

Austin Parks & Recreation Department

Community PARKnerships Program

FY23 Year in Review



The Austin Parks & Recreation Department (PAR) Community PARKnerships program mobilizes partners and volunteers to facilitate community-initiated parkland improvements. PARKnerships engages community leaders to co-create projects that reflect neighborhood priorities. By connecting talent with resources, PARKnerships encourages long-term stewardship and place-led change. The five Community PARKnerships programs are PAR PARKners, Community Activated Park Projects, Adopt-A-Park, Parkland Stewardship, and Cities Connecting Children to Nature.

PAR's fiscal year 2023 (FY23) ran from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023.

Contents

Integrating Racial Equity	3
PARD PARKners	4
PARKner Lunch & Learns.....	4
PARKner Resource Library and Newsletter.....	5
Recognition Guidelines	5
PARKner Activation and Programming:	5
Partnership A Non-Profit Partnership Highlights	5
Pease Park Conservancy	5
The Trail Conservancy Arts and Culture Plan.....	6
Community PARKnerships “Pop-Up” Programming Pilot:.....	7
Community Activated Park Project (CAPP) Program	9
CAPP Collaborators	9
CAPP Project Highlights for FY23	11
Adopt-A-Park Program.....	16
Community Stewardship of Parkland	17
Volunteer Stewardship in FY23:.....	17
Volunteer Coordinators Appreciation Lunch.....	17
Raingarden Stewardship:.....	17
Neighborhood Park Stewardship Plans:	18
Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN)	19
Green School Parks	19
Nature Play.....	20
Loose Parts Lending Kits:	20
Youth Leadership	21
OLE! (Outdoor Learning Environments!) Austin	21
Nature Smart Libraries.....	21
Joint Use Agreement for School Parks.....	22
Events and Special Programs	23
Park Study Tour: Austin TX.....	23
Nature Play Training: Bienenstock Workshop	23
Park Equity Cohort: Urban Land Institute Technical Advisory Panel	24
Contact Information.....	24

Integrating Racial Equity

To advance equitable outcomes, the City of Austin is leading with a lens of racial equity. Racial equity is the condition when race no longer predicts a person's quality of life outcomes in our community. The City recognizes that race is the primary determinant of social equity, and therefore we begin the journey toward social equity with this definition. The City of Austin also recognizes historical and structural disparities and a need for alleviation of the wrongs by critically transforming its institutions and creating a culture of equity.

Accordingly, the PARKnerships program prioritizes efforts in historically disinvested communities and seeks to rebalance the power and ownership that Black and Brown community members have in their local parks. This fiscal year, Community PARKnerships took the following steps toward racial equity.

- **Developed staff.** Community PARKnerships started the year by setting racial equity goals, and core team members attended Undoing Racism and Latinx Challenge trainings.
- **Collaborated.** An Urban Land Institute (ULI) Technical Advisory Panel evaluated and made recommendations for racial equity in the Adopt-A-Park program. Community PARKnerships participated in more Equity Action Team (EAT), Youth Leadership Working Group (YLWG), and Food Plan meetings to prevent siloing and join forces across departments.
- **Improved outreach and accessibility.** Community PARKnerships revamped the CAPP process, CAPP submission form, and program webpages to be more user-friendly and representative of Austin's diversity. Through a ULI Impact Grant, the team invested in language accessibility and targeted outreach in the Adopt-A-Park program.
- **Prioritized underserved parks.** Community PARKnerships created a CAPP Decision Matrix to score projects' feasibility and equity impact, focused resources to highest-scoring proposals, and encouraged PARD staff to lead It's My Park Day! stewardship events in unrepresented parks.

PARD PARKners

At PARD, we are committed to partnerships that align with our overall mission, vision, values, and provide benefit to the public and the Austin parks system. Park partnerships (PARKners!) successfully combine the assets of the public and non-profit sectors in novel ways to create new and refurbished parks, greenways, trails, and other public assets in our community. Partnerships between public agencies and community non-profits can help effectively build, renovate, maintain, and program parks. By teaming up, park agencies, non-profits, and community groups can help cities do a better job of meeting citizens' demands for more and better parks in the face of limited public resources.

