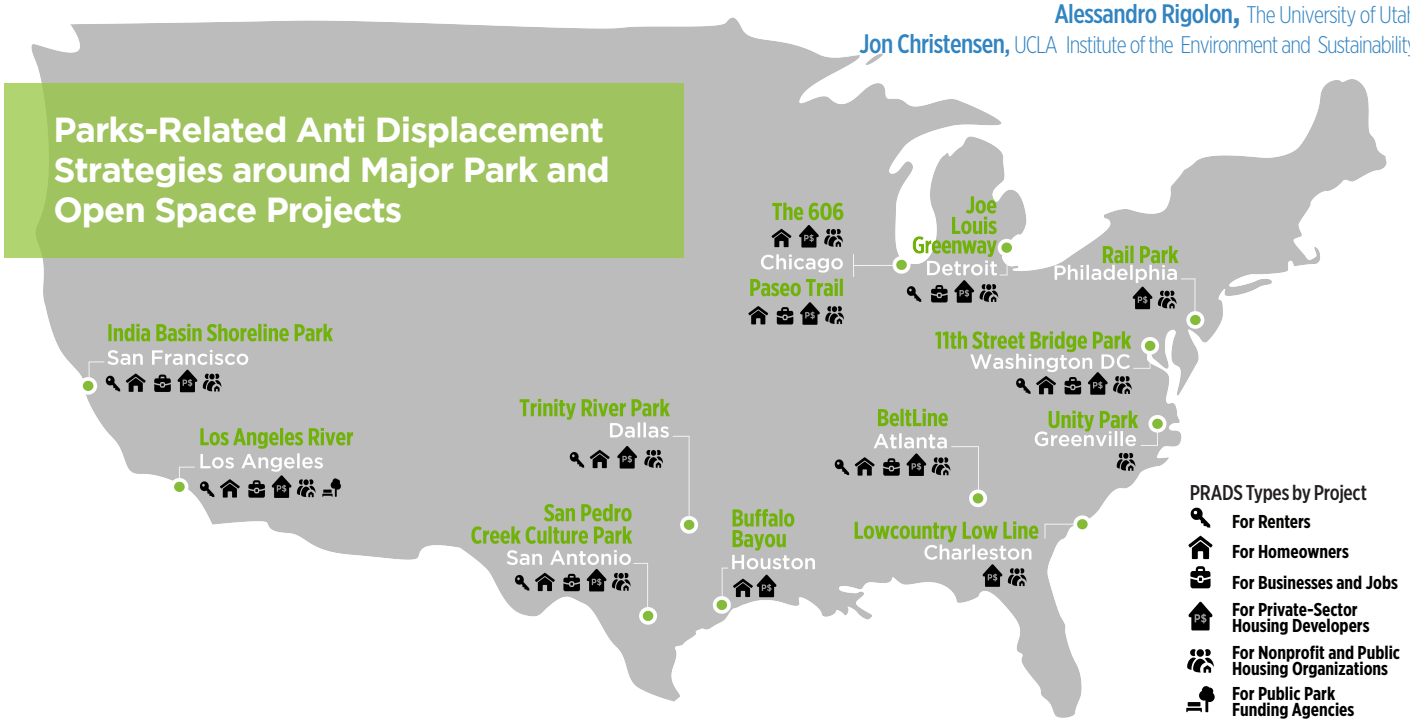
Greening without Gentrification:

Learning from Parks-Related Anti-Displacement Strategies Nationwide

Alessandro Rigolon, The University of Utah
Jon Christensen, UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability



When large parks are built in historically marginalized urban areas, they can contribute to "green gentrification," a process involving increases in housing prices and the influx of new, wealthier and often white residents in low-income communities of color. Research shows that the threat of green gentrification is real in many cities, and it can lead to the displacement of longtime residents that many park equity efforts are designed to serve. Policymakers, planners, parks and housing advocates, and local community-based organizations are increasingly recognizing this threat and taking action to limit displacement.

In this policy report, we share the results of an ongoing study to identify and classify parks-related anti-displacement strategies (PRADS). Through a nationwide search, we identified 27 large park development projects in marginalized neighborhoods in 19 cities. We reviewed policy documents and media accounts and conducted interviews with project stakeholders. The good news is that stakeholders in about half of the projects we surveyed, including many park advocates and local community organizations, are proposing and actually implementing PRADS. The bad news is that the other half of the projects have not taken concrete actions yet.

