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Transform Small Parks

Big Idea in Action

In the future, Washington neighborhoods will be resplendent with lushly landscaped circles, triangles, and squares. These small parks are easily visualized as accessible destinations for all residents and visitors and provide important community open space for a variety of activities. Individually, they serve as a lovely place to eat lunch outdoors, sit and chat with a neighbor, play, or read. Collectively, they green neighborhoods and beautify the public realm.

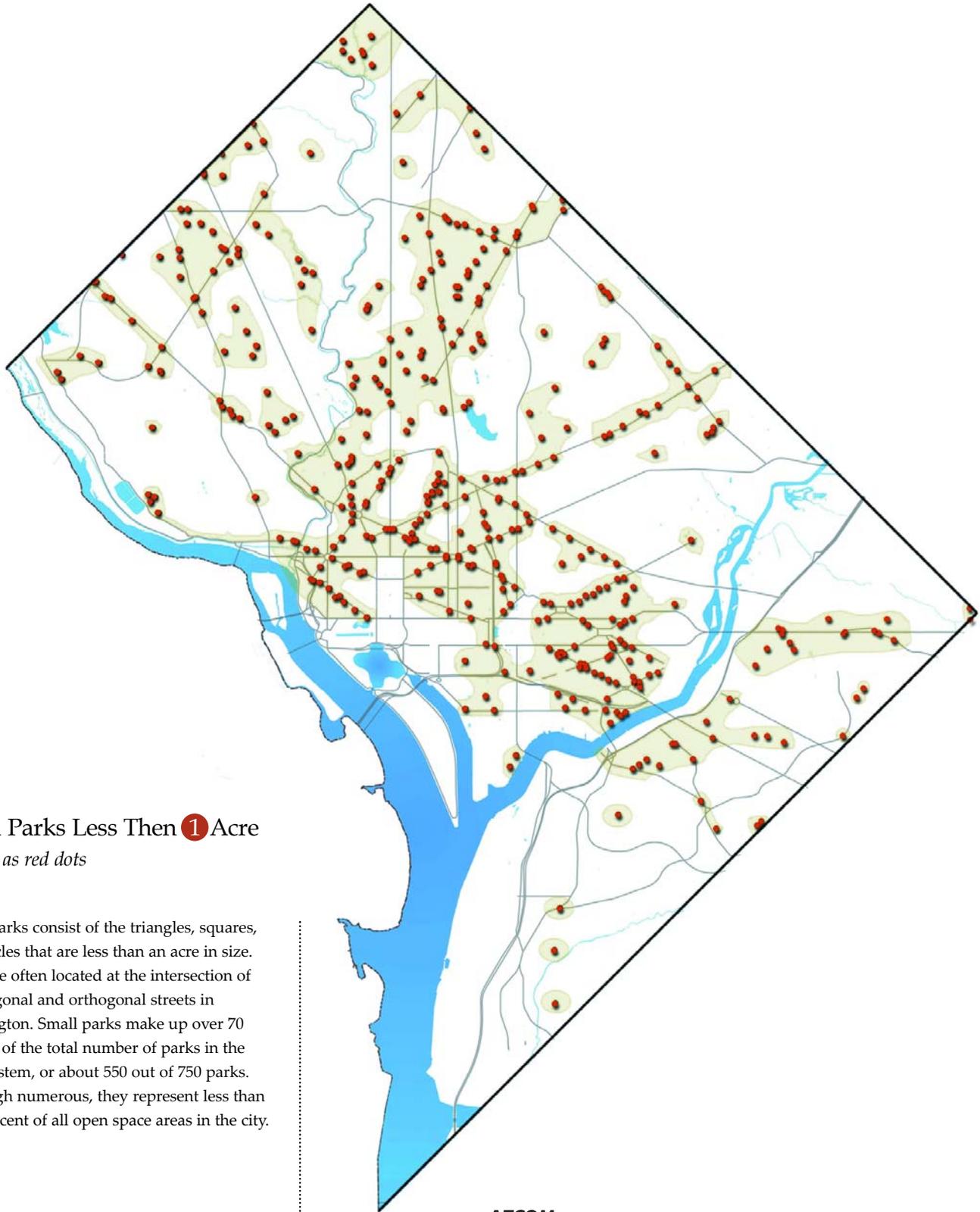
Washington's abundant small parks present an enormous untapped resource. The existing spatial distribution of small parks in Washington ensures that virtually every neighborhood can have walkable access to green open space. By transforming underutilized small parks into successful public spaces, more residents will have access to recreation and open space. Visitors and residents alike will be drawn to the small parks with their historic features, artwork, and cultural activities.

