A Citizens' Guide to Maintaining Neighborhood Places
This booklet was prepared for the U.S. Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, by William Carney, The Trust for Public Land.

The Trust for Public Land is a private, nonprofit conservation organization that specializes in acquiring land for public use. The Trust works with local groups, landowners, and public land-management agencies to preserve open space and to pioneer methods in community ownership and control of land.


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# A Citizens' Guide to Maintaining Neighborhood Places

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U.S. Department of the Interior • Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
During the past two decades, a quiet revolution has taken place in America's inner cities. Across the country, people in neighborhoods have found that they can create and control neighborhood spaces by applying their own energy and readily available materials to recycling abandoned land and buildings. Many projects have continued to flourish; others now lie barren or in disrepair, victims of vandals or slashes in city maintenance budgets. It is increasingly clear that many neighborhood projects will remain a vital part of American cities only if neighborhood people shoulder the responsibility for their care, as well as their creation.

Based on its success with grassroots neighborhood groups, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) was asked by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (HCRS) to prepare this manual for neighborhood groups trying to keep their community projects alive and growing. TPL, a nonprofit land-conservation organization has worked with inner-city neighborhood groups since 1975, helping them gain control of local land resources. Emphasizing landownership by nonprofit neighborhood land trusts, TPL has helped over 50 groups in California, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Colorado, and Florida acquire and develop vacant lots as community parks and gardens. This manual is a sequel to the Citizen's Action Manual: A Guide to Recycling Vacant Property in Your Neighborhood which TPL compiled for HCRS in 1979.
Perhaps you have started a vegetable plot in a community garden or helped put the play structures in place at a neighborhood tot lot. Perhaps you and your neighbors transformed a littered vacant lot into a park with grass, trees, and benches. Maybe your group turned an abandoned building into a community center. Whatever you have done to make the neighborhood you live in a little more open, green, and welcoming, this manual will help you make sure that your efforts are not lost. Creating community space is only the beginning. To make community space last takes the same kind of work—neighborhood commitment, creative problem-solving, and elbow grease. When neighborhood projects fail—when weeds overrun the garden, when vandals take over the playground, when trash and broken glass litter the park—the loss is more than visual; it must be measured in the diminished pride and self-confidence of the neighborhood. The very credibility of grassroots community action is then called into question, not only by government and corporate decision makers, but in the minds of neighborhood residents as well. Maintaining neighborhood property is a big responsibility, but it does not have to be a difficult or a grueling task. In fact, the easier you make it on yourself, the better your chances of success. Helping clarify exactly what tasks need to be done and the most fruitful approaches to them is what this manual is all about. The foundation of successful community space is maintaining a spirit of commitment to the project and the neighborhood. If the work you put into a piece of land is more than balanced by the satisfaction you get back, then you and those around you will naturally continue the effort. But to keep this balance without overextending or frustrating neighborhood energy requires ongoing commitments of labor and money, often from sources beyond the immediate neighborhood. Site maintenance demands the same concentration and careful marshaling of available resources that goes into site acquisition and development. A commitment to maintenance should therefore be part of the earliest stages of planning any community project. Many neighborhood projects have benefited from close working relationships with city agencies, notably with local parks and recreation departments. Good communication can give the community group access to a wide variety of services and expertise and will always make site maintenance easier. As with acquisition and development, the major problems of property maintenance are most often solved by a few critical breakthroughs: the establishment of a maintenance endowment, an agreement with a local manpower program for weekly labor assistance, or an arrangement with a local landscape maintenance business. How to obtain such commitments is the primary concern of this booklet. Physical site considerations and community participation are also covered. The manual is organized around seven broad topics, each treating a task essential to site maintenance:

1. **Organizing for action:** encouraging community involvement and tending to the necessary paperwork.
2. **Locating resources:** getting the skills, muscle power and material resources to maintain community projects.
3. **Raising money:** how to meet expenses.
4. **Designing for low maintenance:** preliminary considerations for design and safety.
5. **Maintaining open space:** paying attention to the physical details that keep the site in working order.
6. **Maintaining buildings:** the special aspects of building maintenance.
7. **Looking to the future:** the benefits of frequent use of the site and additional ways to care for your neighborhood through physical improvements.
1. Organizing for Action

In several important ways, a community project must survive in the field. Certain basic organizational and legal preliminaries will clear the way for easy and efficient maintenance.

Forms of Community Involvement

The best organizational structures and intentions can accomplish little without the energy and interest of people to actually get things done. The people who bring the community project into existence are also the basic resources for keeping it going.

There are five basic forms of participation which community groups can use to channel this fundamental energy. Matching the task at hand to the most effective form for accomplishing it is the first step toward the best use of human energy.

- Committees of two or three people best suited for a task can handle most of the business and background work of a group—finances, special events, weekly site inspections. This arrangement usually proves to be an efficient use of people's time.
• Community meetings should be reserved for making decisions which affect everyone in attendance. Broad policy issues or major undertakings fall under this category.

