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**Benefits of Parks to Communities, a summary of Urban  
Land Institute and Other Research**

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*By The Urban Land Institute (ULI) Idaho District Council*

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## Introduction

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) Idaho District Council was asked to assemble information regarding park reinvestment and redevelopment. This paper is a representative summary of ULI and outside research pertaining to park reinvestment and redevelopment in various cities across the United States.

ULI Idaho is a District Council of the Urban Land Institute with members throughout Idaho and Montana. ULI Idaho membership includes professionals involved in all aspects of the real estate and land use industry: developers, lawyers, financiers, academics, elected officials, environmentalists, planners, architects and realtors.

**About Urban Land Institute:** The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the institute now has more than 30,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service. As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information and experience among local, national and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places. The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. Members say that ULI is a trusted idea place where leaders come to grow professionally and personally through sharing, mentoring, and problem solving. With pride, ULI members commit to the best in land use policy and practice.

## Executive Summary

"What we've found is that great parks make great cities, and great cities have great parks," said Ed McMahon, senior resident fellow at the Washington-based Urban Land Institute.

A recent winner of the 2010 ULI Amanda Burden Urban Open Space Award was the 2.5 acre four season Campus Martius in Detroit. Amanda M. Burden says she created the award with ULI, because of her belief "in the power of well-designed public space to be a focal point for cities, bringing together residents of all income, race, age, and social status." She states that in her 30 years of urban planning, it has become increasingly clear that great cities are not about building, they are about people. Public spaces that are destinations for all people boost the economic, environmental, and social wellbeing of cities. Campus Martius features a central fountain, pathways, gurgling water features, a Civil war monument, trees, a lush lawn area that transforms into an open air theater for concerts, films, and other events and when the weather turns cold it converts into a popular skating rink. The year-round programming lends the park the urbanity that bolsters its charm, park officials say.

Robert Gregory, who now leads the Detroit 300 Conservancy, of Campus Martius in Detroit, says a park might not work miracles, but it could be a key step in reviving a city. "A great signature park isn't going to turn around a city by itself," Gregory said. "But great cities have strong and vibrant downtown cores. A signature place downtown where people can come together is a part of that."

For cities that are looking to change their image, spur investment, and create amenities for their residents, urban open space is the answer, says Amanda Burden.

Another recent example of a four season park is Houston's Central Gardens that was developed by converting a parking lot into a beautiful 12 acre park in Houston, Texas in 2008. Barry Mandel, president of the Discovery Green Conservancy who built the park created a space that provides amenities such as renting boats for the lakes, and an outdoor skating rink during the winter.

Sarah Jawaid, mentions in *The Power of a Park: Urban Open Spaces as Value Generators*, That all of the successful examples of parks in America had one thing in common: strong leadership and community will. The parks had the right mix of uses to make gathering easy.

A recent presentation, *What is it Worth, The True Value of Open Space*, by Michael Kirschman cited a 2008 study that reported living near parks and woodlands boosts health, regardless of economic status. It is the first time anyone systematically showed that the health gap between rich and poor can be decreased with the help of green spaces. (Chenoweth & Associates, Inc./Health Management Associates)

According to the article, *The Economic Benefits of Parks*, by the American Association of Landscape Architects, the Gotham Gazette say, “parks support economic development by drawing tourists and tourist dollars.” Central Park attracts more than 25 million visitors a year, about one fifth of whom come from outside the city, according to *The Central Park Effect*, which was prepared by the economic analysis firm, Appleseed for the Central Park Conservancy. The study determined that in 2007, spending by visitors and enterprises in the city’s most famous park directly and indirectly accounted for \$395 million in economic activity.

In addition to real estate, tourism, and environmental benefits, parks also provide health, community or social, and “direct use” benefits, found the Center for City Park Excellence at The Trust for Public Land.

