

**10**

## Steps to Becoming Partners in Neighborhood Parks



“The heart and soul of the Providence park system are its neighborhood parks.”

## Introduction

A big city park may be an exciting place to visit, but it's the park around the corner that you will frequent and that can enrich your life on a daily basis. Neighborhood parks that serve the needs of the folks nearby don't just happen; they have to be nurtured. Two partners make a thriving neighborhood park:

- 1) A city/town Parks Department that understands the importance of working with the community
- 2) A community group (friends group) that helps shape the ways in which the space will look and be used

Working together, these two groups can create and maintain an outdoor space that reflects the identity and needs of the community. City and town Parks Departments need active friends groups to be the stewards for neighborhood parks because the “friends” know how they want to use the park and what is needed. Cities and towns can provide an infrastructure to support friends groups and they can assist by providing consultations, offering training, attending select friends group meetings, giving technical assistance and support (e.g. how to organize and run a meeting, opportunities for grants and fundraising), and sharing the work of other successful groups. As partners, it is important to hold conferences to share best practices and resources, feature the park on a website, and celebrate milestones.

This manual aims to serve as a framework for creating a friends group that can partner with your city or town to make the park of your dreams. Establishing a friends group is a great way to meet your neighbors and cultivate a strong sense of community in your neighborhood. Keep things light and fun. Be sure to include all ages and constituencies in the process so that your project reflects your community. Keep the city involved in the process at every step so that you can work as partners.

To make things concrete, this manual uses examples from the experience of the Friends of Brown Street Park in revitalizing a park in Providence, Rhode Island. Providence has a diverse park system

that spans over 100 parks in neighborhoods throughout the city. With the goal of keeping parks vital and strengthening community spirit, the Providence Parks Department has partnered with many active neighborhood groups in the development and redevelopment of walking trails through nature conservancies, community gardens, farmers' markets, and a variety of special events. It is essential that each neighborhood park has an active group that is willing to partner with the city to support, create, and maintain open spaces that serve everyone.

Since 2006, when the Friends of Brown Street Park, Inc. formed in partnership with the Providence Parks Department to revitalize the park, the partners have worked together to transform a formerly unusable outdoor space into a vibrant and unique place for the community to enjoy. Many lessons were learned along the way and many lively discussions occurred. The park is now a thriving part of the neighborhood because of the process. KaBOOM!, the national non-profit dedicated to creating a great place to play within walking distance of every child, was so inspired by the partnership that it approached the groups to create this resource, in hopes of sharing it with you, so that you might learn from the experience of the Friends of Brown Street and Providence Parks Department and enhance or create your own unique parks. Please visit [www.friendsofbrownstreetpark.org](http://www.friendsofbrownstreetpark.org), [www.providenceri.com/parks-and-rec](http://www.providenceri.com/parks-and-rec), and [kaboom.org](http://kaboom.org) for more details.

Lastly, remember that this manual is simply a guide. One key to success is flexibility: try out some of the steps, and see what works for your group and your Parks Department!



# 1

## Get started and establish goals



Start with a small core group of people who have similar goals and are fun to work with. If you don't know who these people are, find them through flyers posted at the park or by asking around. Begin with at least one or two other people in your core group but no more than five. One person *can* start a group, but that is more challenging.

Determine group rules for meeting. Spend a few minutes discussing and documenting ways you want your group to be. (See Resource Section for [Ways We Want Our Group to Be](#) and [Tips for Facilitators](#).) This step is essential as you will be bringing more people into the discussion as the project proceeds.

- **Determine what you want to accomplish.** Do you want to clean up? Completely transform the space? Improve or add programming to enhance the way the space is used? Remove graffiti? Create a new look?
- **Determine how much time and effort your project will take.** Will your project be a one shot deal like a cleanup? Or will it be a transformative journey in which you will add new elements little by little, change landscaping, expand design? (See Resource Section for [Phases of Brown Street Park](#).)
- **Determine how much time you are willing to put into the park and what specific skills each of you bring to the effort.**
- **Be prepared to go in another direction if the process leads you there.**

### Action Steps

- Meet with Parks/Council representatives early to share general ideas, get a history of the space, and determine whether they had any plans for the space. (Others may have tried to do something similar in the past. There may be a special fund available for that space. There may be zoning issues.)
- Talk to other friends groups in your area to learn about their process.
- Conduct focus groups with people in your neighborhood and surrounding neighborhoods (youth, seniors, families, students).
- Evaluate the focus group responses and create a preliminary mission and goals. (See [Resource Section for Sample Mission Statements](#).)