Civic groups take pride in helping to maintain the small parks in their neighborhoods, often providing additional programming as appropriate. In many neighborhoods, these small parks provide much-needed open spaces that promote active living, walkability, community safety, and choices for an enriching urban lifestyle. They also offer an opportunity to more evenly disperse Washington's commemorative works beyond the monumental core.

Each small park is individually important to area residents, workers, and visitors. Collectively, Washington's extensive small park system underpins a cohesive urban network of green spaces, serving as the glue of the larger parks and open space network. This diverse network of park and open space distinguishes Washington as a "City of Parks," beautifies neighborhoods, and is the place where local civic life happens.



The sheer numbers and locations of these small parks within Washington neighborhoods provide an opportunity to improve the park system at a manageable scale with big results.



Small Parks Less Than ① Acre

Shown as red dots

Small parks consist of the triangles, squares, and circles that are less than an acre in size. They are often located at the intersection of the diagonal and orthogonal streets in Washington. Small parks make up over 70 percent of the total number of parks in the park system, or about 550 out of 750 parks. Although numerous, they represent less than two percent of all open space areas in the city.

A Brief History of Small Parks in Washington

Small parks are distinct features of the urban fabric of Washington and the result of multiple planning and improvement initiatives. Within the L'Enfant Plan, triangle parks are typically open spaces at the intersection of diagonal and orthogonal streets. When L'Enfant created the plan for the capital city in 1791, he envisioned open spaces in the centers of the residential areas where streets meet to provide light and air to its inhabitants. It took almost another century as the roadbeds, curbs, and utility lines were constructed for these open spaces to be completed as parks.

While L'Enfant envisioned park spaces to serve the needs of residents of the new capital city, the largely undefined smaller open spaces only slowly took shape through the next century as the city plan was developed and streets were improved. In the mid-1800s, streets and neighborhoods began to be platted outside the boundaries of the L'Enfant Plan. Some of the earliest suburbs—such as Uniontown (Anacostia) and LeDroit Park— included small parks as a community amenity. Until the 1890s, the subdivision of nearby farms and estates were platted with streets and building lots that did not relate to an overall plan and lacked coordination. This occurred most notably in the northwest section of the city bounded by Florida Avenue, Rock Creek Park, North Capitol Street and Spring Road. This unregulated development prompted the creation of the 1893 and 1898 highway plans, developed in consultation with the noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. These plans extended major L'Enfant avenues, pre-determined locations for all city streets, and continued the tradition of creating small parks at the intersection of diagonal and orthogonal streets. The small parks along 16th Street, Mount Pleasant Street, Rhode Island Avenue, and Georgia Avenue north of Florida Avenue are examples of small parks resulting from these plans.

In the late 19th century, the Office of Public Buildings and Ground of the United States Army Corps of Engineers improved many of the smaller triangular spaces as simple lawns or flower beds, or as small parks. Significant improvements also occurred during the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration.

By the mid-20th century, urban renewal and other government programs intended to revitalize neighborhoods developed additional small neighborhood parks as part of mixed-use developments. Many of these parks are located within the city block, and usually provide active recreation amenities such as playgrounds, picnic tables, and multi-use courts.

Today, there are approximately 550 small parks less than one acre in size distributed throughout Washington. These parks function as sites for national and local commemoration, street medians, traffic circles and pocket parks in neighborhoods.