States and cities can significantly limit or facilitate the implementation of PRADS by, for example, prohibiting or enabling policies such as rent control or inclusionary zoning. But there are a wide variety of other approaches that stakeholders can implement.

We found 13 park projects in 12 cities that are employing substantive efforts to limit green gentrification. Based on these efforts, we identified 26 types of PRADS that have been implemented or proposed in those 13 park projects, with an average of 7 PRADS deployed per project. In most of these projects, it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of PRADS in limiting displacement. However, we have found that significant efforts are underway to curb green gentrification and ensure park projects benefit the intended communities.

In surveying these efforts, we found that:

- A variety of strategies are being deployed around park projects across the country. Most of these efforts are multidisciplinary. Different strategies are likely more applicable and effective depending on whether the local real estate market is hot, warm, or cold.
- That said, starting early, before developers and investors recognize the potential of park projects to increase surrounding property values, is considered best for success.
- Community engagement is viewed as crucial for implementing PRADS, especially in the early stages of park development projects. Indeed, the impetus and energy for much of this work around the country has arisen from community-based organizations.
- Projects in which equity-oriented efforts are more deliberate tend to use multidisciplinary approaches, integrating affordable housing, job training and creation, and support for small businesses.
- Some projects include efforts to influence system-wide changes in public policies (for example, ongoing park funding measures that require anti-displacement strategies) alongside project-specific efforts (such as nonprofits building affordable housing units near new parks).
- Efforts to address the threat of green gentrification directly and implement PRADS around park projects are leading many park advocates to participate in broader initiatives to address displacement, whether it is triggered by parks or not, and to conceive of parks as just one crucial part of equitable community

Analysis of Parks-Related, Anti-Displacement Strategies

In our survey of 27 major park projects in 19 cities, we found 96 parks-related, anti-displacement strategies (PRADS) that have been proposed or implemented in 13 park projects in 12 cities. Building on a typology developed by researchers at the Urban Displacement Project, we identified 26 distinct types of PRADS being implemented or planned in those 12 cities. Some of these strategies are designed to limit green gentrification in neighborhoods near specific park projects, and thus have a more direct nexus to parks, while others are citywide policies and initiatives that could also benefit other parts of the cities. We classified the 26 strategies into six broad categories that describe three sets of actors that benefit from PRADS—renters, current and prospective homeowners, and businesses and workers—and three sets of actors that play a central role in implementing PRADS—private sector developers, nonprofits and public housing organizations, and park funding agencies. (**See appendix for a chart of all the PRADS.**) All of these strategies are, of course, relevant for park agencies and park advocates, but to address the challenges of green gentrification, park agencies and advocates must work with these other sectors. They cannot solve this problem alone.

For Renters (beneficiaries)

We found seven types of strategies that apply to renters of existing housing units including rent control, anti-eviction protections (such as right to counsel), and renter education workshops. These strategies are being employed as part of seven of the 13 projects we surveyed. These strategies aim to enable renters to continue living in existing privately-owned rental units. State laws prohibit some of the cities we studied from implementing rent control, the most well-known and in some cases controversial strategy.

Most strategies in this group are policies and initiatives that apply to an entire city rather than prioritizing targeted interventions in areas near parks. Because these policies apply everywhere in a city, they could be harder to implement, when allowed by state law, than strategies targeted to specific neighborhoods around parks, where residents affected by gentrification might find common ground and successfully advocate for anti-displacement strategies. Strategies targeted to benefit renters also appear to be an area where additional policy approaches are needed, especially in cities where rent control is prohibited or limited.

For Homeowners (beneficiaries)

This group of strategies is intended to protect current low-income homeowners and promote homeownership among other low-income residents, and is being employed in nine of the 13—or 79%—of the projects we surveyed. We identified six types of PRADS in this group, ranging from property tax freezes for existing low-income homeowners to financial support such as down-payment assistance for prospective low-income homeowners, and strategies to create additional revenue for low-income homeowners such as allowing the construction of accessory dwelling units. These PRADS seek to stabilize communities near parks at risk of gentrification by keeping or transferring homeownership to longtime, low-income residents, who are often residents of color. By doing so, these strategies can also reduce deeply-rooted inequalities in homeownership rates.