• Community events are for carrying out the big decisions or accomplishing the large tasks such as semi-annual work days or major changes to the site. They should be used sparingly and planned carefully to have significant results which will in turn keep people coming back time and again.

• Individual skills should be called upon for special problems as they arise: a broken water pipe, a leaking ceiling, a diseased tree, a play structure in need of redesign. Maintain a checklist of the skills available in your immediate neighborhood.

• A core group such as a board of directors or a set of officers takes final responsibility to see that things happen. The best groups are those which avoid monopolizing all the work by channeling tasks to the committees or individuals mentioned above.

The Advantages of Nonprofit Incorporation

Maintaining community owned projects takes group energy, and one of the best ways to organize this energy for permanent and productive use is through a nonprofit corporation. Because such a group has formally defined itself, it has both external credibility and internal staying power. It also has the important financial advantages of being able to receive tax-deductible charitable contributions and to participate in government and foundation funding programs. You may be able to include your activities among other concerns of an already established nonprofit group, such as a community development corporation. If not, and if your project involves open space, incorporation as a neighborhood land trust expressly for the purpose of acquiring, developing, and maintaining property is a simple process in most states. (HCRS's Citizen's Action Manual and Foundations Handbook describe this process.) Once incorporated, a group maintains its identity by operating according to written articles of incorporation and bylaws, minutes of all meetings, and keeping accurate financial records.

Example

Both San Francisco's Argonne Community Garden and Berkeley's Washington Environmental Yard have found that strong organization has paid off in saving their projects from other plans posed by the school districts which own the groups' land. In their cases, the municipal landowners took them seriously because they were well organized and had developed impressive track records.

Example

In Philadelphia, an informed community group had been gardening a piece of land for four years. When the land was sold, the new owner offered them free ownership of the portion they were gardening—but only if the group became incorporated.

Income and Property Tax Exemptions

A continued nonprofit status is the key to obtaining tax-deductible contributions from businesses and individuals, as well as foundation and government grants. Your group's nonprofit, tax-exempt status requires that you submit forms to the Internal Revenue Service each April 15. Obtain the proper forms and detailed instructions from the IRS office listed in your phone book. Similar procedures apply to state income taxes. Foundations Handbook, by HCRS, and TPL's Land Trust Manual provide further information.

Explain the community oriented, nonprofit use and ownership of your land to your city's tax assessor. In many states such uses are exempt from property taxes. Ask the office for the criteria used to determine exemption and for the forms you must submit. Several states have laws granting reduced assessments on land used for large-scale natural-resource management such as forestry and agriculture. Such laws could be expanded to include urban sites managed in the public interest. To help a neighborhood group minimize costs, a city may be willing to take title to a project site, thereby eliminating property taxes which would otherwise be owed by the neighborhood group.

Liability Insurance

Liability insurance coverage is necessary to pay any suits won against your group for bodily or property damage resulting from the use of your neighborhood site. This is 'third-party coverage' which does not include damages to the property itself. Since buying your own policy can be both difficult and expensive, the best approach is usually through a larger organization.
City park and recreation departments are sometimes willing to include a parcel owned or used by nonprofits in the city's own open-space coverage. Seattle's Pea-Patch project received this kind of coverage.

If the city owns land on which a neighborhood project takes place, the city may assume the insurance responsibilities solely, or share costs with the organization undertaking the project.

Open-space projects supported by community development funds may qualify for additional funds for insurance. This was the case with ten community gardens in Oakland.

Corporations likewise may be persuaded to include a nonprofit effort under the company's overall policy, or they may agree to an annual charitable contribution of the amount needed for self-coverage. The Tasty Baking Company in Philadelphia provides such support to a local project.

Insurance companies and associations of independent insurance agents are especially good sources of such annual endowments. Although usually prevented by law from giving free coverage, they may give the cash needed to buy a policy. The Prudential Company has entered into such agreements with several Newark community groups.

A property owner who leases land or a structure may already have sufficient insurance to cover the group's use of the property. In Chicago's Pilson neighborhood, a local pub owner extended his policy to include an adjacent solar greenhouse and gardening project.

Special-interest organizations like 4-H clubs and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension Service offer group coverage for some community gardens where the main users are known and their activities involve little risk of injury. There is such a program in San Francisco.

Open-space organizations like the New York Parks Council and the Trust for Public Land offer blanket policies in some areas. Coverage costs about $100 a year. These groups can also provide the names of those hard-to-find insurance companies willing to insure community owned sites.
Whoever insures your neighborhood project is likely to require that the design and operation include some common-sense safety features: visibility from the street, good lighting, play structures solidly made and not over seven-feet high, immediate repairs, sand which is raked weekly and replaced yearly, and electrical systems in good repair. Ask the insurance carrier to have a specialist in risk management help you review plans and make a yearly inspection.

Meet any other legal obligations as well, such as lease or rental agreements, which your group may have entered into.

**Keeping People Interested**

People get involved in neighborhood projects because it gives them personal satisfaction. The group that understands and encourages the sources of such satisfaction is the group that enriches itself through its efforts.