Triangle at Florida Avenue and R Street, NW

Ownership and ambiguity issues can lead to encroachment on park space by adjacent uses, such as this small park at the intersection of Florida Avenue and R Street, NW. Conceptual improvements are illustrated on the following page.



Challenges

Small parks often exist in the shadow of the larger, more renowned parks. Residents and out-of-towners alike are more familiar with Rock Creek Park, Potomac Park, and the National Mall. Many small parks, on the other hand, are virtually unseen to any except for their immediate neighbors. Over the years, many of the squares, circles, and triangles have been used for private storage, Civil War camp sites, trash dumps, formal marketplaces, and squatter shack sites. To this day, confusion over ownership and purpose makes them prone to being ignored for funding, vandalized, encroached upon by private uses, or reconfigured for traffic improvements. As a result, many of these small parks have been underutilized as open space resources for the community.

Small parks can be hard to administer because their management and maintenance are split between the National Park Service and multiple District agencies. Each agency has a different mission, which determines the level of improvement, programming, improvement and maintenance of these parks. Management jurisdictions, and in many cases, ownership, of many small parks was transferred from the federal government to the District of Columbia at the time of Home Rule. Subsequently, various District agencies have been assigned responsibility for these spaces. This development history has resulted in confusion over site management that persists today.

Small neighborhood parks are difficult to maintain because they are not large enough to merit dedicated site staff. Instead, smaller maintenance crews responsible for a significant number of locations are assigned to small parks. However, they often only visit after a problem is reported. The multi-jurisdictional management structure for small parks makes it difficult for community users to know who to turn to when maintenance is needed or when there is an interest in the community to fix up a park. Even agencies are sometimes uncertain who has jurisdiction over some spaces. Thus, it is not uncommon to find a small park that is not maintained next to other well-maintained small parks in a neighborhood. Some neighborhoods resort to maintaining and making unsanctioned changes to the small parks themselves after unsuccessfully finding the appropriate park agency that could give them permission.

The lack of maintenance leads to other issues that go beyond park management and touch upon larger societal challenges, most notably homelessness and crime. While these small parks are not the root of the social problems, they are public spaces in neighborhoods that can become venues for anti-social activities when the people in the community do not take ownership of them. Lack of formal coordination between police, park departments and organizations dedicated to social change is an ongoing challenge that must be addressed.



The multitude of small parks makes maintenance difficult.

Opportunities

While the size of the small parks limits the amount and type of programming and facilities that can be located within individual sites, each has the potential to become a defining component of a neighborhood. Small parks located along avenues or thoroughfares can serve as gateways to neighborhoods, while those located on local streets could be a central gathering place. They have the potential to be a character-defining feature of a neighborhood, while providing a safe and easily accessible resource for recreation. Activating them as vibrant community spaces can help encourage neighbor interaction, make neighborhoods safer, and improve the environmental health of the city through additional tree canopy, native landscapes and permeable surfaces.

In some neighborhoods, the small neighborhood parks can provide much-needed recreation space. These spaces can accommodate a wide variety of passive and active recreational opportunities. Some activities can be formally programmed as community gardens, playgrounds, or dog parks. Other activities that can be accommodated by small parks are more spontaneous, such as picnicking, throwing a Frisbee, or reading. With the increased use of a small park comes a stronger sense of community ownership over the space. These parks provide direct opportunities to incorporate positive behavior into the lives of its residents, and in turn can reduce the number of activities that hurt the fabric of a community, such as drug dealing and robberies. The more a neighborhood is involved, the safer the small parks are for the community.

Small parks are an ideal venue to showcase sustainable practices, specifically those for stormwater management, in every neighborhood across the city. Many of the parks are too small to be used for recreation or inaccessible because of traffic. With appropriate improvements, many small parks could play an enhanced role in capturing and treating stormwater runoff from adjacent streets. This practice could raise awareness of stormwater issues and incorporate small parks more fully into the city's green infrastructure. These green spaces can also help cool summer air temperature, increase Washington's tree canopy, and reduce air pollution.