## TIPS!

### Parks Departments

Each municipality needs to determine its approach to neighborhood parks and develop a policy.

Provide a list of park protocols (e.g. trash is picked up on Mondays) and contact numbers for relevant city departments.

### Friends Groups

We recommend doing the simple group exercise: What do we want our park to look like? to feel like? to sound like? Consider the identity of your community, including people, culture, architecture, and landscaping. (See [Resource Section for Ways We Want Our Park to Be](#).)

Think about the activities that you want to happen in your park before you decide what types of equipment or changes you are going to need. e.g. If you want it to be a place for relaxing, you may need gardens and benches. If you want a place for socializing, you may want picnic tables.

### Friends Groups & Parks Departments

*Establish a trusting relationship with municipalities by following through and keeping communication open. If you spend less time butting heads, you will have more time and resources to accomplish the project.*

## 2

### Start to create an infrastructure



Before you go too far in the planning process, make sure you have a cohesive working group, the support of the city, and the support of your elected officials. Think about who else needs to be involved and what other talents or skills you may need. Keep it simple and small.

- **Determine who else needs to be involved.** For example, do you need someone with design skills, gardening, fundraising, event planning, marketing, web design, or non-profit work?
- **What other constituencies need to be considered?** If your group is all work-at-home professionals, maybe you need to include the voice of students or seniors? Do you need a translator? Look back at the sign-in sheets. Check with your neighborhood association or city councilor. Be ahead of roadblocks and assess: What could possibly get in the way of your project? Who could help?
- **Surround yourselves with talent.** Who do you know who can be on your team? What skill sets will they bring? Who do they know? Map the assets in your community. (See [Resources section for more.](#))

#### Action Steps

- Determine a schedule and location, and revisit ground rules for meeting.
- Take pictures of your group and the park before you make any changes.
- Create job descriptions for all positions needed.
- Pick a small doable project to test the waters and solicit more community involvement. Examples include a park cleanup, planting day, equipment painting, surfacing replenishment, or sandbox construction.
- Start introductory meetings or information sessions with those you may want to approach for support.
- Network with other area groups.

## TIPS!

#### Friends Groups

Have a particular focus because that will determine who you are.

Bring pictures/videos to meetings to show people some of the possibilities. Many times kids will ask for basketball courts, but if they are aware of options, they might think more creatively.

Keep it flexible and fun. When Friends of Brown Street first started its project, about two-thirds of involved parents had small children. They had meetings at the park or someone's house, and the kids could play. They called these "playdates with a purpose". You can also organize wine and cheese socials as the focus of your group, a monthly barbecue/meeting, or a combination of many different venues and themes.

#### Parks Departments

Keep track of who is calling from the community and who has shown interest, and try to connect these people. They may have enough momentum to make something really wonderful happen.



## Conduct an inventory

You may have more going for you than you think. Inventory the park's physical and programming assets (e.g. There is a great swing set in the park; people do tai chi in the morning; a rec league soccer team practices here.). Determine the strengths of the park and your group. Determine your hindering factors: What could possibly get in the way of your project? What can you do to overcome those obstacles or use them to your advantage?

### Action Steps

- Inventory assets and facilitating/hindering factors. Determine steps for using these to your advantage.
- Research what programming or community-builds have been made or attempted in the past.



## Confirm a mission or vision statement, working timeline, and goals

How long do you estimate the project will take? What is your ultimate vision for the park?

### Action Steps

- Review your focus group input, and work with your core group to create a mission statement that reflects what you want to do. Get feedback, and tweak as necessary.
- Sketch out a timeline in one to three phases: What we can do now? What do we want to work toward? What is our ultimate vision?



## Go public, and make and keep friends

It is important to let people know what you are doing early on to gauge support and get relevant feedback.

### Action Steps

- Get buy-in early. Develop a mechanism for keeping people informed and amenable to joining the project. Neighborhood association newsletters and community bulletin boards are good for this.
- Meet with your city/parks representatives again to review what you want to do and ask how you can work together to achieve your goals.