PARD has spent the last fiscal year refocusing departmental goals and objectives with an equity frameset. In order to accomplish this, PARD has held team trainings and site visits to under-resourced parks in order to better understand the diverse and unique needs at each park site, started a new data report focusing on partner equity practices, completed the Urban Land Institute (ULI) park equity cohort for the Adopt-A-Park program to analyze and provide solutions to barriers to participation in the program within historically underserved communities, and more.

In FY23, PARD, in collaboration with 19 nonprofit partners and community groups, leveraged over 7 million dollars in private funds to go towards improvements and maintenance of parkland.



PARKner Lunch & Learns

An integral part of supporting non-profit and community partners is sharing information and resources from within the City. In FY23, PARD Community PARKnerships hosted three in-person Lunch and Learn events. The event topics vary based on the needs of our partners. The topics chosen this year were Community Engagement Best Practices, SITES Certification Processes, and a review of the PARD Land Management Plan. Over 40 individuals joined, with more requesting slides and expressing interest in engaging virtually after. These events not only educate our partners, but also provide an opportunity to come together and build relationships with PARD and partner staff.

[PARKner Resource Library and Newsletter](#)

The [PARKner Library](#) is a resource hub, curated to provide PARKners with convenient access to essential content and reference documents. The folders are organized into topics such as historic preservation, partnership configuration information, relevant resolutions and reports, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. PARKners reference this periodically updated library for anything from interpretative signage guidelines to counsel resolutions relating to Community PARKnership programs.

The PARKner Newsletter is a monthly communication distributed to Configuration A and B partners, serving as a valuable source of information regarding upcoming events, pertinent policy updates, and available learning resources. This newsletter not only serves as a platform for internal PARD staff to disseminate important information but also plays a pivotal role in fostering greater awareness and collaboration among partner groups. Recent editions of the newsletter have featured updates on Historic Preservation Grants, details about Community Engagement Trainings, and a reminder of the upcoming Roots and Wings Festival.

[Recognition Guidelines](#)

Community PARKnerships developed a PARKnership Recognition Guidebook in FY23 to provide guidelines for recognition features that are consistent, cohesive, and aligned with PARD standards. The document lives in our PARKner Library and is accessible to all PARD PARKners. Sections in the Guidebook include information on limitations, policies related to recognition, review processes, and examples of recognition features and comprehensive recognition planning.

[PARKner Activation and Programming:](#)

The City of Austin's Parks and Recreation Department works with various partner organizations, such as Shoal Creek Conservancy, Pease Park Conservancy, Keep Austin Beautiful, The Trail Conservancy, and more to activate parkland around Austin. Activation includes culturally relevant arts and community programming, free family programs, wellness programs and classes, and more. Previous highlights of activation in FY23 include 8 movies in the park, Music on the Trail, Creek Show, Pride Picnic, farmer's markets, and Austin-wide parkland volunteer days.

Benefits of parkland activation include increased civic trust and engagement, community-building, improved mental health, increase in positive health outcomes, exposure to nature, free community-based programming and activation of parkland.

[Partnership A | Non-Profit Partnership Highlights](#)

[Pease Park Conservancy](#)

City of Austin officials and Pease Park Conservancy (PPC) solidified the organizations' shared responsibilities for Pease Park's Kingsbury Commons by signing the PPC Park Operations and Maintenance Agreement (POMA) on January 18, 2023. This agreement formalizes their partnership, active since the completion of Kingsbury Commons' renovation in July 2021, outlining the Conservancy's role in operations, maintenance, and programming, with plans for expanded responsibilities throughout the park in future.



Photo courtesy of Pease Park Conservancy

Over 1,700 volunteers worked about 3,500 hours in Pease Park in FY23. Although most volunteering focused on environmental work, as in the photo above, volunteers also assisted with PPC’s new Peasecology School Field Trip program. In the 2022-2023 school year, PPC brought over 300 Austin children into the outdoor classroom of Pease Park. PPC paid for transportation and lunch for all AISD Title 1 school groups. The photo above shows students from Graham Elementary School on a Peasecology School Field Trip.

