



A Bridge to the Future
🍃 **Fairmount Park Strategic Plan** 🍃
Executive Summary

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Preface

July, 2004

Dear Friends:

From one corner of Philadelphia to the other, Fairmount Park enriches our lives in countless and irreplaceable ways. It is a place of adventure and exploration. It is a treasure trove of history, culture, and environmental education. It is a place of great fun and recreation, of quiet contemplation and hidden beauty. It is a place to come to, again and again.

In truth, Fairmount Park is not a park at all, but an immense system of parks large and small throughout our city. Consisting of 77 parks in 12 park complexes, the Fairmount Park system incorporates 9,204 acres – one out of every 10 acres in Philadelphia – enhancing every area of our city. It offers an amazing variety of experiences, including trails, gardens, woodlands, rivers and streams, day camps, ballfields and golf courses, picnic areas and playgrounds, historic homes, environmental centers, the Ben Franklin Parkway, the Robin Hood Dell, the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, the Zoo, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the wonderfully-restored Water Works and – coming to a wholly restored Memorial Hall – the Please Touch Museum!

Fairmount Park is also our legacy for our children. For that reason, I am extremely pleased to have this exciting new Strategic Plan for Fairmount Park. This candid and comprehensive analysis of our region's natural treasure should serve as a roadmap guiding essential change for years to come. I commend the team of consultants led by Leon Younger & PROS for a difficult job well done.

This Strategic Plan is rich in detail – laying out more than 75 individual strategies for transforming and revitalizing the Park system. While giving fair credit to the system's strengths, it is also bold and blunt, pulling no punches in calling for doing business in a new way at Fairmount Park. Parts of the Plan are certain to be controversial – and I welcome the debate ahead as efforts get underway to implement key portions of the Plan.

This project was funded jointly by the City and our community of foundations. I would like to convey the City's deep appreciation to the William Penn Foundation for its extraordinary support, and to the Campbell-Oxholm Foundation, the Claneil Foundation, the Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation, the HBE Foundation, the Samuel S. Fels Fund, the Independence Foundation, the McLean Contributionship and the Philadelphia Foundation for additional key support.

I would also like to thank the thousands of volunteers who passionately support Fairmount Park year in and year out. According to the Strategic Plan, "Fairmount Park has more volunteer organizations than any other city that the Project Team has worked with in the last 10 years." To them, I would say: We have the roadmap. Together, let us examine it, use it, and make Fairmount Park all it can be so we can make Philadelphia all it can be.

With kind regards, I am



Sincerely,
John F. Street

Executive Summary

Philadelphia is a city within a park. As the fifth largest city in the United States, Philadelphia has its history rooted in parks and open space as envisioned by its founding father, William Penn. The Fairmount Park system, enveloping the City, is one of the most scenic and picturesque environments in the United States, and in itself makes Philadelphia unique. The Park system consists of 9,200 acres with 77 primary parks ranging in size from one acre to more than 1,600.

Throughout its history, Fairmount Park has been lauded and criticized, examined and debated, and has strived to endure its role as a place to seek haven from the stress of urban living. Fundamentally, Fairmount Park is at another crossroads of its history. The original mission to preserve and protect open space, and ensure the quality of the water supply has been achieved. Today, there are laws and regulations to help continue to uphold this very important charge. The challenges facing Fairmount Park today are very different from those facing the park at its inception over 150 years ago. The grandeur of Fairmount Park is at risk if change does not happen.

The Fairmount Park system last performed a master plan in 1983. This plan provided guidance for physical improvements, but did not address operational aspects in detail. In addition, a review of Fairmount Park Commission by a charter review committee in the 1990's resulted in a proposed referendum to significantly reduce the role of the Commission was defeated in a citywide election. Following years of financial hardship and decline, the leaders of the City of Philadelphia and the Fairmount Park Commission recognized the need for a strategic plan to provide a framework and guidance for the Fairmount Park system.

This plan gathered input from residents and stakeholders to form the vision for the Fairmount Park system. In addition, the plan assessed the operational, financial, facility, partnership, and governance issues associated with the Park system. The City of Philadelphia retained a consulting team led by Leon Younger & PROS to conduct this comprehensive study and formulate the Strategic Plan for the Fairmount Park system. In December 2002, the City began a community based planning process to identify strategies for repositioning Fairmount Park as a premier Park system. This process included two phases:

Phase 1

- Community and Stakeholder Input
- Operational and Financial Review

Phase 2

- Park Facilities and Programs Review
- Financial Resources/Partnerships Review
- Park Governance Review
- Strategic Plan Development

The result of this planning process is a Strategic Plan that will serve as a roadmap for the Fairmount Park system with intensive implementation efforts for the first five years and continued follow-through for the next five years. This process takes a comprehensive approach to melding goals, objectives, and strategies with the values of the community to create a structured plan that addresses issues facing the Park system.