## TIPS!

### Parks Departments

The needs of the Parks Department might not be the same as the needs of the community. At one time, the park might have had small equipment for toddlers. As those children have grown and moved away from the community, there may no longer be a need for that equipment and, therefore, your parks department spending money to refurbish it doesn't make sense.

### Friends Groups

Start small. Pick a project that is doable and will help you attract more people to your group.

Don't just put ideas down and look for all the work from the city. Let them know what you are willing to do to work with them. For example, will your group recruit volunteers for a community build day? Will you solicit donations for plants?

### Friends Group & Parks Departments

When considering your plan, be mindful of developing a maintenance component, and work with the city on what each is responsible for. For example, if you put in high-maintenance plants, who will water? Will you need to put in an irrigation system? Is this even feasible?

## 6

### Develop an identity



In order to be effective, you need to have a cohesive mission and identity. Branding your organization is important to accomplishing this. It is best to include city logos with yours as you are now partners in this venture.

#### Action Steps

- Create a logo or slogan. (Hold a contest, or have neighborhood or college kids do this!)
- Develop promotional materials. Many online printing services will do a first run of rack cards or postcards that you can post or hand-deliver. Delivery is a fun way to involve kids.
- Create a website and news distribution method (e.g. Mail Chimp, Constant Contact). Google and Weebly are just a few sites that allow you to easily create free websites. If you plan a community-build playspace project, use [kaboom.org/projects](http://kaboom.org/projects) for step-by-step guidance.

## 7

### Determine your needs: money, in-kind services, volunteers, committees

Do you need to raise money? Do you think you can accomplish your goals with volunteers and in-kind services? Do you need a combination of all three? If you are going to need grants, you may want to consider becoming a non-profit. Should you incorporate? If so, is there some agency who can act as a fiscal agent? Develop a budget? Do you need to apply for 501(c)3 status?

#### Action Steps

- Research grants and funding available.
- Determine if you need to be a 501(c)3 non-profit or if you can use another non-profit as your fiscal agent. If your project is small, you may be able to apply for grants under the auspices of the city or a local university.
- Identify an accountant and lawyer who may be willing to do the application for you. Many law firms require their attorneys to do pro bono work in the community. Make your appeal to one of these.
- Develop committees to be responsible for specific areas/items/events of the project.

## TIPS!

#### Friends Groups

Know when to start delegating, Your core group should get the momentum going, but you need additional people and resources to keep growing or maintain what you have created.

Sometimes it can be more helpful to think of the types of activities and the ways in which the space will be used or is being used and let that guide any physical changes you might be considering.



## You never know until you ask

Be confident that you are working to make your community stronger and that everyone can help by supporting, volunteering, or just visiting your park and appreciating it. When you ask for donations or support, be clear about your mission, who is involved already, and what you want from your “ask.” Let businesses know that you will include them as a sponsor or will be hosting a thank-you event. Publicly thank your donors and volunteers and treat them well. Visit [kaboom.org/fundraising](http://kaboom.org/fundraising) for more details on fundraising strategies.

### Action steps

- Determine what you need and start asking. It is better to ask for part of something than the whole thing.



## Start doing it, and start small

Plan your first event or project. Remember to keep it small and do it well. Thank volunteers profusely, and get media and public recognition. Post pictures on your website or project page.

### Action Steps

- Come up with a game plan. (See [Resources section for more.](#))
- Line up materials, volunteers, and the Parks Department (if they are involved in the day). Make sure you have a good “people person” working with volunteers on event day—it’s important that all volunteers know their time matters and is appreciated. Develop promotional materials.
- Treat your volunteers well (food, water, and fun).
- Thank your volunteers, city officials, and Parks Department well.



## Reflect on your successes and failures; revisit all of the above; and keep talking with your city and community

Evaluate the project: How did it go? What can you do differently next time? What else do you need?

### Action Steps

- Don’t be discouraged if the project or event doesn’t turn out exactly as planned—be flexible and always focus on the positive outcome.
- Plan your next meeting or project, and make sure you have fun doing it!

## TIPS!

### Friends Groups

Start with a small and doable project to assess how your group works together and let others see the results of your efforts.