- **Have a purpose.** People like to be a part of something bigger than themselves, which is exactly the opportunity provided by community sites.
- **Do something.** Another basic appeal of neighborhood projects is that they are tangible. Give people something to do that they can get their hands on and that leads to results that can be seen.
- **Spread the word.** Person-to-person contact is the basic ingredient—and one of the essential satisfactions—of any community effort.
- **Spread the responsibility.** Nothing sours group effort quicker than one person trying to do everything. Everyone should be in on the action.
- **Share the glory.** Media exposure, ringing speeches, simple acknowledgements—take every opportunity to let people know that they and their work are appreciated.
- **Recognize conflict.** Different ideas about getting things done are bound to arise. If explored fully—and with an eye to the problem rather than the personalities involved—such differences usually lead to solutions better than any one person could produce.
- **Have fun.** Remember always that neighborhood efforts can be fun. Bring out music, food, and laughter whenever the situation calls for it.

**Example**

Brooklyn's Vernon Avenue Neighborhood Association has celebrated the success of its garden by holding neighborhood parties on the site. As a result, the project has attracted increased interest and support through the years, including local television coverage.
The skills, muscle power, and even material resources needed to maintain community projects are usually available for the asking somewhere in your city—often right down the block.

**Labor Resources**

Your own organization is the heart of your labor force. However, one of the best ways to encourage and conserve your organization's enthusiasm is to bring in more people for occasional major tasks and to farm out some regular tasks.

- Make workdays community events by handing out flyers and contacting people throughout the neighborhood well in advance. These can become spring and fall outdoor rituals akin to cycles of planting and harvesting, or yearly indoor rituals reminiscent of spring housecleaning.

- Back up neighborhood involvement by inviting another group, especially one which prides itself on its muscle. Scout troops, athletic teams, school classes, military reserve units, service clubs, church groups, teenage groups—all have been involved in taking care of neighborhood sites. Many areas
have state or federally supported Youth Conservation Corps, summer youth employment programs, or self-styled green guerilla groups specifically geared to help maintain community projects. Contact your area state employment office for assistance.

• See if such a group might also be willing to take over weekly site inspection and cleanup tasks for a summer or a year. Unless they are being paid, be sure to keep up interest by rotating this responsibility within and among groups for specific blocks of time. Find out who maintains the grounds of local industries or institutions and get the business (or the landscape contractor) to agree to include your project in its regular maintenance rounds. At most, it means an hour or two a week, and it is a tax-deductible business expense.

• Court referrals are another potential weekly labor source. Violators work off their fines in community service rather than in cash.

Whatever your solution, the successful maintenance of your open space or structure may well hinge on the involvement of some form of ongoing, paid labor from outside the neighborhood volunteer network.

Trade Resources

Specialized skills can often be obtained free by approaching labor unions or trade organizations, or by asking a local contractor to donate a service. For small, single-shot tasks, this usually works. Look around the neighborhood for construction sites. As often as not, you will be able to divert a load of sand or get the use of a grader during lunch hour.

Example

The California Society of Professional Engineers donated over 200 hours to Oakland's Jungle Hill community park project figuring out how to prevent continued erosion of a steep hillside. The Navy Seabee Engineers then spent several additional days working with bulldozers to stabilize the site.

Design Resources

Most large cities have community design centers which provide free architectural and landscape architectural services to nonprofit groups. Professional schools of architecture are another good source. See if you can get a class to do a user study analyzing how people are using your site and then redesign the place for better use. Local landscape architectural offices or landscape contractors are usually willing to give free advice on
particular issues. Most city staffs also include design and drafting professionals—talk to your parks department, city planning office, department of public works, redevelopment agency or office of community development. Whatever the source of design assistance, make sure that the designer clearly understands that his or her role is not to single-handedly determine the form of the open space, but rather to offer practical physical solutions to the neighborhood's wants.

Example

An architect's drawing of what had been accomplished and what was proposed for one of Cleveland's community gardens was a key factor in convincing city officials to allow continued use of the site.

Horticultural Resources

Advice on diseased plants or planting improvement is often available from local nurseries, college agriculture and horticulture departments, city parks divisions, private or public arboretums, the USDA Cooperative Extension Service, and state and local urban-forestry programs.

Legal Resources

Nonprofit public-interest law firms and government-sponsored legal assistance offices offer free legal services to community groups. In addition, private law firms often devote a certain percentage of their time to free, public-interest work. The local bar association can help you locate such assistance, and the city attorney's office may also have some recommendations.

Financial Advice

Most large nonprofit organizations have staff accountants or others knowledgeable about bookkeeping who would be willing to help you set up a simple system of managing money. Direct advice is also available from the bank where your group opens an account and perhaps from the city finance department. Try to appoint someone with this kind of knowledge to your board of directors.