In addition to serving as important neighborhood open spaces, the citywide system of small parks plays a vital role in defining the character of the nation's capital. Washington's bountiful small parks are a defining feature of the cityscape. Their frequency softens the hard urban streetscape and weaves open space throughout residential and commercial districts. Small parks are increasingly important as sites for distinctive local and national commemorative works. Collectively, the small parks can help unify and expand the existing parks and open space network. Coordinated improvements and maintenance along a corridor or within a neighborhood can reinforce their importance as a significant park type within a larger network of parks and open spaces.

Small Space, Big Opportunities

Well-designed physical improvements can significantly enhance the contributions of small parks to a surrounding neighborhood. The three photo simulations below illustrate potential improvements, each highlighting a different park theme.



Placemaking



Connectivity: Urban Trail



Sustainability: Low Impact Development (LID)

Small Parks Model Project

Manage Small Parks by Geographic Area.

As Washington has relatively few medium-sized parks and several neighborhoods with comparatively less access to open space, linking geographically clustered small parks can be an important strategy in providing multi-purpose, complementary amenities. Thirteen small parks near the intersection of Rhode Island and Florida Avenues, NW, were considered as a neighborhood cluster case study. The four parks south of Florida Avenue are within the boundaries of the L'Enfant Plan and are considered contributing elements for its historic plan designation. None of the parks exceeds 0.7 acres in size and ten are less than 0.1 acre.

Ownership and management of the parks is diverse, and is reflected in their improvements. The largest park at the southwest corner of Florida Avenue and 1st Street, NW, is managed by the District Department of Parks and Recreation, contains playground equipment, a court and benches, and sees heavy community use. The National Park Service park immediately across Florida Avenue is landscaped and helps define the Bloomingdale neighborhood. The District Department of Transportation park at Florida Avenue and North Capitol Street is a busy transfer point for several bus lines. The remaining parks are minimally landscaped or paved. Truxton Park, formerly at the intersection of Florida Avenue and North Capitol Street, was eliminated by earlier transportation projects.

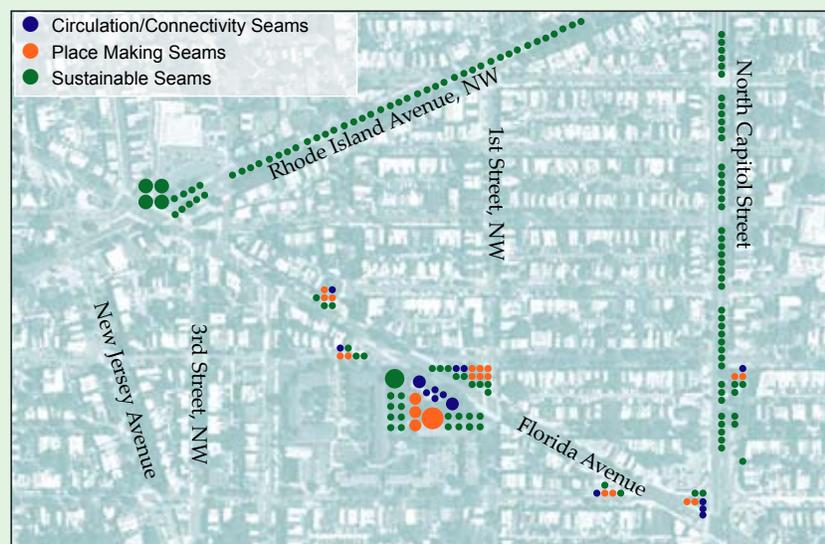
These small parks face many challenges:

- ◆ Size, location, and other restrictions, such as historic designations, can constrain use and design. These same factors, along with a lack of coordinated features, make these parks, and their potential, less visible to adjacent neighborhoods.
- ◆ High traffic volumes on adjacent streets pose challenges to connect park spaces, and bike and pedestrian access can be unsafe or unclear. Encroachment by adjacent uses and inappropriate activities discourages use.
- ◆ Maintenance and programming responsibilities are divided between three agencies. Without coordinated maintenance, design standards or complementary uses, parks are not used, or perceived, as part of a network. Small parks often bear the brunt of limited agency resources, resulting in less maintenance and fewer amenities.

