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Parks breathe life, and jobs, into cities

By Catherine Nagel, executive director of the City Parks Alliance - 12/20/11 01:45 PM ET

The South Platte River has become a cherished recreational asset for residents and visitors to Denver. Thoughtful, visionary planning and public-private partnership have restored and transformed the city's waterfront from what was once called an "urban dump" to refuge for wildlife and people alike. Local efforts to improve the river have created new jobs and inspired economic development, and places for picnicking, biking, boating, dining, entertainment and even sunbathing on a sandy stretch of beach.

Much of this progress would not have been possible, however, without essential funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the nation's primary tool for protecting open space in urban and rural communities nationwide. Denver, like cities across the country, relies on the fund to match state and local dollars to create and enhance urban parks and restore waterways.

Instead of using taxpayer money, the little-known LWCF is funded with fees paid by oil and gas companies drilling offshore. For nearly 50 years, the fund has protected national parks, wildlife refuges, rivers, parks, and ball fields in every state.

"The Land and Water Conservation Fund continues to be an essential tool to meet the increasing demand for livable communities in cities all across this country," Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock said recently. "In Denver, we value our great open spaces and recreational facilities. These investments are as much economic investments for the city as they are quality of life investments for our residents."

Denver isn't alone. Recognizing the importance of parks to the vitality and health of their communities, 50 U.S. mayors joined Mayor Hancock in appealing recently to President Obama and Congress to maintain funding for LWCF during these difficult economic times.

With cities facing depressed property values, reduced tourism, and lower tax revenues, urban parks have incurred approximately \$6 billion in deferred maintenance costs, according to Will Rogers, president of The Trust for Public Land. Newly released data from TPL's Center for City Parks Excellence show that many city park systems are struggling to deal with budget shortfalls, resulting in fewer people employed in full-time and seasonal positions, and potential impacts on programs and services.

At a time when the nation is looking for every opportunity to create new jobs, mayors assert that parks are just as important to a city's prosperity as banks, coffee shops, department stores, and corporate headquarters. In addition to luring tourists, parks bolster community home values. Mayors know that could mean more real estate tax revenue.

Furthermore, parks breathe life into communities. Urban parks are not just safe and beautiful retreats, but also

help to address nearly every critical urban need from health to housing, education and environmental justice, countering sprawl, and combating crime.

Just last month, Los Angeles Mayor Villaraigosa announced a plan to create dozens of new parks throughout the city. The initiative is part of his goal to create a livable, vibrant and prosperous community, and at the same time drive economic development and create new jobs.

“Urban parks are more important than ever as cities grow larger and denser,” said Rogers. “Though budgets are tight everywhere, urban parks have consistently proven to be a wise investment, helping to improve health, increase environmental quality, and sustain property values.”

Are President Obama and Congress listening? Working together, we can revitalize and green our cities and create jobs. The Land and Water Conservation Fund is an essential tool for realizing that vision.

Nagel is executive director of the City Parks Alliance.

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