There also is a benefit to incorporating in trails and greenways according to research from the Rails to Trails Conservancy. In the article *Economic Benefits of Trails and Greenways*, it is mentioned that not only do trails with connectivity to other areas provide job-growth for tourism-related opportunities, but also many companies seeking to relocate or establish corporate headquarters have cited the availability of trails as a significant factor in their decision to choose one locale over another. Many cities have sought to emulate the success of the San Antonio Riverwalk in Texas, the anchor of the city’s tourism economy by virtue of its links to popular stores, restaurants and other destinations. Communities find that trails and greenways provide the tools to turn geographic resources into community trademarks that become focal points of civic pride and key attractors of new residents and businesses.

Pittsburgh’s former Mayor Tom Murphy, who recently visited Coeur d’Alene and spoke at our ULI Infrastructure event, testified at a Congressional hearing in which he credited trail construction for contributing significantly to a dramatic downtown revitalization.

Sited in the Urban Parks Institute article, *Great Parks We Can Learn From*; Through nearly 30 years of observation and analysis, Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has identified nine strategies that help parks achieve their full potential as active public spaces that enhance neighborhoods and catalyze economic development.

- Use transit as a catalyst for attracting visitors
- Make management of the park a central concern
- Develop strategies to attract people during different seasons
- Acquire diverse funding sources
- Design the park layout for flexibility
- Consider both the “inner park” and “outer park”
- Provide amenities for the different groups of people using the park
- Create attractions and destinations throughout the park
- Create an identity and image for the park

In another PPS article, *What Makes a Successful Place?*; In evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, PPS has found that successful ones have four key qualities: they are **accessible**; people are engaged in **activities** there; the space is **comfortable** and has a good image; and finally, it is a **sociable** place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit.

According to an article by Megan Lewis, AICP, Assistant Director of The City Parks Forum, American Planning Association, *How cities use parks for ... Economic Development*, Parks provide

intrinsic environmental, aesthetic, and recreation benefits to our cities. They are also a source of positive economic benefits. They enhance property values, increase municipal revenue, bring in homebuyers and workers, and attract retirees. At the bottom line, parks are a good financial investment for a community.

Increased property values and increased municipal revenues go hand in hand. Property tax is one of the most important revenue streams for cities. By creating a positive climate for increased property values, the tax rolls will benefit in turn. As shown with Central Park, parks can both pay for themselves and generate extra revenue. In addition, tax revenues from increased retail activity and tourism-related expenditures further increase municipal monies.

### ***Property Tax Benefits***

**Chattanooga:** Improvements in Chattanooga resulted in an increase in annual combined city and county property tax revenues of \$592,000 from 1988 to 1996, an increase of 99 percent. (Lerner and Poole, 1999).

**Boulder:** The presence of a greenbelt in a Boulder neighborhood was found to add approximately \$500,000 in property tax revenue annually.

### ***Sales Tax Benefits***

**Oakland, California:** The presence of the East Bay Regional Park District is estimated to stimulate about \$254 million annually in park-related purchases, of which \$74 million is spent in the local East Bay economy.

**Shopping Districts:** Surveys indicate that prices for products in districts with trees were on average about 11 percent greater than in no-tree districts; the quality of products were rated 30 percent higher than in areas with no sidewalk landscaping.

### ***Tourism-Related Benefits***

**Atlanta:** Centennial Olympic Park has an estimated 1.5 million visitors each year, attending 175 public events.

**San Antonio, Texas:** Riverwalk Park, created for \$425,000, is lined with outdoor cafes, shops, bars, art galleries, and hotels, and has overtaken the Alamo as the most popular attraction for the city's \$3.5-billion tourism industry.

### ***Employment-Related Benefits***

Megan Lewis also points out in, *How cities use parks for ... Economic Development* that a survey of 1,200 high technology workers in 1998 by KPMG found that quality of life in a community increases the attractiveness of a job by 33 percent. Knowledge workers prefer places with a diverse range of outdoor recreational activities, from walking trails to rock climbing. Portland, Seattle, Austin, Denver, and San Francisco are among the top cycling cities; they also are among the leaders in knowledge workers. Workers attracted to an area are then positioned to put money back into the local economy through jobs, housing, and taxes, which then contribute to parks.

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