The Shaw/Rhode Island/Florida Avenue Cluster

There are many opportunities to connect and define small park clusters in the Florida and Rhode Island Avenue neighborhood so that their impact is magnified. Using the themes of connectivity, sustainability and placemaking, parks can be visually unified to create a distinct identity at the corridor or neighborhood level.

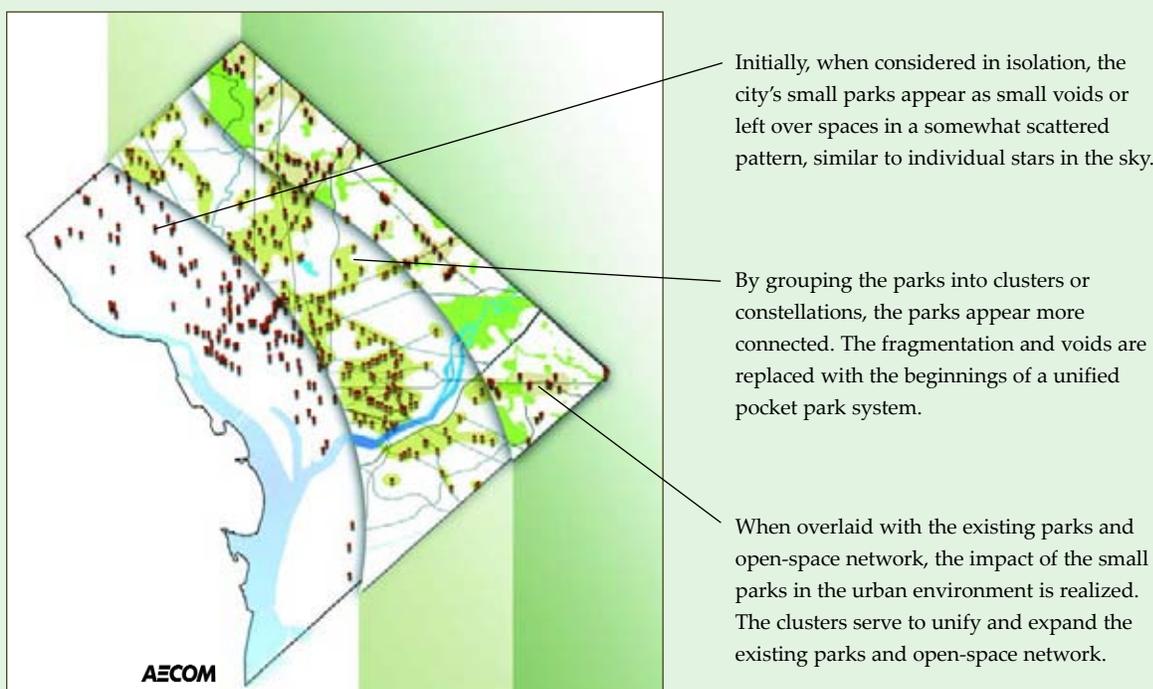
This physical improvement graphic identifies opportunities to connect and define small park clusters using themes of connectivity, sustainability, and placemaking. The cluster concept is appropriate for small parks with well-defined geographic areas, corridors, or neighborhoods where revitalization activities are occurring. Small parks can be linked to provide multi-purpose amenities in a community with very limited open space.



Small Parks Model Project

Move Towards a Systemic Approach to Planning Small Parks to Improve Design, Programming, and Maintenance.

While a cluster approach to improving and maintaining the small parks addresses needs at a neighborhood level, addressing system-wide challenges of managing small parks could have dramatic results. To appreciate this opportunity, consider the potential benefits of coordination between the federal and District agencies responsible for these small parks. A coordinated approach to programming, improving and maintaining these urban spaces would complement efforts to better define their use and design, and present opportunities to use scarce resources more effectively. It is helpful to step back and consider that improvements to small parks can have cumulative impacts to the whole park system, as illustrated to the right.