The Trail Conservancy Arts and Culture Plan



Photo courtesy of The Trail Conservancy

The Trail Conservancy (TTC) Arts and Culture Plan, approved by City Council on April 13, 2023, provides a structure for expanding the cultural relevance of the Trail through the art selection, engagement, and curation. The plan approved is committed to acknowledging overlooked histories and engaging with local culture is pivotal for building a diverse community dedicated to the long-term preservation of the Trail. By reaching out to artists widely and facilitating inclusive decision-making processes, TTC seeks to promote a vibrant and welcoming Trail. The goals include acknowledging historical inequities, promoting

healing relationships, expanding collective memory, deepening user connections, curating thought-provoking art, nurturing environmental awareness, and celebrating the Trail's role within the broader community.



Photo courtesy of The Trail Conservancy

The fort installation *Phoenix Trail* opened to Trail visitors in October 2022 and remained up through January 2023. Austin-based designer Agustina Rodriguez created the piece as part of Fortlandia. *Phoenix Trail* was the Trail Conservancy's third installation for Fortlandia, an annual artistic collaboration with the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Community PARKnerships "Pop-Up" Programming Pilot:

This fiscal year the [Community PARKnerships Program](#) explored programming as an outreach tool and activation of underserved park spaces with free programming opportunities. The goal was to provide support to Adopt-A-Park and partner groups in Districts 1-4, build relationships through consistent and non-transactional activities, and connect communities to play opportunities presented by nature play features. Each site had corresponding stewardship and partner groups collaborate on at least one of the Pop-Ups. The events included a nature-inspired biking obstacle course, seed-ball making, floor-is-lava, and other nature play favorites, as well as unstructured play sessions.



Since the pilot program began in August 2022, the pop-ups have attracted **277 participants and 6 non-profit or Adopt-A-Park groups** to collaborate.

Parks Selected for Pop-Ups:

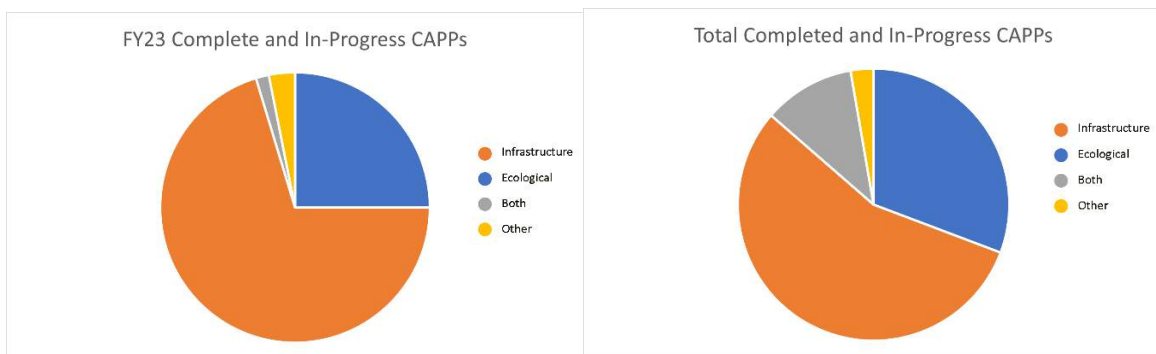
- Kendra Page Neighborhood Park (District 2)
- Parque Zaragoza (District 3)
- MLK Station Neighborhood Park (District 1)
- George Morales Recreation Center (District 2)
- Colony District Park (District 1)
- Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park (District 4)
- Wooldridge Elementary School Park (District 4)
- Armadillo Neighborhood Park (District 2)
- Davis White Northeast Neighborhood Park (District 1)

Community Activated Park Project (CAPP) Program

Falling under the PARD Community PARKnerships umbrella program, the [Community Activated Park Project \(CAPP\)](#) program provides a pathway for neighbors, non-profits, community groups and partners to leverage resources and plan and implement park improvements projects that are in alignment with PARD goals and meet community priorities. Stories about CAPP proposals submitted in the FY23 fiscal year are shared below in the PARKner Projects section.

