



A 'GreenPlan' for Philly

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GreenPlan Philadelphia's Open Spaces Plan

How do you grow the city in a responsible way? How do you ensure that what you plan for is sustainable? How do you integrate existing community plans into a comprehensive plan for the city's future? These are some of the questions the City of Philadelphia seeks to answer through its GreenPlan Philadelphia initiative.

Philadelphians have long recognized the benefits of open spaces to their quality of life in the city. Professor Susan Wachter's study for the Wharton School has documented the links between quality open spaces and economic prosperity in neighborhoods (The Determinants of Neighborhood Transformation in Philadelphia; 2005), and a PennFuture-sponsored survey conducted last spring found that "ninety-two percent of Philadelphians believe that environmental and

infrastructure improvements are necessary to improve the area's economic competitiveness and growth." But until now, nothing much has been done to protect open spaces, or to open up a dialogue with residents to form a consensus around sustainability issues.

That's about to change. The City of Philadelphia recently launched GreenPlan Philadelphia, a massive, citywide, inter-agency effort, led by the Managing Director's Office, to identify the city's natural resources, and to develop, with community input, a plan to preserve and protect open green spaces throughout the city.

GreenPlan involves fourteen city agencies, including the Department of Recreation, the Department of Streets, the Water Department, and the City Planning Commission, as well as regional partnerships with various agencies including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, among others (click for a complete list of involved organizations). City of Philadelphia Assistant Managing Director Robert Allen, chief spokesperson for the project, said, "It's a huge undertaking. There are over 200 open space related projects going on in the city right now, and one of the goals of our plan is to make sure they relate to one another in a good way."

That means ensuring coordinated planning, so that, for instance, a bike trail planned in one district connects with a bike trail in another, and that there are adequate green pathways to parks and public access to rivers. "Fundamentally, the goal is to provide quality green open spaces for citizens, for visitors, and to make sure that every community is served. Right now we have huge disparities. People who live in the western part of the city have an enormous amount of open space and easy access to it. Other areas have almost no open space, no access to parks. There may be recreation sites, maybe a blacktopped school playground, but nowhere people can enjoy trees, or no park environment for kids to run and play," said Allen.

Maitreyi Roy, Director of Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Green says, "The bones of the city are extraordinary in terms of open spaces, and the idea is to protect and preserve them into the future." The PHS was

hired by the City to facilitate community input in the GreenPlan process.

“Open space plans for big cities really inform what the outdoors looks like. On a very personal level, this effects every citizen. How do you feel when you walk to work, or go to the grocery store? It effects the air you breathe. Socially, a greener place is a calmer place. It’s a way to connect to the community. There’s documentation that greener spaces around schools makes the kids learn better, they’re smarter about how they approach learning. There’s a lot of connection between good quality green space and decreases in crime. The environmental benefits and the economic benefits are well documented, but even if you didn’t think about those factors, at a very personal level it has a huge impact on your daily life,” said Roy. “GreenPlan is a project that starts with these things. We know the benefits, so what are we going to do about it? There’s a boom in the city with real estate, but what are we doing in those neighborhoods that are dense and built out? This process is a dialogue that will inform and influence those types of things.”

The community engagement provision is a notable feature of the plan. Information about the program is available at www.GreenPlanPhiladelphia.com. There’s a survey for people to fill out. The City has provided a telephone number residents can call to leave a message and be contacted about open space issues, and they plan an advertising campaign in the neighborhood newspapers. The city is also reaching out through the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives and neighborhood Townwatch organizations.

The plan provides for citizen input at the beginning and the end, and encourages feedback throughout the process. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) is the key partner focused on citizen engagement. They have established deep ties to the various neighborhoods across the city through their Philadelphia Green program, community gardens and parks revitalization efforts. They have been active for decades in urban greening efforts, and the Sustainability Forums they continue to co-sponsor have done much to spark community interest in these issues.

