

# Investing in parks pays off

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Denver's many parks, natural areas and recreation centers are dearly loved. Every weekend, thousands of people are drawn to the paths along the South Platte River and Cherry Creek to bike, skate or stroll along the water. Families flock to Confluence Park, where Cherry Creek merges with the South Platte River, to bask in the sun near the rapids. Parks across the city pulse with sports, picnics, dog-walkers and sunbathers. And our unique inventory of mountain parks draws many of us to the foothills and Denver's surrounding areas.

In these difficult economic times, parks and recreation centers are more important than ever. Our parks, trails, greenways and natural areas — the "green" infrastructure — are as essential to Denver as the sports, cultural, residential and commerce-based cornerstones of the Mile High City.

What may surprise some is how important our park system is to the economic health of our city. We've understood for years that park and recreation amenities are one of the chief reasons businesses choose to relocate to Denver. At The Trust for Public Land, we set out to determine just much money the park system brings in to the city.

Although a dollar figure can't be placed on every aspect of a park system, our new report, "The Economic Benefits of Denver's Park and Recreation System" ([www.tpl.com](http://www.tpl.com)), quantifies the economic value of seven major benefits of our park system: clean air, clean water, tourism, direct use, health, property value and community cohesion.

The findings are impressive. All told, the Denver park system provides the city annual revenue of \$7.1 million, municipal savings of \$3.6 million, resident savings of \$517 million and a collective increase of resident wealth of \$48.7 million. That's a pretty good return on an annual investment of only about \$50 million.

The problem we now face is that our acquisition and creation of new parks has not kept pace with the city's population growth. Denver's population has grown about 8 percent since the 2000 Census to a current total of almost 600,000 residents. Since new parks have rarely been added to the system, Denver's ratio of parks to population has consistently slipped, so that now we find our parks system ranks well below the average size reported by similarly dense cities, less even than cities like Phoenix, San Diego and Houston. And the need for new parks is especially acute in parts of Denver where the acres per resident are even lower.

All of our neighboring cities are adding significantly to their park inventories, while Denver is falling behind. Why? Perhaps because Denver is the only county in the seven-county metropolitan area that does not have a dedicated funding source for the purchase and ongoing maintenance of parks and open space. For example, Aurora now enjoys 27.3 acres of parks and open space per 1,000 residents (almost three times the Denver ratio), thanks to the voter-approved Arapahoe County quarter-cent sales tax that funds their acquisitions. And the same is true in Douglas, Jefferson, Gilpin, Clear Creek, Boulder and Adams counties.

At the time of Denver's founding, the vast majority of Americans lived in rural areas and small towns, and relatively close to the land. Today, 85 percent of us live in metropolitan areas, but the move to city dwelling must not be allowed to cut us off from nature, and the comfort that even a few hours outdoors can bring into our hectic urban lives. The results of this new and revealing economic analysis can be profoundly helpful as we look to the future. They show us that a continuing investment in Denver's system of parks, parkways and trails that keeps pace with our population not only keeps Denver a healthy and livable city for everyone to enjoy, but considerably and measurably strengthens our economy as we grow.

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