Over the past six years, the CAPP program has grown tremendously. Submissions received from community and non-profit partners have reached nearly 550 in parks across 31 different Austin zip codes. The percent **growth in submissions from FY18-FY23 is 137%**. During that time period, only two fiscal years demonstrated a decrease in submission numbers. This occurred during FY20 and FY21, corresponding with the COVID Crisis. In **FY23, 61 CAPP proposals were approved, 23 were completed, and 24 under review.**

CAPP proposals generally fall within two categories: infrastructure or ecological projects. Of 64 completed or in progress CAPP projects in FY23, **25% were ecological, compared to 70% in the infrastructure category.**



Fiscal Year	Submissions Received	Percent Change
FY18	54	
FY19	108	+108%
FY20	88	-18.5%
FY21	75	-14.8%
FY22	91	+17.6%
FY23	133	+40.7%
TOTAL	549	+137%

CAPP Collaborators

Throughout the CAPP program’s history, PARD has collaborated with 69 different neighbors, non-profits, and community groups. In FY’23, PARD collaborated on CAPP proposals with **15 new partners**, for a **total of 50 partnerships in FY23.**

Number of nonprofit and community partner groups in FY23: **29**

Groups that proposed their first CAPP are shown in bold:

- Austin Bocce League
- Austin Cricket Association
- Austin Independent School District
- Austin Parks Foundation
- Austin Sunshine Camps
- Bartholomew Park Disc Golf Club
- Clarksville Community Development Corporation
- **Dogs of Springwoods Pak**
- Downtown Austin Alliance
- **Environment for Change**
- Gullet Elementary School
- **JJ Seabrook Neighborhood Association**
- **Lantana Neighborhood Group**
- **Living Springs**
- **Millwood Neighborhood Association**
- Montopolis Neighborhood Association
- North West Austin Civic Association
- **Northwood Neighborhood Association**
- Overton Elementary School
- PARD
- **Partners for Education, Agriculture, and Sustainability**
- Pease Park Conservancy
- **Red Line Parkway Initiative**
- The Trail Conservancy
- Travis Audubon Commons Ford Committee
- **University Hills Neighborhood Association**
- **Walnut Crossing Neighborhood Association**
- **Waterloo Greenway Conservancy**
- **Western Hills Little League**

Number of Adopt-a-Park/friend/park stakeholder groups in FY23: **13**

- Amigos De Parque Zaragoza
- **Clarksville Community Garden**
- Friends of Armadillo Park
- Friends of Austin Nature and Science Center
- **Friends of Balcones Park**
- Friends of Copperfield Nature Trail
- Friends of Elizabet Ney Museum
- Friends of Mountain View Park

- Friends of Perry Park
- Friends of Reed Park
- Friends of Wooldridge Square
- Keep Walnut Creek Wild
- Mayfield Park Community Project

CAPP | Project Highlights for FY23



Davis White Neighborhood Park | Lighting | District 1

In collaboration with the Transportation and Public Works Department's Neighborhood Partnering Program (NPP), lighting improvements were installed at Davis White District Park. The lights were installed along a gravel loop trail on the western side of the park, where community members walk, gather, and exercise. In the culminating celebration for the amenity installation, the African American Health Alliance in Central Texas (AAHACT) brought games such as jump rope, cornhole, and musical chairs for community members to enjoy. The ribbon was cut by park adopter Jasmin Gardner, who grew up nearby to the park and brought her mother and daughter to join the celebration.



Photo courtesy of Cade Kegerreis for Austin Parks Foundation

Dove Springs District Park, Garrison District Park | Court Resurfacing | District 2

Through funding and implementation partnerships with the San Antonio Spurs and Austin Parks Foundation, two parks were selected to receive court improvements as a part of the “Spurs Week”. Improvements included resurfacing, repainting, and goal replacements. Improvements at Dove Springs and Garrison District Parks were completed in FY23. For the opening ceremony at Dove Springs, 50 PARD youth basketball league players joined to gain new skills and show off their own.