PHS began the community input process for GreenPlan by inviting 200 community associations to participate in outreach planning. About 100 groups stayed involved. Twelve public meetings have been scheduled, corresponding to the twelve planning districts delineated by the Planning Commission, to begin the process of finding out what communities want included in an open spaces plan. The first one is set for October 25th in Roxborough.

“The idea is to bring people together in one meeting, and then have subgroups if people want to talk about particular areas in the community. These planning areas are huge areas, they cross neighborhood boundaries, but we found our community partners are very hungry for this kind of cross neighborhood effort. There’s a great opportunity for dialogue here,” said Roy.

“After these community meetings there will be venues to get people together to discuss citywide issues, and to discuss some of the feedback we got during community meetings. We’ll have follow up meetings, because hopefully communities will invite us back, and they’ll say, we’d like to learn more, or, we have this particular issue and didn’t have time to get into it in detail at the big meeting. And then we’ll have a process where subject matter experts can get together and talk about what we found out from the community feedback, and provide input and make recommendations. We’ll have a consultant gather all this information in a meaningful way, and help us put a plan together so that we make all the right connections between communities,” said Allen. “This is a long-term plan. This is not something we’re going to implement in five years. There’re going to be enormous capital costs, which we’re going to try to estimate, once we determine what the needs are. And we will help prioritize those needs.”

Many times plans have been undertaken with great fanfare, only to sit on shelves, unimplemented. In many cases neighborhoods have undertaken their own plans, and there are projects in progress throughout the city. GreenPlan seeks to integrate those efforts into their larger view, rather than recreate what’s already been done. When

asked about how the recently announced PennPraxis plan for the Delaware waterfront might be integrated with GreenPlan, Allen said he didn't know yet, but that it would be. "There's no question that whatever they do has to be coordinated with what we do, to make sure that their recommendations are incorporated in what we're recommending for the city. The good news is, this open space plan has provided the venue to do that. What has happened before is that that kind of coordination would be fragmented. You'd get all these individual plans for the waterfronts, and then the Schuylkill River Waterfront Development Corporation, sort of quasi-nonprofit entities, doing all this stuff. But the open space plan provides a venue for all of it to come together."

What makes GreenPlan different is not just the scope of the plan itself, or the community engagement process, but also the inter-agency cooperation it has facilitated. "We have a group of people who are our cabinet for open space planning, people from Fairmount Park, City Planning, the Watershed office, the Health Department- because for the first time they have a say in city planning and what's going on through this process- and others. We now have a forum for people to make the right connections," Allen said.

Implementation and stewardship into the future are components of the plan's goals. "We've done extensive research on what other cities are doing, and we're going to make recommendations on how it can be sustained," Allen said. "Perhaps we can set up a permanent structure for open space and sustainability issues in the city, so there's a place to go where information can be provided, so we can make informed decisions about the things the city does. So it's not just City Council members saying, I'm making this decision, I'm building this shopping center here because it's going to create 50 jobs in my community. Hopefully, this forum can say, well, City Councilperson, if you did this with this real estate, and provided access to the river, you could increase the real estate values in your district and still bring in jobs. Here's the economic benefit to leaving open spaces and greening the community instead of building a shopping center with a useful life of 20 years.

"Now, that's the vision. Whether that happens, it's difficult to say. Politics always come into play. But at least, if politics are going to come into play, then other stakeholders have had a say, and we're going into it with eyes open. And we can get better at advocating for open spaces as we go along."

Roy is also keen to provide solutions about stewardship into the future. "I think people who live here, who care about the city, that's the best place to start. So, with GreenPlan Philadelphia, the city is starting that process by first saying to residents, what are your concerns? What are your interests? What are your priorities for the future? The idea of engaging community partners was to get them involved in the beginning so they become stakeholders into the future. They become stewards of a plan for their own community," she said, "So it lives large, beyond the agencies, beyond the partners involved. It lives on in the community. Any great, solid vision comes from the community. That's the process we hope to facilitate, and use that as a foundation for the planning process."