Lessons Learned

- ◆ The full potential of small parks is largely untapped.
- ◆ Using parks to their best advantage and establishing a clearly defined role increases their visibility and provides great opportunities to build a sense of community.
- ◆ Their small size makes it easier for civic or business groups to provide improvements or maintenance.
- ◆ Given the widespread distribution and number of small parks, they have the potential to transform the image of the city and strengthen neighborhood identity.

Recommendations

Transform Small Parks

Focus on System-wide Improvements to Small Parks (SMP-1)

Small parks can provide a greater contribution toward the existing open space network than their size suggests, provided that they are considered together as a system and not in isolation from one another. Small parks can be coordinated as a network to reinforce placemaking, sustainability, and connectivity.

- ◆ Categorize small parks by geographic area, function, adjacent use, and/or size as a basis for determining the appropriate agency to manage them, their purpose and programming, and their local or national identity.
- ◆ Prioritize improvements to small park clusters in areas with limited access to parks and open space, and a growing population.
- ◆ Coordinate the programming, physical improvements, and management of clusters of small parks to capitalize on the synergistic benefits of several parks with complementary functions such as a tot lot, rain garden, memorial, and seating area in the center of the neighborhood.
- ◆ Apply common themes such as sustainability, place-making, or connectivity to plan, enhance, and maintain the small parks as a system.

Develop a Coordinated Management Approach (SMP-2)

Defining the role of small parks in the larger park system will help develop a coordinated approach to management among the various park and planning agencies, help the agencies manage them more efficiently, and promote system-wide investment of resources.

- ◆ Develop a shared database of small parks to inform coordination efforts between agencies and with the public, including data on ownership, size, location, function, level of use, historic or cultural value, commemorative elements, programs, and condition.
- ◆ Assess existing agency jurisdiction for certain small parks to ensure that each parcel is managed effectively to meet District and/or federal objectives and to clarify responsibilities of the managing agencies.
- ◆ Develop a coordinated approach to handle service requests and inquiries for small parks regardless of jurisdiction. The approach could include a central site to receive requests and inquiries that are then referred to the responsible agency that could best address their concerns.
- ◆ Incorporate local commemoration, linear or neighborhood gateways, public art, and way-finding as landmark elements.
- ◆ Provide informative and interpretive signage to identify park management and any park and/or neighborhood history.

Recommendations



Lamont Park

Increase Capacity and Improve Livability (SMP-3)