Through a citywide survey of Philadelphians, Fairmount Park was the most frequently mentioned asset that makes Philadelphia a good place to live, while only 29% of the respondents stated they use the Park frequently. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents were overall satisfied with Fairmount Park, while only half were satisfied with safety, cleanliness, and maintenance. An assessment by the Consulting Team identified a similar situation of parks generally meeting the needs of users, however with aging and outdated infrastructure resulting primarily from limited investment in maintenance.

The Fairmount Park system is multi-faceted, serving the region at large, area communities, and local neighborhoods. The development of Fairmount Park through the protection of watershed areas throughout the City of Philadelphia has created a unique park asset in the



United States. It has also resulted in an imbalance in neighborhood and community parks compared with the larger regional/watershed parks. These regional/watershed parks serve adjacent neighborhoods and communities, but gaps exist in areas without immediate access to these parks. As the City housing landscape continues to evolve through programs such as the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, this imbalance issue must be considered.

The City of Philadelphia is dealing with a trend of a slowly declining population. Because much of the Park system was built for a larger population, the number of facilities such as tennis courts, basketball courts, recreation centers, and swimming pools exceed recommended facility standards applied to population factors (e.g. One soccer field per 6,000 persons). Based on these standards, the City is running a deficit in sports fields including soccer, baseball, and softball. This results in some facilities and amenities being overused while others have limited, if any, use. The Facility Needs Assessment Priority Ranking process identified the top needs for improvements as: restrooms, concessions, hike/bike trails, historic facilities, natural areas, playgrounds, and signage.

Operationally, Fairmount Park has a much reduced staffing and funding capacity compared to 20 years ago resulting in a strained organization with limited operating standards and resources for meeting the desires of the community for clean and well maintained parks. Increased funding to achieve these standards is critical, combined with improved management practices. Recent special funding programs in the areas of environmental restoration and street tree maintenance have resulted in a major improvement to the care and stewardship of the City's natural resources. In addition, Fairmount Park currently lacks the organizational structure, resources, incentives, and philosophical approach to reach its full revenue-generating potential, creating a more financially sustainable operations. Overall, available baseline data is very limited, impeding meaningful benchmarking or productivity tracking.

Opportunities exist to redefine the roles and responsibilities of the Fairmount Park Commission and the Department of Recreation to eliminate duplication and overlap in facilities and operations and take advantage of



each organization's inherent strengths and capabilities. A review of the governance of the Fairmount Park Commission identified a lack of focus on policy development and over-involvement in the day-to-day operational issues of the Park system. In addition, with no published criteria or appointment process for the Commissioners, stakeholders perceive a lack of representation and accountability. Also, the roles and responsibilities are not well defined between the Commission, the Mayor, and the Managing Directors Office which reduces accountability and ownership.

The comprehensive community and stakeholder input process identified what the Philadelphia community values in parks and open space and their expectations for the Park system. This input was organized using the *Community Values Model* methodology, which synthesized and arranged resident and stakeholder input into categories, driving the development of the vision and mission and organizing the framework for the Strategic Plan.

The benefit of the *Community Values Model* methodology is the resulting balance among a variety of perspectives and values held by the community and it serves to develop a tool that facilitates the implementation of strategies. The six community values and their overarching goals include:

- 🌿 **Community Mandates** - Elevate the quality and value of the Fairmount Park system to enhance quality of life and create pride for the residents of Philadelphia that results in retaining and attracting residents and visitors.
- 🌿 **Managed Consistent Standards** - Create and implement equitable and consistent standards throughout the Fairmount Park System that creates

advocacy, value, and support by residents.

- 🌿 **Managed Services** - Deliver a balanced and coordinated park system with natural and developed areas that maximizes the uses of park and recreation facilities.
- 🌿 **Sustained Financial Growth** - Increase sustainable revenue sources to support operations and capital improvements within the Fairmount Park system.
- 🌿 **Community Partnerships** - Enliven and strengthen role of community partners to support implementation of the strategic plan.
- 🌿 **Effective Governance** - Establish effective and accountable governance system that builds trust with the community and creates support and advocacy.

These goals are supported by 29 objectives and more than 70 detailed strategies with actions. They are organized in a matrix that serves as a strategy implementation tool, creating a living document for guidance of all aspects of the Fairmount Park operations and governance by the Park Commission. The strategy matrix enables accountability by linking goals and objectives to responsibilities, performance measures, and timelines for results.