Photo by K. Gupta

Sanchez Elementary School | Nature Play | District 3

The final pilot Green School Park (GSP) project at Sanchez Elementary is now complete. Full-size logs and boulders provide structures for climbing and play, and tables provide seating. A long dry creek bed was installed where existing runoff is prevalent, and an ADA path connects the existing park path with the school path. Park amenities, including benches, picnic tables, and a new water fountain with dog bowl have also replaced the old amenities.

St. Elmo Elementary School | Tree Plantings | District 3

Through a collaboration between PARD, AISD, and the St. Elmo Elementary School community, 64 trees were planted on the school campus in FY23. Among the trees planted were several species of oaks, Mexican Sycamore, and Cedar Elm. The project was funded through the Development Service Division's Urban Forestry Grant, in alignment with AISD's Sustainability Plan and the City's Climate Equity Plan.



Metz Neighborhood Park | Bike Polo Facilities | District 3

In July, the Austin Texas Bike Polo Social Club successfully launched the city's inaugural bike polo court. The project encompassed various improvements, such as leveling the surface, improving drainage, and resurfacing with durable blue paint, complete with half-court stripes and goal crease semicircles. To support the court's maintenance, a storage shed was added to house bikes and equipment. The Neighborhood Partnering Program funded this project.



Metz Neighborhood Park | Gazebo Restoration | District 3

In March 2023, the CAPP proposal to renovate the Mendez Gazebo was successfully carried out. The comprehensive restoration included repainting the metal roof, stucco sided columns, and concrete tables and benches. This gazebo is situated as a resting place for people coming from the Ann and Roy G. Butler Hike-and-Bike Trail, the Mendez Recreation Center, or viewers of the "Quinceañera" mural by

Fidencio Duran. The project required coordination between Recreation Center staff, The Trail Conservancy, and PARC.



Heath Eiland and Morgan Moss Skatepark | Lighting | District 9

Friends of House Park proposed new lighting at the Heath Eiland and Morgan Moss Skatepark. Due to the park's popularity, with many visitors seeking refuge from the heat in the evenings, the existing dim lights posed safety concerns and hindered skaters' ability to fully enjoy the park. To enhance safety and promote night-time skating, new, brighter lights were installed in spring 2023. The Friends of House Park group celebrated the successful installation by inviting professional skaters to showcase their talents under the improved illumination. This upgrade not only ensures a safer environment but also extends the skatepark's operating hours, providing a positive experience for skaters of all levels long after the sun sets.

Adopt-A-Park Program

ADOPT - A - PARK



The success of our parks system depends on the support, volunteerism, advocacy, and enthusiasm of the public as stewards and agents of their parks. The Adopt-A-Park program helps community members become those stewards through a collaborative partnership between PARD and Austin Parks Foundation (APF). The goal of this program is to build community agency and ownership around every neighborhood park in Austin. Park Adopters serve as key community representatives for their park by organizing a community-based group and making an ongoing commitment to improving their neighborhood park. Through this program, adopters are empowered to engage neighbors and park users, fostering a sense of possibility and momentum for change that can galvanize others, resulting in a more innovative, creative, and dynamic park system.

An annual audit in the first quarter of FY23 found that of the eligible parks (district, neighborhood, and pocket parks), **153 have an adopter group**, and 106 are unadopted.

In February 2023, PARD Community PARKnerships and APF sponsored a technical advisory panel (TAP) facilitated by the Urban Land Institute (ULI). The purpose of the TAP was to investigate barriers to participation in the Adopt-A-Park (AAP) program for communities of color and low-income communities. More information is available at the end of this report in the section “Park Equity Cohort: Urban Land Institute Technical Advisory Panel.”

Community Stewardship of Parkland

On City of Austin parkland, volunteers support much of the litter abatement, tree mulching, amenity paint refreshing, and invasive removal efforts needed to keep our parks clean, environments healthy, and communities happy. PARD's Volunteer Stewardship program manages these volunteer events, which are led by partner organizations. Partner organizations provide boots on the ground leadership, facilitating stewardship events that are aligned with PARD standards for safety and environmental compliance. These organizations have greater ability to meet the demands of neighborhood groups for facilitated parkland stewardship, as well as capacity to recruit volunteers from businesses. PARD provides review of volunteer events and guidance of parkland facilities with volunteer need. In FY23 PARD leveraged thousands of volunteers to assist in the maintenance and operations of our parks and recreation system.

