

“Our parks strategy in Lawrence has improved the quality of life for residents. But it also has dramatic economic benefits. This galvanized our partnership with the city, which allowed us to achieve such positive outcomes.”

—Kate O’Brien,
Groundwork
Lawrence

Action idea: Treat urban greening as an essential investment, not a luxury.

Urban green spaces are an essential part of the infrastructure of neighborhoods. Parks are places for residents to exercise, create and maintain social networks, and take their kids to play. Well-kept urban green spaces contribute to the environmental health of a city.

Parks are a source of pride and identity, something that can be especially powerful in smaller industrial cities that have suffered from decades of economic stagnation and a sense of being “forgotten.”

While parks in disrepair may not cause the kind of crises that unsound bridges or water mains do, they are magnets for crime and dumping and quickly become a painful symbol of a city’s decline.²⁵ Recognizing that urban green spaces are not just a luxury—but can propel broader community revitalization—a wide range of stakeholders are developing creative solutions to reclaim and restore inviting green spaces in smaller industrial cities.

Reconnecting Poor Neighborhoods to the River: The Spicket River Greenway

Lawrence, Massachusetts, a former textile manufacturing city with a heavily Hispanic population of around 72,000, is located on the Spicket River, a small tributary of the Merrimack River. For a long time, the river, which runs through the city’s poorest neighborhoods, suffered from neglect and dumping and was bordered by many vacant lots and brownfields.

In 2000, Lawrence CommunityWorks and Groundwork Lawrence launched a neighborhood planning process that became the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative. A key component was to work with neighborhood residents to convert a 2.7-acre contaminated former industrial laundry site into a riverfront park—the Dr. Nina Scarito Park, named after a well-loved Lawrence obstetrician.

The success of the effort inspired Groundwork Lawrence to work toward a vision for a greenway across the city—an “emerald bracelet” of parks and trees along the river, linked by recreational trails.

Groundwork Lawrence carefully built a partnership with the city government, which led to securing funding from the state’s Urban Self-Help Fund—not just one grant, but a remarkable string of grants. The funding has helped bring about three new parks along the Spicket, including a skate park that local youth were instrumental in creating. A fourth park, also on a reclaimed brownfield, is expected to open in 2009.

In addition to the quality of life improvements, the parks are supporting broad economic benefits. From 2000 to 2004, Groundwork Lawrence reports that property values around Scarito Park more than doubled—a larger increase than in other Lawrence neighborhoods.

Groundwork Lawrence is now using state recreational trail money to plan and design the Spicket River Greenway, which will link the growing collection of riverfront parks through the lowest-income areas of the city. When it’s completed, residents of these historically underserved neighborhoods will have safe, attractive walkways to schools, downtown, a commuter rail station, and a developing mill district with new jobs.

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