Building Materials

Whenever possible, go to the place where the thing you need is being used or produced, not to where it's being sold. Look around with open eyes, then match your needs to available resources.
Neighborhood Skills Checklist

☐ Carpentry
☐ Plumbing
☐ Wiring
☐ Electrical
☐ Masonry
☐ Construction
☐ Landscaping
☐ Gardening
☐ Graphic design
☐ Environmental design
☐ Printing
☐ Fundraising
☐ Legal work
☐ Other skills
3. Raising Money

Operating a site does not have to cost much. Most of what’s needed in labor and materials can be acquired through donations. Before paying for anything, be sure you have exhausted all other possibilities. However, there are expenses—both regular bills and unexpected emergencies—which require cash on hand. In raising this cash, as well as in soliciting help and hardware, your group’s nonprofit status gives you the important advantage of being able to receive contributions which are tax-deductible to the donor. An HCRS publication titled Fundraising provides more information on this topic.

Estimating Costs

Before even thinking about fundraising for your project, it is important to sit down as a group and attempt to calculate expenses over a period of time. Be realistic. Project not only costs for basic tools, utilities, and the like, but also think seriously about emergencies that could occur: leaking roofs, broken water pipes, broken equipment resulting from vandalism, or damage to the soil resulting from polluted city air. It is extremely important to assess your ability as a group to raise the funds necessary to maintain your project over time.
The Basic Pitch

Whether canvassing a neighbor, buttonholing a corporate executive, or preparing a foundation proposal, certain basic items should be included in an appeal for support.

- State the purpose of your project clearly, simply, and briefly. Why is your activity important?
- Identify the interests held in common between yourself and the person from whom you are requesting assistance. How is your activity important to this person or to the organization?
- Be specific about what the person's money will buy. If possible, carry a budget which matches the dollar amount of gifts to particular items the money would purchase—for instance, fifteen dollars will buy five bags of mulch. The Gifts Catalog Handbook, produced by HCRS, describes how to develop and present such a list.
- Show the tangible results of your efforts so far; arrange a visit to the site or bring photographs.
- Offer publicity and a chance to participate in the community effort.
- Personalize the appeal by listening and responding to the other person's concerns.

Neighborhood Sources

The best place to start fundraising is close to home, since people there have an interest in the community and can see what their money is buying.

- Membership dues in a local land trust or other organization can provide a limited but ongoing source of funds.
- Annual door-to-door canvassing can tap those local residents and businesses who benefit by your neighborhood project.
- A skill or product may be turned into a revenue-producing enterprise. Surplus produce from a community garden can be sold. Space can be rented for special activities.
- Special fundraising events might include a community potluck or barbecue, an outdoor concert, a car wash, a walkathon, a bake sale, or a flea market. Let your imagination suggest the perfect event for your community.

Example

After holding two flea markets which raised enough money to buy a piece of land, members of Atlanta's Mechanicsville Food Cooperative made their merchandising skills permanent by establishing a thrift shop at the site. Beyond being an ongoing focus of neighborhood activity, the shop and related enterprises provided homemade crafts, a nongovernmental jobs program, and enough cash to buy two more properties and build a community center.

- Sharing costs among users is a common way to cover basic bills like water and utilities.
- Small admission fees can also ease the financial burden. An adventure playground in Huntington Beach, California began charging a small entrance fee when city-park maintenance funds were axed after passage of Proposition 13. Likewise, Denver's famous Molly Brown House receives the majority of its support funds from admission fees.

Larger Sources

When seeking bigger funds, nonprofit status (or association with a group that has nonprofit status) is essential to obtain tax-deductible contributions. The most productive approach is to contact businesses which can identify with what you're doing or with the neighborhood you're doing it in.

- Corporations have been successfully involved in both developing and maintaining open spaces through 'adopt-a-lot' programs. Direct
identification with a particular piece of land in a particular neighborhood, or with a community group is often an attractive supplement to general corporate giving programs. After all, most businesses rely on a good community image. Appeal to that sense. Also appeal to the hometown pride of local corporate headquarters. Where possible, work through someone you already know in the organization. Find out who makes decisions about charitable contributions and try to arrange a meeting with that person. Try to get a corporate endowment—an annual commitment for the amount needed to maintain your lot or building.

Examples

Clorox, whose corporate headquarters are in Oakland, was one of the first companies in the city to 'adopt a lot.'

When the Tasty Baking Company moved its headquarters into a Philadelphia warehouse in an industrial neighborhood, it set up a special foundation to help solve community problems. Open space, day care, and building restoration have been some of the positive changes effected by the resulting partnership between business and neighborhood.

- Smaller annual endowments for specific purposes—water, electricity, insurance—can sometimes be arranged from the company supplying the particular service. For instance, a scavenger company may find it awkward to give your group free trash pickups (Why not every other group?), but they may be willing to give an annual charitable contribution equal to the service fee they charge.

- Private foundations generally like to provide start-up funds for acquiring and developing sites or facilities rather than ongoing commitments. However, if a foundation is involved in this way in your initial funding, you may make a convincing argument that a yearly stipend be built into the original grant in order to maintain the good results. Any large library will have several foundation directories, including listings of funding sources specifically interested in urban or recreation projects, as well as those lesser-known local foundations that may be looking for small-scale projects to support.

