

## Health Equity and LA County's Park Funding Measure: Ensuring Safe and Healthy Parks for All Communities

### OVERVIEW

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors will be making key decisions regarding a proposed Countywide park funding measure on June 21, 2016. To ensure a continuous source of funding for improvements to existing park and recreation facilities as well as new infrastructure in cities and unincorporated areas across LA County, the proposed measure must be placed on the November 2016 ballot. Currently, the proposed measure's spending plan devotes 15% of the revenue generated to increase park space and improve existing recreational facilities in the County's highest need communities. Allocating at least 15% to the most park-deficient communities could yield significant health and safety benefits to residents throughout the county.

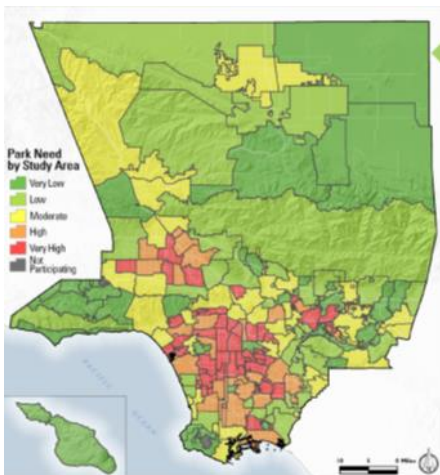
### BACKGROUND

In 1992 Los Angeles County voters enacted the Safe Neighborhood Parks Proposition (Prop A). Four years later, voters enacted an extension to Prop A. Since that time, these two public finance measures have generated approximately \$54 million per year for neighborhood and regional parks and open space as well as conservancies and conservations corps which undertake park projects, maintenance and job training. Prop A expired on June 30, 2015; the extension is set to expire on June 30, 2019.<sup>1</sup>

### FUNDING MEASURE DETAILS

A recent Board of Supervisors (BoS) hearing on the proposed ballot measure to continue these park funding programs included reports on the Countywide [parks needs assessment](#) undertaken by the LA County Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR); the proposed [spending plan](#) for the new measure; and a presentation by the LA County Department of Public Health on the [links between the lack of park and recreation facilities and higher rates of heart disease, hypertension and diabetes](#), and economic hardship.<sup>2</sup>

The proposed spending plan was informed by the parks need assessment and includes the following allocation categories: 27% for the community-based park investment program (per capita to cities and unincorporated areas) and four competitive programs including 15.4% for safe parks, repairs and upgrades, healthy communities, urban greening (the high need program); 15.4% for protecting open spaces, beaches and watersheds; 15.4% for regional recreational facilities, trail and accessibility; and 3.8% for youth and veteran job training and placement opportunities. The expenditure plan also includes 15% for maintenance and operations and 8% for administration, technical assistance and oversight.<sup>3</sup>



The proposed spending plan, especially the high need program category, focuses resources on reversing the well-documented park inequities in LA County's underserved communities. Both per capita dollars and competitive grant funding under the safe parks program could be used in park deficient communities to increase park space and improve existing recreational facilities.<sup>4</sup>

The proposal to devote 15% of the park funding measure revenue to address park deficiencies in high-need communities is critically important to move toward park and health equity for all LA County communities, especially those with well-documented park and recreation deficiencies.

In the absence of robust general fund allocations for parks and recreation, most cities and unincorporated areas rely on voter-approved resources to create and maintain parks facilities and provide recreational programming at optimal levels. The Supervisors' decision about this ballot measure will determine whether LA County communities will get the boost they need to maintain park and recreation infrastructure already in place, and potentially add more, especially in communities where little to none exists presently.

