails, adding new trails, and providing select road crossings and clear routes into City Park, City Park Golf Course, and institutions.	Pedestrian Access & Comfort	3	3	3	3	3	15	15	100%

Conclusion

By conducting surveys and interviews with stakeholders, the author assisted the CPA board in clarifying their perceptions as a group, gathered up-to-date insights on park visitor preferences, renewed discussions with community organizations and institutional partners, and developed a mechanism to rank current and future CPMP projects.

The data collection process also resulted in concrete recommendations for CPA’s improved communication and collaboration with community groups and campus stakeholders as well as identification of areas for growth in CPA’s knowledge and awareness. Additionally, the user and stakeholder survey results and analysis, including raw data and summary charts, are available in the appendix of this report for the board’s review and perusal. Key excerpts of

the survey results and project prioritization matrix shortlists were presented to CPA. All of this data increases CPA’s ability to make more fully informed decisions regarding which CPMP recommended projects to support and which partners might serve as the best collaborators in their implementation. Overall, the act of collecting data for this study contributed to CPA’s visibility in the community and role in park affairs.