- Government funds, such as community development block grants, are like private foundations in their emphasis on starting things rather than maintaining them. Again, try to build in maintenance commitments from the beginning.

- A more direct approach is to try to tap into government-funded programs such as CETA by pooling efforts with other groups to share the work time of someone hired specifically to care for a community open space or building.

- Talk to city officials about organizing your own nonprofit maintenance cooperative and get the city to pay you for upkeep of public and community owned property. Such contract arrangements are becoming more feasible as hard-pressed cities look for ways to cut back salaried positions.

Example

The city of Seattle has contracts with 5 community groups to provide maintenance at 14 miniparks. The contracts save the city money, earn income for the community groups, and promote local involvement in neighborhood facilities.

Managing Money

Once your group gets the necessary money, it's important that the community gets the maximum benefit from it. To safeguard against misuse of funds, elect a responsible person who knows about accounting to act as treasurer. Or establish a treasury committee as the El Sol Brillante community garden in New York did. Appoint an executive committee to authorize expenditures before paying. Set up a bank account requiring at least two signatures for the release of any funds. Keep accurate records of all income and expenditures, and save bills and receipts. Try to get a local banker or accountant to serve on your board of directors. Such accountability will go a long way toward securing future funds.

Accounting for grant or foundation money requires special care. Make sure that the way in which the money is actually spent matches the itemized budget in the grant proposal. Make sure that spending adequately accomplishes the purposes for which the grant was intended. Finally, be sure to follow the time schedule and other details of the grant contract.
Sample Community Garden
Management/Development Budget

Office Expenses
Utilities $ 225.00
Printing 600.00
Postage 20.00
Office supplies 20.00
Sub-Total $ 865.00

Project Expenses
Property taxes $1,000.00
Insurance 150.00
Gardening hand tools 200.00
Tiller & mower rentals 75.00
Shrubbery, trees, soil, plants 200.00
Miscellaneous—garbage pickup, etc. 100.00
Sub-Total $1,725.00
Total Expenses $2,590.00

Sources of Funds
Yearly membership fees $ 250.00
@ $10.00
Community Development Block Grant 500.00
Ajax Sheet Metal Company 50.00
Brown & Green Nursery 50.00
Yearly pig roast & barbeque @ $3.00 150.00
Biannual Flea Market 600.00
The Rita Mae Gooch Foundation 500.00
Sub-Total $2,100.00

Donations of Equipment & Services (+ Matching Costs):
Ajax Bulldozer Service—clear rubble from site $ 200.00
Brown & Green Nursery—shrubs and fertilizer 150.00
Phillips Hardware—garden tools 125.00
Max’s Farm Equipment—tiller use 35.00
Mrs. Kramer’s lawnmower 35.00
City of Belmont—water & electricity 150.00
Fireman’s Insurance Company—insurance 150.00
Sub-Total $ 845.00
Total Income $2,945.00
4. Designing for Low Maintenance

Maintenance must be built into a neighborhood project design from the beginning. Assess the maintenance resources available to your group and then make sure that the design does not call for a higher level of care than you can give. Also be sure that the design offers something to all of the diverse users of your neighborhood project.
Design Considerations

- Keep the design simple. Fussy or overly complicated designs are usually expensive, difficult to build, hard to maintain, and unattractive. When in doubt, simplify.
- Combine functions whenever possible. Steps can also serve as seating, a sculpture as a plaything, a tree as a territorial boundary, or a wall as a mural. Make every part of the space or structure as usable as you can.
- Divide the space into distinct areas, each with a definite use. This allows many different people to comfortably share the space and claim it as their own. Being clear about how a place is to be used discourages misuse.
- Keep pathways and other edges direct, ample, and clearly defined. Paths which go where people want to go avoid muddy shortcuts and trampled vegetation. Low walls or retainers add to this effect, double as seating, and help keep play sand or planting soil in place.
- Use durable materials. Expect the hardest possible use and build for it. Something easy to break invites misuse. The challenge is to make a strong place which is also attractive, comfortable, and inviting. People can then identify with the strength rather than defying it or feeling put off by it.
- Use plants and trees adapted to the site. A plant which grows naturally in local conditions of water, soil, and light will be able to take care of itself once it gets started. Also consider such special urban conditions as air pollution, foot traffic around the roots, and wind from surrounding buildings. Trees make great playthings, so they must be durable enough to stand climbing and to provide the fruit, twigs, or other 'loose parts' which children may demand of them.
- Concentrate on groundcovers. Shrubs generally take more pruning and other care, as well as interfering with the site's visibility. The mowing and watering which grass requires make it appropriate only where it can actually be used for play or sitting.
- Avoid tight angles in planting areas. Give people and plants the space they need to feel comfortable.
- Provide trash containers. These should be stationary and conveniently placed.
- Provide conveniently located hose bibs and electrical outlets. Also make sure that maintenance equipment like lawn mowers has easy access to the site.
- Consider installing maintenance time-savers like automatic irrigation and mowing strips around planting beds or walls. Irrigation systems are, however, subject to vandalism and play damage, sometimes requiring more money in replacing parts than is saved in labor.
- Provide sufficient hard-surface areas. Not only are these easier to maintain than planted areas, but are essential for certain play and social activities.
- Use sound construction materials and techniques. Proper soil preparation, paving bases, rot-resistant woods, and the like save a lot of repair and replacement time later on. Do it right the first time.
- Involve people. The best way to create a place that people use and care about is to include the neighborhood at all stages of design and maintenance.