### Parks Departments

It is imperative to have groups that are active. Invest some time creating a support system for these groups.

After your main project is completed, find creative ways to get your group together on a regular basis, even if it is only once or twice a year, so that you can stay involved and maintain engagement.

## Resource List

- Providence Parks and Recreation: [www.providenceri.com/parks-and-rec](http://www.providenceri.com/parks-and-rec)
- Friends of Brown Street Park: [www.friendsofbrownstreetpark.org](http://www.friendsofbrownstreetpark.org)
- KaBOOM!: [kaboom.org](http://kaboom.org)
- Project Planner: [kaboom.org/projects](http://kaboom.org/projects)—step-by-step guidance on how to plan and organize a community-build playspace project, including tools for recruiting and managing volunteers, promoting projects, and fundraising.
- Fundraising Resources: [kaboom.org/fundraising](http://kaboom.org/fundraising)—information on how to create business sponsorship proposals, develop individual giving campaigns, write grant proposals, and organize special events.
- Playspace Construction and Improvement Grants: [kaboom.org/grants](http://kaboom.org/grants)
- Asset-Based Community Development: [www.abcdinstitute.org](http://www.abcdinstitute.org)

## Things Parks Departments Can Do to Support Friends Groups

*Provide an infrastructure to support friends groups by doing any or all of the following:*

- Provide a dedicated liaison/coordinator to parks groups. Remember that the liaison does not exist to do the work of the friends group but to make sure the friends group has the information to be successful.
- Attend select friends group meetings.
- Offer trainings on how to organize a group, group facilitation, recruiting volunteers, grant writing, and fundraising. Use [kaboom.org/playschool](http://kaboom.org/playschool) and [kaboom.org/toolkit](http://kaboom.org/toolkit) as a resource.
- Offer trainings on park basics, such as union issues and how to obtain permits.
- Provide consultations for individual groups.
- Offer technical assistance and support.
- List and update grant and fundraising opportunities.
- Highlight the work of successful groups, and celebrate this work with thank-you events.
- Sponsor conferences to share best practices and resources.
- Feature parks on website and city media.
- Maintain a clearinghouse of resources, in-kind donors, and programming options.
- Be flexible and keep communication open.

## Things Friends Groups Can Do to Support Parks

- Be flexible and keep communication open.
- Build on the strengths of the park. Work with what you have before you work with what you don't have.
- Remember that, in addition to helping your park, there are many other parks that require mandatory maintenance. Other obligations, including budget restraints and city ordinances, may make what you want to do challenging or prohibitive.
- Be open about what your group is capable of doing.
- Don't demand. Ask.
- Make sure you say "thank you" well.
- Think creatively about how your group can reach your goals.
- Be willing to share your successes with other park groups.
- Look for additional funding, sponsorships, volunteers, and grant opportunities.
- Invite your park representatives and city officials to meetings, opening day, and all the fun events, too.
- Publicly acknowledge and thank your supporters and partners.

## Sample Mission Statements

1. The mission of Friends of Brown Street Park is to create a sustainable space that fosters a sense of community.

### Core Values

*The mission and programs of Brown Street Park are supported by a focus on the following:*

- Sustainability
  - Arts and health programming for all ages
  - Open space and natural play
2. Friends of Ferry Point's mission is to restore, preserve, and improve all of Ferry Point Park by participating in and communicating with other volunteer groups and by gathering and guiding volunteers in maintenance, cleanups, tree stewardships, and other environmental issues.
  3. Friends of Van Cortlandt Park is committed to supporting the conservation and improvement of Van Cortlandt Park by providing essential services, such as offering ongoing high-quality education and stewardship programs, working to identify community needs, and empowering residents by giving them a means to improve park conditions.
  4. Friends of the Woods is a grassroots community organization dedicated to preserving the history and exposing the beauty within University Woods. Located in the University Heights section of the Bronx, they provide programming that empowers, educates, enriches, and entertains the community.
  5. Astoria Park Alliance is a volunteer organization whose mission is to beautify, enhance, and encourage participation in Astoria Park. APA believes that supporting parks and green space builds community.