Volunteer Stewardship in FY23:

- Total Volunteers: **11,921**
- Hours Contributed: **31,536**
- Trees and Saplings Planted: **1,478**
- Pounds of Trash Collected: **82,698**
- Total Value of Volunteer Time: **\$1,002,844.80**



Volunteer Coordinators Appreciation Lunch

After having to suspend the in-person annual event due to COVID-19, the Community PARKnerships team relaunched an appreciation lunch for nonprofit PARKner coordinators who bring volunteers into Austin parks. The event on September 8, 2023, gathered 17 people across seven partner organizations. Volunteer coordinators bonded over a stewardship-themed Bingo game while sharing pizza and enjoying a slideshow highlighting volunteer events across Austin. Community PARKnerships staff gave an appreciation speech to highlight the impact of volunteers on Austin's parkland, ecological health, and community building.

Raingarden Stewardship:

In FY23 Dottie Jordan Neighborhood Park in District 1 was selected as a pilot for a Rain Garden Stewardship Plan. The site was selected due to the existing rain garden and community interest and support from PARD Operations and Maintenance. Rain gardens are shallow, vegetated depressions designed to filter runoff and support water quality. To maintain the health and efficacy of the rain garden at Dottie Jordan, PARD, Watershed Protection Department, and community members put

together a stewardship plan based on the Grow-Zone framework. As part of this plan, community members will undertake stewardship activities such as weeding and watering young plants. This pilot has developed a system to track and maintain rain gardens alongside community members, and to support drought management efforts while providing educational opportunities for the community.

Neighborhood Park Stewardship Plans:

PARD Community PARKnerships also piloted a Neighborhood Stewardship program which featured the development of a plan for the Great Hills Neighborhood Park in District 10. The 85-acre park was established in 1994 and is located along the Bull Creek Watershed. The Great Hills Park Committee has been providing stewardship to the park's trails, chimney swift towers, and other amenities for over 30 years. In order to streamline and provide multi-department approval for park improvements, PARD, WPD, Austin Fire Department, and the Great Hills Park Committee collaborated to develop a comprehensive Neighborhood Stewardship Plan. The plan provides ecological and historical summaries of the site and outlines approved volunteer activities, City of Austin resources, and suggested improvements to propose through the CAPP. Neighborhood Stewardship Plans have the potential to increase multi-department collaboration at park sites with active community groups and to increase community autonomy and trust at sites with long-standing stewardship groups.

Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN)

Cities Connecting Children to Nature is a national initiative that seeks to create more equitable and abundant access to nature for children throughout Austin. FY23 achievements include:

- Leveraged \$5,399,172 in funding CCCN efforts, up 93.3% from FY22
- Integrated a racial equity lens to recenter our focus towards changing policies and practices that exclude communities of color
- Moved Green School Park (GSP) designation to self-assessment model open to all AISD schools, increasing GSPs from 3 to 16
- Published Nature Play Guidelines V2
- Updated Loose Parts Lending Kits
- Designed nature play spaces at 4 parks, with the expectation that all parks moving forward will include nature play
- Re-started Nature Smart Libraries (NSL) and Outdoor Learning Environment (OLE!) strategies

Green School Parks

Vision: Create a network of school parks that provide schools and the surrounding community the opportunity to learn from, steward, and play in nature.