Safety Considerations

Set up a network of residents and businesses immediately around the project who agree to report any threatening or violent behavior to the police. Sometimes simply making it obvious that someone else is watching can stop a crime before it happens. Several other steps may make such a network of eyes more effective:
- All portions of the site should be kept clearly visible from surrounding streets and buildings.
- Visibility can be maintained at night by adequate lighting.
- Fencing may allow better control of the area or parts of it without actually discouraging use.
- Other small territorial markers such as a gate, an entry arch, a low wall, or a sign with your group's name on it let people know that this place belongs to someone; that it is not a no man's land where anything goes.
- Establish operating hours, make a sign, and post it.
- See if you can get a phone or a police call box installed along the street.
Once you have the necessary resources, it is relatively easy to maintain the site, whether it is open space or a building. (Building maintenance is discussed in the following chapter.) It's mainly a matter of taking care of details before they develop into problems. A publication by the New York Parks Council, *Volunteers in Parks*, is a handy reference for open-space maintenance.

**Litter**

Someone should be responsible for cleaning up the site at least once a week throughout the year and daily during heavy use. Be sure to rotate this responsibility among volunteers if you can't get it included in the rounds of a paid maintenance person. Perhaps various user groups could assume responsibility for site visits one or two days a month, thereby sharing the work. A more cohesive group might form. Make
arrangements with the local trash collectors to pick up the bagged refuse. Discourage litter by providing firmly anchored trash containers at convenient locations. Remember that care is contagious; a neat site will be viewed with pride and treated with respect.

Example

New York's Vernon Avenue Block Association found that early involvement by neighborhood people encouraged residents to consider future maintenance plans. Residents who spent weeks hauling garbage from a vacant lot are now careful to avoid littering their park in even the smallest way.

Repairs

The person responsible for daily litter pickup should also watch for necessary repairs on the site. A minor repair made in time will usually prevent a major headache and expense later on. Don't let things slide. Use the weekly site checklist at the end of this chapter for your regular inspections.

Unsafe Conditions

It is especially important to immediately correct anything dangerous—glass in the sandbox, a loose bolt on a swing, a tree limb threatening to fall, a loose floorboard. By preventing injury, you also prevent the kind of liability suit which can permanently close down your organization and your project.

Plants

During the growing season, grass cutting and watering may also be a part of your regular chores. The rest of the landscape can usually be adequately cared for in two work sessions a year—one in the spring and one in the fall. Typical tasks for these sessions are listed on the yearly landscape task chart at the end of this chapter. Of course keep alert for special problems—insects or disease, a dry spell, broken limbs.

Water Service

An adequate supply of water on the site is crucial to a community garden. It can keep the plants in a pocket park alive or a playground's drinking fountain flowing. This makes the site's plumbing system a high-priority maintenance item. Have it checked by a plumber before each growing season, and drain any exposed pipes before the first fall freeze. Keep the plumber's phone number handy for emergencies.
Electricity

Make sure everyone working on the project knows where any underground live wires run and how to turn off the electrical system in case of breakage or failure. Once again, know where to find an electrician when you need one. There are usually people with piping, wiring, and other repair skills living within the immediate neighborhood.

Drainage

One of the most common problems in a newly landscaped site is standing pools of water. Check the site after a heavy downpour and if necessary decide how to get rid of excess water. You may have to regrade an area to increase its subsurface drainage tiles to carry the water away from the site. Ask a local engineer or landscape architect for advice.

Small Changes

Watch for other slight changes which could make the place work or feel better. Perhaps a bench would get more use if you added a backrest. With another board along its top, a retaining wall could double as a seat. A blackboard might eliminate some graffiti on the walls of your neighborhood center. Notice play structures that go unused and try to figure out ways to make them more interesting—or replace them with something the neighborhood children want. These kinds of small, ongoing design adjustments, based on people's actual use of the site, make for the most popular open spaces and structures.