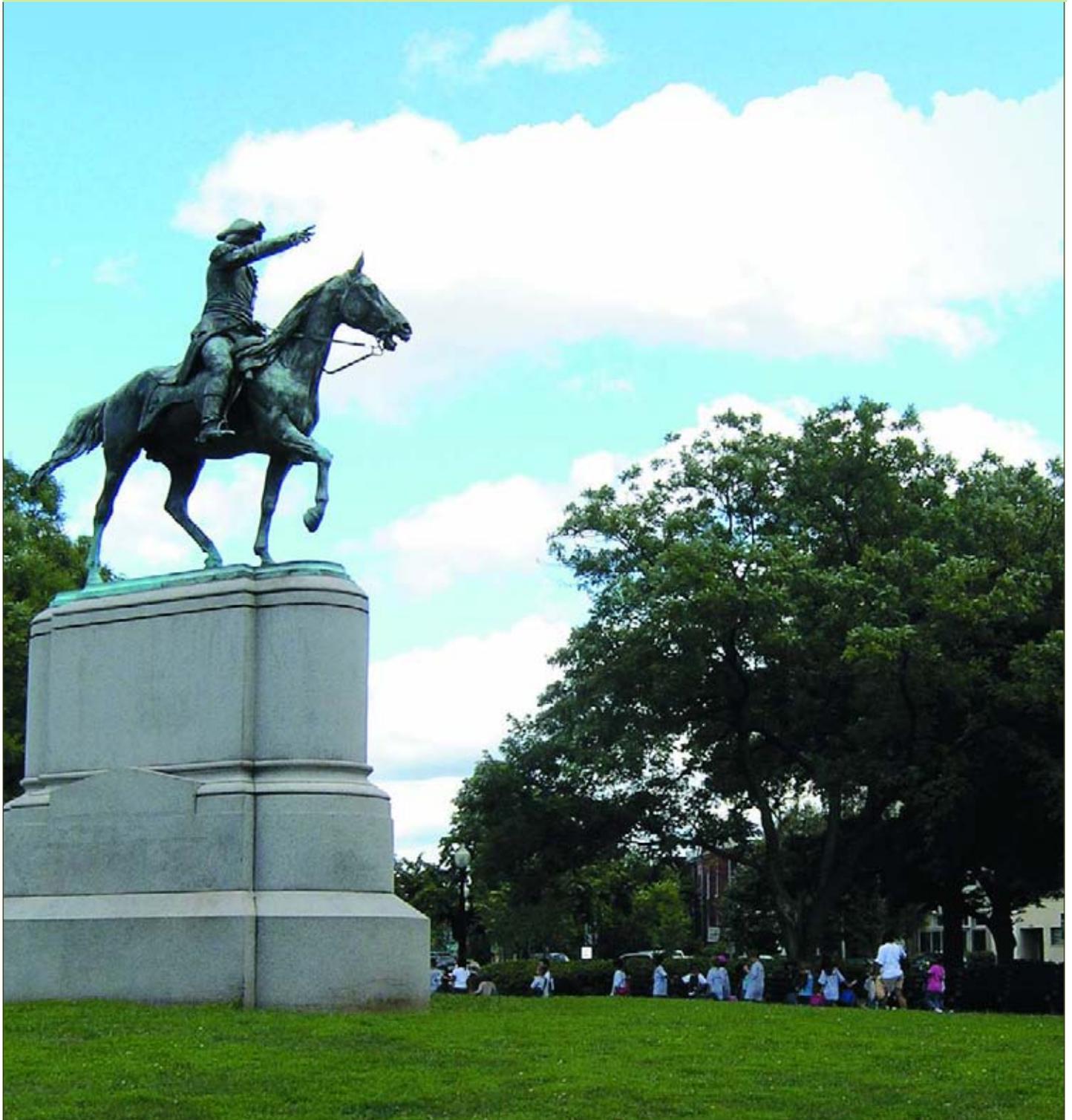
Providing appropriate programming and improvements and ensuring that the small parks are clean and safe can enhance neighborhood livability as these parks are the most accessible to residents, workers, and local businesses. In some neighborhoods, small parks are the only available open space; thus, their usability provides significant quality of life benefits.

- ◆ Improve pedestrian and bicycle safety along all the streets adjacent to small parks to improve park access, and include bike parking where feasible.
- ◆ Identify appropriate recreation opportunities based on park size, function, access, safety considerations, and natural and cultural resource protection.
- ◆ Encourage social interaction among park users with various pedestrian elements.
- ◆ Establish a shared baseline clean and safe standard for small park maintenance that considers the various maintenance practices and resources of the agencies.

Employ Creative Resource Strategies (SMP-4)

Leveraging related investments and uncovering untapped funding resources for small parks are vital to achieving the goal for the small parks.

- ◆ Employ the “City of Parks” branding as a means of fundraising for the larger system of small parks.
- ◆ Use themes such as sustainability, placemaking, or connectivity to tap partnerships and funding programs focused on these issues.
- ◆ Tailor funding for maintenance and enhancements to park usage.
- ◆ Coordinate current planning and capital improvement efforts across agencies that affect small parks in clusters or corridors to achieve their maximum benefits.
- ◆ Seek out partners to provide improvements for small parks on an area- or District-wide basis.
- ◆ Explore unconventional transportation funding sources for improvements to small parks in challenging in-street locations.



Stanton Square