Accomplishments:

- AISD schools increased from 3 to 16 Green School Parks
- CoA/AISD Interlocal Agreement amendments for the 21 existing school parks (joint use sites) passed on consent by city council January 26, 2023
- Ongoing coordination between PARD + AISD on upcoming AISD Bond, which will impact 9 joint use school parks + coordination on fencing at both joint use school parks and schools adjacent to parks
- Completed Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant, studying the impact of green infrastructure installed as part of the GSP program. Final conclusions include:
 - As temperatures rise, children decrease physical activity and seek shade

- Children’s connection to nature had a significant positive effect on their:
 - Overall SEL skills
 - Self-awareness
 - Self-management
 - Relationship skills

Nature Play

Vision: Activate parks and greenspaces through nature play programming and installation of nature play spaces across the city



Accomplishments:

- Published Nature Play Guidelines V2
- Designed nature play spaces at 4 parks, with the expectation that all parks moving forward will include nature play
- Updated loose parts lending kits, with kits used by 254 people
- Secured PARD mitigation funds to cover the cost of moving logs
- Led Infrastructure Subcommittee quarterly meetings, providing space for staff and partners to discuss best practices for nature play
- Held nature play training and evening presentation, led by Adam Bienenstock, for 66 participants from 26 City Divisions and Organizations
- Started initial prep at John Trevino Metro Park for housing nature play material

Loose Parts Lending Kits:

Loose parts nature play is unstructured play that promotes creativity and imagination, increases physical activity, promotes cooperation and communication, reduces stress, improves psychological well-being, fosters critical thinking skills, decision making and appropriate risk taking while fostering a connection to nature. Loose parts lending kits provide activities to engage youth, attract visitors and activate parks and places in Austin.

This past fiscal year, we updated the loose parts lending kits. Since the beginning of the program, the kits were housed in a large 4ft by 2ft container. The size and weight of the kits presented barriers for transporting the materials. Using feedback from stakeholders we researched new options for containing and transporting the materials. The updated loose parts kits are housed in small and medium size containers and transported using a collapsible wagon.

Youth Leadership

Vision: Collaborating to build an Austin in which young people can easily access careers in outdoors, nature, and the environment, are fairly compensated for their contributions, and that the field, and leadership within, represents the communities we serve.

Participants:

- 49 participants from 18 organizations
- 18 different zip codes represented
- 7 new folks ages 16-24
- 12 non-White (Black/African American, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Latinx/Hispanic)
- Committee Chairs: 2 youth + 2 adults
- 64 total members

Accomplishments:

- Normalized talking about race & racism with stakeholders, partners, participants, leadership
- Combined in-person + virtual meetings: Nature Networking, Adult-Youth Collectives, Culture Change/Building a net that works
- Created pathways into nature-based jobs:
 - Austin Civilian Conservation Corp: 38 summer temp jobs at CoA, 13 still employed
 - Youth Forest Council: 12 interns
 - Austin Youth River Watch (AYRW): YLWG chairperson employed at AYRW

OLE! (Outdoor Learning Environments!) Austin

Vision: Improve outdoor spaces at childcare centers to enable 0–5-year-olds to be active, learn in nature and develop motor skills.

Accomplishments:

- Restarted OLE! Austin coalition following the COVID-19 pandemic and transition in leadership
- Officially opened ACC Lab School's OLE! space early 2023
- Held community engagement and drafted an initial design at City of Austin's Dove Springs childcare site
- Held teacher training Winter 2022
- Created a unique design for Magic Dragon Preschool, reflecting its multicultural nature
- Facilitated Abiding Love Childcare Center receiving its design in Fall 2023 after participating in OLE! design and community engagement event led by Texas Tech University this September

Nature Smart Libraries

Vision: Foster connections to nature through stories, experiences, and resources to promote curiosity and environmental literacy.

Accomplishments:

- Re-started NSL strategy, with goals that aim to foster connections through stories, activities, and resources to promote curiosity.

- Held summer programming that connected children to nature through environmental education.
- Partnered with the nature-based organizations BK Bones and Crowe’s Nest Farm to provide children and families with the opportunity to learn about careers
- Expanded APL’s story walks, including the first accessible StoryWalk® at APL’s Windsor Park branch, enabling braille-reading visitors to touch and read along

Joint Use Agreement for School Parks

A School Park, often known as a Joint-Use Site, is an outdoor space at a school that is available to the public during non-school hours through an Interlocal Agreement between City of Austin (COA) and Austin Independent School District (AISD). These outdoor spaces are special purpose parks with recreational amenities responding first to the student population, then to the neighborhood. They are co-owned and co-managed by both AISD and COA. Because of the co-ownership of the park grounds and associated amenities, maintenance services and improvements are provided by AISD and COA.