Tools

One of the best ways to avoid putting off a task is to have the right tool on hand when you need it. Begin every work session with safety instructions on the proper use of each tool, and keep first aid materials handy. Where feasible, design a sturdy tool and storage bin (perhaps as an additional sitting surface at the edge of a raised planting bed or play area), or a locked closet, or arrange with a nearby neighbor to store the tools in a garage or business. Some community groups have formed tool-lending services which share the resources and bring in extra cash to buy more tools.
Basic Tools and Supplies

- Pruning shears
- Lopping shears
- Pruning saw
- Pole pruner
- Round-point shovel
- Spade
- Spading fork
- Hoe
- Leaf and grass rake
- Bow rake
- Mattock
- Sponges
- Mops
- Buckets
- Squeegees
- Cleaning rags
- Cleaning detergents
- Basic tools for small maintenance tasks
- Light-bulbs
- Fuses
- Fire extinguishers
- Claw hammer
- Combination wrenches
- Drill
- Hand saw
- Hack saw
- Screw drivers
- Trowel
- Gloves
- Wheelbarrow

Weekly Site Check

- ☐ Litter?
- ☐ Broken Glass?
- ☐ Sand raked clean?
- ☐ Loose bolts or other parts?
- ☐ Broken wood?
- ☐ Loose bricks or mortar?
- ☐ Cracked concrete?
- ☐ Grass mowed?
- ☐ Stakes and ties in place?
- ☐ Broken or dead limbs?
- ☐ Plants watered?
- ☐ Plant pests or diseases?
- ☐ Water working?
- ☐ Lights working?
- ☐ Standing water?
- ☐ Washouts?
- ☐ Equipment replacements?
- ☐ Broken locks?
- ☐ Anything that might fall or splinter?
- ☐ Broken windows?
- ☐ Warped or stuck doors?
- ☐ Refrigerator cleaned?
- ☐ Sink or toilet backed up?

Yearly Landscape Tasks

- Weed all areas (4 times)
- Cultivate ground cover areas (2 times)
- Fertilize (2 times)
- Control insects (2 times)
- Prune shrubs (2 times)
- Prune trees (1 time)
- Plant bulbs and annuals (2 times)
- Replace or add plants (as needed)
- Clean and repair equipment (as needed)
- Replace play area sand (1 time)

Yearly Structural Maintenance Tasks

- Wash all windows (6 times)
- Wash and wax all floors (4 times)
- Control termites and rodents (as needed)
- Paint walls (1 time)
- Repair and replace damaged fixtures, walls, stairs (as needed)
Maintaining a building for community use entails many of the same considerations which apply to maintaining open space. Basic organization, community involvement, and fund-raising skills come into play for either type of property. However, the presence of a building on the site introduces special problems and potentials.

**Code Compliance**

Local governments require that buildings meet a series of written codes ensuring their safety and livability. Meeting these codes not only is a necessary responsibility of owning the property, but also provides a systematic means of fulfilling the basic maintenance needs of the building. Most cities or counties will inspect your building on request (usually for a fee) and issue a letter detailing the work needed to bring the structure up to code. Copies of the various codes—building code, electrical code, plumbing code, etc.—can be obtained from the city. When you have done the necessary work, the inspecting agency will issue a certificate entitling you to continued use of the structure. You will probably also need a city building permit before you start any substantial work. All these steps obviously take time, but the payoff is a sound building.
Wiring, Heating, and Plumbing Systems

The threat to life and property from faulty building systems is so great that these should be kept in good repair at all times and should remain the highest of your building maintenance priorities. A fire from faulty wiring could destroy everything you've worked for. Leaking pipes can quickly damage much of a building's interior. Be aware that many local codes require that work on these systems be done by licensed tradespeople.

Structural Integrity

Sound foundations and framing are also fundamental to long-term use of a building. Check and correct any rotting timbers or deteriorating masonry. You may want to bring in a structural engineer to supplement the advice of a contractor or building inspector. Seek donations of these skills.

Termites

Insects are one of the greatest threats to older structures. Look around wood footings for sawdust and other signs of termites. If you suspect their presence, hire a licensed termite inspector to prepare a report on the building. This report will cost fifty to one hundred dollars and will specify the work needed to correct any insect problems. Again, try for a donation.

Weatherproofing and Energy Conservation

Preventing leaky roofs, windows, or siding is a key element of building maintenance. Keep roofing, flashing, and other drainage features in good repair. The ongoing costs of operating a building can be considerably reduced in many climates by proper insulation, storm windows, weatherstripping and other measures. Your local utility company can often provide advice and low-interest loans. There are also some surprisingly simple means of capturing and retaining heat from the sun, or tapping the cooling capacity of low nighttime temperatures and of the ground itself: window greenhouses that face south, glazed brick walls, water-filled oil drums, and sensitive plantings. Many how-to books are now available on such techniques.

Appearance

As a community property owner, you will want to make sure that your property enhances the appearance of the neighborhood. Cleaning and painting are perhaps the easiest steps. Look around at neighboring buildings, then either repeat their character or provide a pleasing accent with your building. Also take a close look at your building's original architectural character. It is almost always more pleasing to bring out this character than it is to 'modernize' it. Many cities have design guidelines and staff architects to help you with this undertaking.

Usability

As with open space, an underused building is an open invitation to vandalism and other problems. Your group probably owns the building for a particular purpose, but you may wish to supplement this use by making the space available for additional community uses. Try to have enough going on so that a responsible person is in the building all day and provide adequate security at night. To encourage such usability, you may need to rethink the interior design of the building. If you do remodel, try to create a flexible space which can respond to changing community needs.