### PARK NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The parks needs assessment represents an unprecedented effort on the part of LA County. The process was initiated by the BoS and implemented by the DPR with the support of a 40-member steering committee, a technical advisory committee, 86 participating cities, an alliance of non-profit organizations, and a consultant team comprised of data, GIS, communications, public health and community engagement experts.<sup>5</sup>

## PARK DISPARITIES AND HEALTH INEQUITIES

The County's park needs assessment determined need using the following criteria: park acreage per 1,000 people; the percentage of the population that lives within ½ mile of a park; and how much park land is available to residents living in the area around each park. Approximately 53% of County residents live in a high need or very high need area, demonstrating the critical importance of the proposed measure and an equity-focused spending plan.<sup>6</sup>

Its findings are consistent with independent academic studies demonstrating that compared to other communities, low-income and predominantly Latino and African-American communities have fewer, more congested, and poorer quality parks and recreation facilities.<sup>7</sup> Other research has revealed profound inequalities in the levels of park and recreation funding in the LA region.<sup>8</sup>

Access to parks and recreation facilities is a critical health issue for everyone, especially for LA County's low-income and predominately African American and Latino communities. LA County cities and unincorporated areas with less park space per capita on average have higher rates of premature mortality from cardiovascular disease and diabetes, higher prevalence of childhood obesity, and greater economic hardship compared with cities and communities with more park space per capita. And, African Americans and Latinos are more likely than Asians and Whites to live in cities and communities with less park space.<sup>9</sup>

The park needs assessment final report has also deepened our understanding of the extent of neighborhood-level park and recreation deficits throughout the County. For example, local parks—which provide people living nearby with health promoting opportunities to be physically active—account for just 1.7% of the 901,647 acres of available parkland in the County. Regional parks make up 2% of all County parkland and 11% of parkland is classified as regional open space. Natural areas account for the remaining 85% of County parkland.<sup>10</sup>

In areas deemed as 'very high need' in the park needs assessment there are 0.7 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents; in 'high need' areas there are 1.6 acres per 1,000 residents. This is significantly less than the Countywide average of 3.3 acres per 1,000 residents and in stark contrast to the 52 acres per 1,000 residents in 'very low need' areas.<sup>11</sup>

While each Supervisorial District (SD) has about the same number of residents, parkland is not evenly distributed across them. And, although the park needs assessment final report does not assemble data by Supervisorial District (SD) it nonetheless demonstrates that the dense urban neighborhoods of SD 1 and SD 2—with their large low-income, Latino and African American populations—have the greatest number of 'high need' and 'very high need' areas in LA County.<sup>12</sup>

## ACTION TO ENSURE SAFE & HEALTHY PARKS FOR ALL COMMUNITIES

The most effective way to reverse park disparities as a means to increase health equity is to intentionally change policies and practices and actively engage the communities that are most impacted by the problem. Actions that can be taken on this once-in-a-generation opportunity to increase fairness and justice in park spending, include:

1. **Email the Board of Supervisors by June 17<sup>th</sup> and urge them to support the high need category of the spending plan at a minimum of 15% of the total and to place the park funding measure on the November 2016 ballot.** Email: [executiveoffice@bos.lacounty.gov](mailto:executiveoffice@bos.lacounty.gov).
2. **Attend the June 21, 2016 Board of Supervisors meeting and raise your voice in support of park and health equity.** BoS meetings generally start at 9:30 AM in Room 381B, Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012. More details at: <http://bos.lacounty.gov/Board-Meeting/Board-Agendas>.

**For more information call 323-294-4527**

<sup>1</sup> [Report Back: Potential Local Parks Funding Measure](#). Los Angeles County Regional Park & Open Space District Memo to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, May 3, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> [Agenda for the Regular Meeting of the Board of Supervisors](#), County of Los Angeles, CA, May 3, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> [Revenue Expenditure and Implementation](#), LA County Recreational Park and Open Space District, May 3, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* - Report Back.

<sup>5</sup> Los Angeles Countywide Comprehensive [Parks & Recreation Needs Assessment](#). Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation Dept., May 9, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*: Parks & Recreation Needs Assessment.

<sup>7</sup> Wolch J, et al. Childhood obesity and proximity to urban parks and recreational resources: A longitudinal cohort study. *Health and Place* 2010;16(3):137-57.

<sup>8</sup> Joassart-Marcelli, P. Leveling the playing field? Urban disparities in funding for local parks and recreation in the Los Angeles region. *Environment and Planning* 2010;42:1171-1192.

<sup>9</sup> [Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County: A Cities and Communities Report](#), Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, May, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: Park & Recreation Needs Assessment.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*: Park & Recreation Needs Assessment.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*: Parks & Recreation Needs Assessment.