## Ways We Want Our Group to Be

Participants are invited to make suggestions on how their meetings will be. Start by asking questions, such as, What do we want our meetings to look like? What do we want our meetings to sound like?

Once participants brainstorm a list, the participants categorize them by order of importance.

The participants or person leading the activity can ask, "Is this important? Is this something we agree on?" Once the list has been somewhat edited, the person leading the activity asks if everyone can agree to every item. If there is not modified consensus for an item, it does not make the list.

Participants can then sign off on the agreement.

## Ways We Want Our Park to Be

This exercise is similar to Ways We Want Our Group to Be. Put four pieces of newsprint or large paper around the room with different colored markers at each. Across the top of each one, write the following:

- What do we want our park to look like?  
*Example: Places for grownups to sit and talk, lots of grass, etc.*
- What do we want our park to sound like?  
*Example: Happy, lots of different languages being spoken, summer concerts*
- What do we want our park to feel like?  
*Example: Inviting, clean and safe, soft sand for kids to touch*
- I wish my park....  
*Example: Had a slide to play on, was open until dark*

Invite your group to walk around and add suggestions, impressions, and wishes to the list. Provide a few examples for each.

When everyone has added his or her comments, ask the group to walk around and put a check next to the things that they would also like to hear, see, feel, etc.

The person leading the group can then comment and note, "Looks like it is important that we have..." and then list those things that have a lot of checks. The leader can ask the group if it sees any common themes: e.g. a place for all ages to gather, a safe place for kids to play, art and music.

Narrow your list down to one or two "doable" projects that you can work with your Parks Department on to get the ball rolling.

If you have time, you can start to work out your core values or initial mission statement (this will probably change over time).

Keep these notes in your archive, and revisit them as often as necessary.

## Tips for Facilitators

- Facilitation is not the same as leading. The goals of facilitation are:
  - To manage the agenda.
  - To manage time.
  - To manage participation, to help all voices to emerge.
  - To ask questions which help the group to focus, clarify, and summarize.
  - To occasionally do the focusing, clarifying, and summarizing for the group.
  - To help with making decisions.
  - To help manage conflict.
  - To help energize the group.
  - To introduce new ideas for consideration.
  - In general, to be the “eyes and ears” of the group.
- Build relationships with the individuals in your group. Much is accomplished through relationships. Interviews are an effective technique for getting started.
- Build a collaborative relationship with your co-facilitator.
- Always have a plan A and a plan B.
- Pay attention to room arrangement. The pattern of seating affects participation.
- Communicate the plan at the beginning of the session.
- Change the configuration of the group occasionally. Don't always use the whole group. Use groups of two or three, bigger groups, and time for personal reflection and journaling.
- Create activities that guarantee participation.
- Consider using time limits for participants.
- Call on people. Don't always wait for volunteers.
- Ask questions more frequently than you make statements.
- Help the group focus by restating and summarizing or by asking them to do so.
- Be flexible. Change the activity or the grouping if it's obviously not going well.
- Ask the group to help you in your facilitation. Don't take on all of the responsibility yourself.
  - De-escalate conflicts. Don't escalate.
  - Be a model of non-escalation.
  - Use a moderate voice.
  - Take time out.
  - Suggest “talk it out” vs. “shout it out.”
  - Don't feel that you have to solve it all right now.
  - Ask for help if you need it!



# Facilitation Guidelines

## Facilitator's Guidelines

- The facilitator is part of the group.
- Sitting in a circle will make inclusion of members more effective.
- State when your group will begin and end.
- Include all members. Facilitate communication and interaction.
- Be directive and provide structure.
- Plan activities that place focus on a task, not on individuals.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Encourage the group to communicate with each other.

## Facilitating Activities

To facilitate the activities, explain the goal and the rules of the activity. Then, begin the activity. While doing the activities, remind everyone of the goal and the rules. Encourage them to keep trying. After the activity is complete, reflect upon what happened. Allow the group to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. This is called share-back or debrief. Also, retrieve feedback by asking questions appropriate to the activity such as:

### Observation

- Did your group solve the problem? How? What steps were taken?
- What ideas were expressed? When?
- What decisions were made? Why? How?
- How many times did you get stuck? When? Why?
- How did you get unstuck?
- Did you exhaust all possible solutions to accomplish your goal?
- How did you come to a final solution?
- What are particular events, actions, or conversations that stand out?
- What makes those significant?