Creative Financing

You may want to charge rent for some uses—perhaps for meeting facilities or an upper-story apartment. This added income could help cover the monthly utility bill and other expenses of maintaining a building. In addition, the sizable outlays necessary for code compliance, remodeling, or certain repairs are usually met through building loans from local banks. Since you borrow against the equity or resale value of the building itself, a community group can often greatly increase their borrowing power by pooling labor to make improvements which increase the property value. This 'sweat equity' approach is the basis of many flourishing community enterprises.

Example

While purchasing land for open space, the Wyckoff-Bond community group in Brooklyn also acquired a garage. The rent from this structure now pays for the insurance, taxes and general upkeep of the open space.
7. Looking to the Future

The real measure of a successful place is not just the way it looks but the way it's used. A heavily used park or building may show some wear and tear, but as long as it is reasonably well maintained, it is not likely to become the target of major vandalism. People care about such a place, and people are around to watch after it. On the other hand, neglected space breeds more neglect. Keeping a place peopled is therefore one of the best ways to ensure its care.

**Happenings**

Arrange activities which will draw people. Special events like band concerts, evening concerts, a kite flying day, weddings, or a neighborhood picnic focus attention on the site. Invite nearby classes, clubs, daycare centers, or recycling businesses to use the area on a regular basis. Perhaps local sidewalk vendors or street artists can be encouraged to set up on or near the project. You may want to establish a site-programming subcommittee to encourage and coordinate such uses.

Certainly, use the site for your own group's meetings whenever possible.

**Example**

Denver citizens keep their historic Molly Brown House constantly busy. They conduct daily tours and run a small gift shop; they rent rooms for weddings, parties, and meetings and sponsor fashion shows of the turn-of-the-century clothing donated by Denverites. The proceeds from these activities, plus occasional public service solicitations, provide all operating costs for the historic site.
Design Revisions

One of the greatest opportunities in caring for open space or a building is the chance to slowly shape it into the most usable space possible. Take your cues from the people now using the place by watching what they do (and don’t do) and by talking to them about what changes they would like. Chapter 4 includes some practical suggestions for making neighborhood places more usable and easier to maintain.

Vandalism

If the site is vandalized, you will often be able to find out who did it. Simple mischief on the part of neighborhood children is usually the root. Talk to them. Let them know why the project is important to you and to them, and how much work you and others have put into it. Invite them to join these efforts. Ask them to repair or replace the things they’ve damaged. Then redirect their energy by giving them maintenance tasks to do on a regular basis.

Example

Elderly residents living near one of Oakland’s community gardens solved both their vandalism and labor problems by hiring other senior citizens who lived closer to the site to weed and generally look after their garden. Since then, no vandalism has occurred.

‘Undesirables’

Sometimes people complain that neighborhood projects attract ‘undesirables’ whose presence discourages other users. Occasionally this is true; if something illegal or dangerous is going on, contact the proper authorities. But don’t overreact. Neighborhood sites are some of the few places where teenagers can congregate away from parents, or where people down on their luck can sit awhile and enjoy life without having to pay for the right. These are, in fact, important uses of a neighborhood place. Plan your area so that such uses can occur without interfering with other uses.

More Ideas

Your group may wish to extend itself beyond a single project. A neighborhood problem is generally an opportunity for neighborhood improvement.

- Other lots and buildings can be converted to community use as a natural outgrowth of success with one site. Neighborhood needs or people not satisfied by the first lot become the focus of later efforts. Consult HCRS’s
Citizen's Action Manual for ways to identify, acquire, and develop vacant land.

- Public parks all over the country are suffering from inadequate city maintenance funds. Citizen groups can help stretch scarce tax dollars by taking care of routine landscape maintenance, mounting anti-litter and anti-crime campaigns, planting trees, developing and supervising play areas, creating community space out of underutilized structures, and generally claiming public space as neighborhood space.

- Planting trees and vines is a simple way to improve land which cannot be acquired for full open-space development. A single tree can give a green character to an entire block. Grass or wildflower seeding can quickly and inexpensively carpet most of the bare land in a neighborhood. Vines can spread the effect up buildings and over fences.

- Street space is another publicly owned resource. Trees can be planted, seating and window boxes added, lighting improved, litter cans introduced, paving patterns brightened with brick or colored concrete, and sidewalks widened in places to add space and slow down cars.

- Painting wall space can expand open space, transforming blank walls into murals of trees and flowers, sky and water, while enhancing the visual environment.

- Other neighborhood issues such as good housing, traffic control, crime prevention, and day care are fundamental to creating a community environment which is personally satisfying and socially responsive.
Above all be proud of what you're doing. Pride is catching. Your success is an example—like many of the examples used in this manual. Make it known, and other people in other places will be inspired to create better and more lasting neighborhoods. The people who follow you, in your own neighborhood and elsewhere, will know that someone cared.
Recommended Readings


Here's How It Works

The HCRS Information Exchange depends on an informal network of contributors to continually expand its collection and contribute to the improved delivery of recreational/cultural services in the United States. In order to provide first class up-to-date information, we ask members to contribute materials which we will announce in Technical Assistance NOTIFICATIONS. These materials would include:

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Here's What It Costs

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