



2016 PARKSCORE INDEX | LEVEL OF PARK NEED



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|---|--|--|
| ■ Very High | ■ Other Parks and Open Space | ■ Vacant Zero Population Areas |
| ■ High | ■ Half-mile Park Service Areas | ■ Waterbodies |
| ■ Moderate | ■ Cemetery | ■ County Boundary |
| ● Optimum Park Location | ■ University | |
| ■ Parks with Public Access | ■ Industrial | |

BIG DATA

SMALL PARKS

BY RAJ MANKAD

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) produced a ParkScore map for the City of Houston that shows parks and open spaces in dark green. Nearby areas within a 10-minute or half-mile walk are in light green. The orange and red spots are the park deserts—places where there is a density of people, especially children and low-income residents, but no park nearby.

“We based [our analysis] on actual walkability by working with park agencies to verify all park access and calculate the 10-minute walk along streets,” says TPL data cruncher Bob Heuer. “If there is a railroad or highway that impedes access, you can have property adjacent to a park appear red because you cannot actually get to the park.”

Though this process of verification may seem obvious, so many interactive mapping tools do not take this step. “Most park equity studies measure distance as the crow flies,” notes Heuer.

Children across the bayou from Mason Park know the difference. Imagine the frustration of seeing that lush park barricaded by a set of railroad tracks, a four-lane thoroughfare with excessively spaced crosswalks, or even the bridgeless bayou itself. These park-adjacent park deserts show up on the map as kissing green and red blobs.

With funding from the Houston Endowment, the TPL piloted a tool that identifies where new park acquisition would have the greatest impact. Many are in the Gulfton, Sharpstown, and Alief neighborhoods where parks are limited and densities high. Public-private partnerships have vaulted Houston into the national spotlight by producing Discovery Green and Bayou Greenways, and remaking Buffalo Bayou Park, Hermann Park, Memorial Park, and others. Can this model address our park deserts?

With a \$5 million grant from the Houston Endowment and Kinder Foundation, plus \$450,000 from the city, an expansion of the SPARK School Parks program attempts to do just that. Founded in 1983 by Eleanor Tinsley, and led today by her daughter Kathleen Ownby, the SPARK program works with public schools to create publicly accessible parks. In exchange for financial investments to build on or upgrade their grounds, the schools agree to allow public access to the parks after hours and on weekends for neighborhood residents. SPARK has worked with over 200 schools in the Houston area. Today there are 150 active SPARK parks. The grants will fund 25 new SPARK parks and five “re-SPARKS” in designated park desert communities over the next three years.

In the past, the program has relied on the initiative and fundraising support of communities surrounding the schools, a method that works in well-off areas. But the Houston Endowment grant refocuses their efforts on the park deserts identified in the TPL map. Plus, the City of Houston’s cash-starved Parks and Recreation Department pinned its 2015 master plan to the map. Cost-effective, bite-sized, and high-impact—the SPARK expansion is a smart idea that will produce quick results where it matters most.

As the city puzzles through the broad directives of Plan Houston, perhaps the Planning, Parks, and Public Works department heads can also look at those kissing blobs and dream up safe infrastructure that connects more kids to parks. A footbridge or tunnel here, a mid-block crossing or High-intensity Activated crossWalk (HAWK) signal there, could go a long way.

The TPL map suggests even more. It is perhaps our best metric of walkability. Again, the process of verifying on-the-ground conditions sets it apart. Tools like Walkscore and Google’s “Areas of Interest” are so focused on measurable densities of storefronts that they relegate much of Houston to the not-interesting dustbin. The TPL map steers clear of walkability-as-shopability. Park access is a more universalizable goal than trying to build four-story apartment blocks atop ground-floor retail all over the city.

The love of parks seems to cross all political and demographic boundaries in Houston. The continued support for a bridge across the bayou in Mason Park in the face of a \$1.4 million cost overrun demonstrates the political will to better connections within the bayou park system.

Can that love cross the boundaries of the park itself? Is it possible for park-love to seep into the redesign of adjacent streets? Perhaps this park map can turn Houston’s attention, finally, to urban design. ^{C99}