### Analysis

- Did everyone contribute? Why? Why not?
- Did everyone feel involved? Why? Why not? How?
- Did everyone understand how the problem was going to be solved?
- Did everyone agree?
- Are there different views of what happened?
- How well did the group communicate? Why?
- What did people do to help others participate? Who did it?
- Whose ideas got listened to? Whose didn't? Why?
- How did people get heard/recognized?
- How did you let people know you were listening?
- Who evaluated ideas? How?
- What did you learn about planning and troubleshooting?
- Did a leader emerge? How? Who was it?
- Did leadership change?
- How did the leader contribute?
- What were the factors affecting silence in a group?
- What role did silence play?
- What role did trust play?
- What did you do to help your group?

## **Guidelines for Community Group Members**

- Approach the community group as an adventure in which you may discover new abilities in yourself and new connections with others.
- Only offer help voluntarily and for which you have time.
- Be clear about your own skills for helping.
- Treat the people in your group with respect. They might be new to this group, too.
- Work as a team member, cooperatively and not competitively.
- Keep a record of your group's plan and your personal responsibility.
- Do what you say you will do and keep a record.
- If you are not able to do what you have offered, inform the person leading the group as soon as possible.
- Ask the leader for help if you are having trouble keeping your commitment.
- If you want to end your commitment for a reason you consider acceptable, discuss it first with the group leader. Communicate your reason respectfully and, if possible, help find someone to assume your responsibility.
- Have fun; enjoy helping to create a safe, comfortable meeting atmosphere—and stay open to new ideas.

### **\*Phases of Brown Street Park**

**Phase I** *The goal of Phase 1 was to revitalize the park with gardens and refurbish existing elements to create zones for play, rest, and activities.*

- The grounds are cleared, and the barrier fences are removed,
- Tractor tires were added as a play element.
- The shade sail has been hoisted!
- A serpentine bike rack has been installed behind our shed for those riding to the park!
- Newly planted 'islands' have been created throughout the park grounds.
- The Children's Garden grows!
- Trex (recycled wood) was added to the retaining wall for more comfortable seating.
- The trash and recycling program has been established! We are proud to announce that we are the first park in the city to adopt a recycling program! Thanks to Brown University for making it possible!
- The Adult Fitness area has been much improved! No more mud pools beneath the equipment.
- Vinyl signs have been designed and printed.
- Tractor tires were donated to create a fantastic new climbing structure and planter.
- The new sandbox was created by using recycled curbstones.
- Our new garden shed was built.
- Beautiful 50-year-old Rhododendrons have been added in two locations.
- Our new perennial street-side gardens have been planted, with many of the plants donated.
- The Department of Public Works and the Providence Parks Department have also set up a water connection so that we can maintain all of the new landscaping!
- We started organized playdates with CVS, a Summer Concert Series, an Earth Day, Fall Cleanup, Raku (outdoor ceramics) Rhode-Y-O, fitness classes with the YMCA, story hours with the Athenaeum, and more.

*\* This is intended as a sample of one park's stages of transformation. Each community and park should decide on its own how best to plan and implement its desired projects.*

**Phase II** *The goal of Phase II was to add elements that increase natural play for children, and increase health, arts, and fitness programming.*

- The adult and teen fitness area is complete.
- A stone picnic table and benches were added.
- Cedar tree stumps were introduced as a play element.
- The high fence and gate have been removed and replaced by a new lower fence.
- The junior climbing structure is complete.
- The community garden is complete, and plots are all filled and maintained.
- New entry-way stone paths and gardens have been added.
- More trees were planted in partnership with Trees 20/20!
- Mulch, stone, and Hasta gardens have been added around all the large trees.
- The shed has been moved to the community garden.
- An outdoor skating rink has been built (though not cool enough this year to freeze).
- The entire park is fully irrigated.
- New metal signage is at all four entry gates.
- We continue with all our programming and added Crossfit, Parkour, the Fun Bus and All Children's Theater, gardening, yoga, meditation, caroling, and more.

**Phase III** *The goal of Phase III is to maintain the park, help other park groups establish, add more health, fitness and arts programming, and help other parks to be green parks.*