The community values helped to articulate the new vision and mission for the future of the Fairmount Park system as follows:

Vision and Mission Statements

Vision

Fairmount Park will be viewed as the regional signature park system...*A Commonwealth Treasure®*

Mission

Our mission is to:

- 🌿 Preserve, protect, and maintain the open space, street trees, natural, and cultural resources of Philadelphia's parks for the recreation and enjoyment of residents and visitors.
- 🌿 Educate the public on the environment, history, and use of the Fairmount Park system.
- 🌿 Promote, celebrate, and enhance the uniqueness and value of the Fairmount Park system and its economic impact to the City, region, and state.

A Bridge to the Future

The future of the Fairmount Park system rests in performing business with a new approach. This will require change. If change does not happen, success will not follow and the decline of an incredible public asset will continue. Change will require putting personal issues aside and doing what's right for the greater good of the Fairmount Park system and the City of Philadelphia. A new way of doing business entails strategic change that includes:

Greater Synergy and Efficiency between Fairmount Park and the Department of Recreation

The separation of parks and recreation in Philadelphia has created confusion of roles and responsibilities citywide, dilution of resources, and inefficiencies in the delivery of services by Fairmount Park and the Department of Recreation. This strategic plan lays out numerous recommendations for moving Fairmount Park into a more efficient and effective operation including the alignment between the Fairmount Park and the Department of Recreation based on the following core responsibilities:

- 🌿 *Fairmount Park* – Passive, self-directed recreation with strong maintenance, environmental education, and historic preservation.
- 🌿 *Department of Recreation* – Active recreation with emphasis on programmed activities and facilities.

With clear alignment of responsibilities between Fairmount Park and the Department of Recreation, the City of Philadelphia can move towards achieving the coordination expectations envisioned in the 1951 Home Rule Charter by forcing the departments to act more as one, reducing duplication, improving efficiency, and increasing accountability. In addition, a more balanced and coordinated approach between active and passive parks and recreation will occur.

Different Role for Fairmount Park Commissioners

Imperative to the success of this plan is the clear definition of the role of Fairmount Park Commissioners as a policy-making board, along with a published and implemented evaluation criteria and appointment process. The Commissioner's roles would focus on policy issues such as preservation, watershed management, and land use. The institution of the Recreation Coordination Board, as defined in the 1951 Home Rule Charter, with members from Fairmount

Park Commission, Department of Recreation, and Philadelphia School District will enhance the delivery of recreation services and facilities to maximize the City's investments.

Develop Leadership and Management Capacity at Fairmount Park

A critical component of the success of this plan is leadership through the designation of a strong Executive Director for Fairmount Park that can serve as a change agent, carrying this plan forward as well as continued focus on increasing management capacity. This will require the addition of skilled and experienced park and recreation professionals who have the capacity to carry out the recommendations of this plan. Enhancing the role of the Fairmount Park Conservancy to raise funding for both capital and operational programs can serve to assist in the implementation of this plan.

Improved Management Practices

Improved management practices and systems are required to address critical operational, financial, and partnership issues. Key management practices include establishing and implementing funded maintenance standards, creating a revenue division to focus on earned income opportunities, and creating a more effective volunteer management process. In addition, improved contract monitoring and compliance enforcement, particularly in the area of concessions and golf, will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the Park system.

Positioning the Fairmount Park system as a Key Economic Driver for the City of Philadelphia

Fairmount Park is recognized as the premier asset of Philadelphia by its residents. It should be leveraged to the greatest extent possible to enhance the economic vitality of the City for retaining and attracting residents and visitors to spend time and enjoy everything Philadelphia has to offer. This will require investment in maintenance, capital improvements, and promotion. Initiatives also include: coordination with the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation in development of a marketing plan and integration into the regions overall marketing efforts, working closely with developers and the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative to encourage development and redevelopment near park properties, and leveraging Fairmount Park's iconic images through licensing agreements.

Fairmount Park's immense signature attractions can play a major role in Mayor Street's "New River City" vision with its tremendous natural resources and river corridors along the Schuylkill, Delaware, Wissahickon, and Pennypack.



The Fairmount Park system has endured many challenges throughout its long and distinguished existence. This plan will not be achieved overnight. The plan presents a series of strategies that can be implemented immediately with little or no investment that will result in a shift in operations and policies over a five-year period. Other strategies will require investment that could take ten years or more to achieve. For success, consistent decision making will be required with a commitment to achieving the vision and implementing the mission.

Fairmount Park has tremendous resources in its parks and facilities as well as a large corps of supporters, volunteers, and partners. The object is to leverage these resources to work for the park. This will require policies that support actions. Fairmount Park has the opportunity to create a more financially sustainable operation with the infusion of an entrepreneurial approach to doing business. The City of Philadelphia and the Fairmount Park Commission are in a position to do business in a new manner at Fairmount Park. Through leadership, commitment, and hard work, this strategic plan can be fulfilled and provide "A Bridge to the Future."



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