Since the separation of AISD from the City of Austin in 1955, there has been an ongoing history of cooperation and joint use of facilities. Through the preceding years since the original Joint Use Agreement was signed, there has been considerable growth and change the city and in our school parks. In particular, schools have begun embracing the park space as a secondary classroom and with that the installation of ecological features to enhance both the environment and learning opportunities. However, with these new features we have also seen increased confusion around the design and maintenance requirements and responsibilities. Efforts to update the agreement began in 2017 to locate current inefficiencies in the operations and maintenance of these sites; develop clear roles and responsibilities; and create a streamlined and transparent process for community activated improvements moving forward. In 2018, PARD and AISD also established a review process for community activated projects on joint use sites and integrated into the Joint Use Agreement Amendment draft. From 2018-2021 PARD and AISD held meetings with pertinent divisions & staff to understand operations and ownership of amenities at sites and draft new language that reflects the operations and maintenance that is occurring at these sites, including adding language surrounding amenities not reflected in the 1981 Amendment. In conjunction with the Amendment, staff developed a [webpage specific to School Parks](#) with general information, frequently asked questions, and a map of existing Joint Use School Parks.

The recent amendment to the Agreement was approved by the AISD Board in November 2023 and passed by City Council on January 26, 2023.

Events and Special Programs

The Community PARKnerships team often serves as a bridge, facilitating collaborations between national non-profits, foundations, and their involvement in pressing contemporary urban concerns with the City of Austin. In FY23, Community PARKnerships orchestrated initiatives such as a national urban parks tour, a nature play training, and a park equity panel. These events foster relationships not only between PARD and the national organizations, but also between peer cities, and even internally as city departments collaborate to learn and share information.

Park Study Tour: Austin TX

In October 2022, the Community PARKnerships team hosted the City Parks Alliance for an Urban Parks Tour, a collaborative effort between Austin Parks & Recreation and The Trail Conservancy. This tour provided an immersive exploration of Austin's innovative urban park strategies for park leaders across the United States. Highlighted throughout was the innovative approach to park partnerships, which showcased the PARKnership Program's success in fostering community engagement, volunteerism, and resource allocation. The tour highlighted Austin's commitment to preserving its natural landscapes through an interconnected trail system, including experiences like kayaking along the Holly Power Plant Lakefront Trail and exploring Waterloo Greenway Park.



Nature Play Training: Bienenstock Workshop

Cities Connecting Children to Nature hosted a two-day training with staff from Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds on November 15-16, 2022, at Delores Duffie Recreation Center. Founder Adam Bienenstock and CEO John El-Raheb led this two-day training about successful natural spaces in urban centers, maintenance of natural play features, and guidelines and standards around safety, liability, and public perception of risk. A select number of PARD staff and partner organizations were in attendance, including staff from Austin ISD, Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept, Austin Parks Foundation (APF), TBG, Paradigm, TF Harper, Fruitful Commons, The Trail Conservancy, and Unity Contractor Services.

Park Equity Cohort: Urban Land Institute Technical Advisory Panel

In February 2023, PARD Community PARKnerships and the Austin Parks Foundation sponsored a technical advisory panel (TAP) facilitated by the Urban Land Institute (ULI). The purpose of the TAP was to investigate barriers to participation in the Adopt-A-Park (AAP) program for communities of color and low-income communities.

The panel of 7 experts was briefed, toured three parks along Austin’s northeastern crescent, and interviewed over 40 community members. The TAP then assembled a series of initial findings and recommendations, which could be grouped broadly into four major barriers: the relationship between APF and PARD, communication, volunteer expectations, and alignment with community needs. The full report is [available for review online](#).



Contact Information

You can learn more about Community PARKnerships on [our website](#) and contact the team by email through [this online form](#) or at PARTnershipsInfo@austintexas.gov.