HOW CAN WE SAFELY SOCIALIZE, EXERCISE, AND RELAX OUTDOORS IF PARKS AND TRAILS ARE CROWDED OR CLOSED?

Open space, parks, and trails in Montgomery County provide an essential respite for residents to maintain their physical and mental health. However, overcrowding and limited access to parks during the pandemic have challenged the ability to safely comply with social distancing guidelines. Not surprisingly, limitations placed on how and when existing open space areas and trails may be used have inspired an expanded vision of what recreation and “the outdoors” look like for the foreseeable future—and likely well beyond.

STREETS ARE EVERYWHERE AND CAN BE ADAPTED

Communities can look to any number of other spaces right in their own neighborhoods that can be opened or adapted for recreation. Many cities and towns have looked no further than their own streets as additional space for recreation by partially or entirely closing public streets to vehicular traffic to create a safe environment for pedestrian and bicycle mobility. These “repurposed” streets not only create additional opportunities for non-motorized activity, but they can also serve as miniature parks or “parklets.” For example:

- San Francisco developed comprehensive guidelines on creating parklets—repurpose a few on-street parking spaces with some chairs, tables, and protective barriers and a new socially distanced plaza is created.
- Bay Area neighbor Oakland, CA recently established a “Slow Streets” program in which certain streets are closed to through traffic to create more space for people during the pandemic. These highly successful models have attracted the attention of cities across the country and world.

In fact, streets don’t even need to be adapted or closed to provide extra mobility and recreational value for pedestrians and bicyclists looking for safe alternatives to crowded trails. In Montgomery County alone, there are thousands of miles of local streets that bicyclists, joggers, and walkers can comfortably use, starting in their own neighborhood. Based on an analysis from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC), the Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC) recently created a web app (find it at www.montcopa.org/getoutandgostreets) showing where these low-volume, low-stress streets are located.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Increased use of county trails and limited access to parks during the pandemic have inspired an expanded vision of where and how people can recreate and enjoy the outdoors.
- Cemeteries, golf courses, parking lots, and closed or “slow” streets are viable, nontraditional alternatives to conventional open space and trail resources.
- Low-stress and neighborhood streets are a convenient and readily accessible alternative to trails for bicyclists, pedestrians, and joggers.
THINKING OUTSIDE THE OPEN SPACE “BOX”

A re-imagining of how open spaces can be used and shared is critical to accommodating increased demand and social distancing guidelines. In response, many communities across the country have adapted or repurposed outdoor spaces to facilitate uses beyond those intended to serve as open space for public recreation and outdoor access.

- **Cemeteries** have a long history of being used as public parks and picnic spots. Cemeteries in our area, including West Laurel Hill and Laurel Hill Cemeteries, have been openly welcoming visitors to explore the grounds and enjoy a respite from busier parks and open spaces long before the pandemic.

- **Golf courses** are also viable options for additional public park space during the pandemic. For example, a 145-acre golf course in San Francisco was converted to a temporary public park.

- **Public schools** and educational campuses have often been used informally as parks and, as the Trust for Public Land advocates, can quickly increase permanent recreational space through formal shared-use agreements.

- **Parking lots and parking garages** are even being re-imagined. While parklets can consume on-street parking spaces in the public right-of-way, parking garages and lots are typically owned by private entities. Therefore, more extensive coordination and negotiation may be required to open these spaces to the public. In Salt Lake City, a Shakespeare production was successfully performed in a parking garage due to pandemic restrictions.

“In so many ways, our cemeteries serve as a buffer to the anxieties people are experiencing as a result of the pandemic, and we are grateful to address these needs by keeping our 265 acres open to the public... . Rarely does a day pass without receiving a note of thanks from someone who is so appreciative of having access to our grounds.”

- Nancy A. Goldenberg, CEO and President, West Laurel Hill and Laurel Hill Cemeteries

RESOURCES

Need More Outdoor Space? Maybe Cities Already Have it.

Mapping How Cities Are Reclaiming Street Space

The case for making golf courses public parks during coronavirus

A 145-acre California golf course was turned into a public park as local officials seek to open more outdoor spaces

Opening schoolyards to the public during non-school hours could alleviate the problem of park access for nearly 20 million people

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- Safeguarding Our Open Space
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America’s public school grounds solve the problem of park access for at least 19.6 MILLION people, including 5.2 MILLION children

Source: The Trust For Public Land

Busy streets can be filled by more than just cars.

Photo Credit: DVRPC

Cemeteries were some of our first great public open spaces

Photo Credit: George Manos

Golf Courses can serve as additional public open space.

Photo Credit: DVRPC