Compared to renter-targeted strategies, homeownership strategies appear to have a more direct nexus to areas surrounding new parks. We found examples of public or nonprofit-led programs designed to create or maintain low-income homeownership in communities near new park projects in several cities. These strategies are difficult to implement in hot real estate markets, where speculation can make them much more expensive. They are likely more suitable for warm and cool markets, especially if they are implemented well in advance of when new park projects are announced and built.

For Businesses and Jobs (beneficiaries)

We identified two types of strategies targeted to businesses and jobs, both focusing on sustaining or increasing the earnings of longtime, low-income residents: strategies to protect or create locally-owned small businesses (such as small business disruption funds) and strategies to create jobs for longtime residents (such as first source hiring ordinances). Seven out of 13 of the projects we surveyed employ or have proposed these strategies. The relatively small number of strategies focused on businesses and jobs may be due to the fact that most stakeholders in this arena focus on preserving or creating affordable housing. The fact that half of the projects include these strategies, however, stems from a belief that multidisciplinary approaches that also prioritize businesses and jobs can go further than efforts that solely center on affordable housing by tackling displacement threats on two fronts: keeping rent or mortgage payments affordable and increasing the earnings of low-income residents.

These strategies can have a good nexus with the development of new large parks. Although first hiring ordinances that apply to entire cities are part of this group of strategies, there are also projects, such as those in Washington, DC, and San Francisco, which include job training and future employment related to the construction and operation of new parks for longtime, low-income residents of color. Similar programs for small businesses have been implemented or proposed in Washington, DC, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The nexus with new parks involves either a reliance on such businesses for park concessions (in Washington, DC, and Chicago) or reliance on tax-increment financing to support small businesses (as proposed in Los Angeles).

For Private-Sector Housing Developers (implementers)

We identified seven types of strategies that require private sector housing developers to contribute to the production of affordable housing, either by directly building new below-market-rate units or paying fees that cities can use to build such units. These strategies are being used in 11 of the 13—or 85%—of the park projects we surveyed. These strategies include well-known tools such as inclusionary zoning, production incentives (such as density bonuses), and developer impact fees for affordable housing. The goal is to increase the supply of below-market-rate housing units near new parks.

Some of these strategies can reduce the profit margins of developers, resulting in political controversy, legal battles, and prohibitions in some places. Local ordinances also sometimes fail to specify the type of affordable units that are built, resulting in the construction of units, such as studios and one-bedroom apartments, which are not suitable options for families who have been displaced from previously affordable, unsubsidized units due to rent increases.

However, the fact remains that most housing is constructed by the private sector, highlighting the importance of these strategies despite their potential shortcomings. And several cities have deliberately targeted the implementation of these policies in areas surrounding new parks, demonstrating that these strategies can have a good nexus with park development.

For Nonprofit and Public Housing Organizations (implementers)

This group of strategies focuses on nonprofit and public housing organizations that build or manage subsidized housing, including municipal-level housing departments. Although we only identified three types of strategies as part of this group, they have been proposed or implemented in every one of the 13 projects we surveyed, demonstrating their importance. These strategies include housing trust funds, community land trusts and other forms of land banking, and value capture mechanisms, such as tax-increment financing, that generate funds for affordable housing.

These strategies have a strong nexus with the development of new large parks. We found examples of cities and nonprofits that have established or are seeking to establish community land trusts or to build permanently protected affordable housing in areas surrounding new parks, thus targeting neighborhoods that are most at risk of gentrification and displacement, in Washington, DC, Chicago, and Greenville, SC. We found examples of value capture through mechanisms such as tax-increment financing—in which a new tax district is created around new infrastructural investment, such as parks, to fund public investments, such as affordable housing, within that district. We found this approach to funding affordable housing around two projects, in Atlanta and Greenville, and proposed in three other projects, in Los Angeles, Dallas, and Philadelphia.

Value capture has had some shortcomings. Its capacity to generate money for affordable housing is subject to market fluctuations. In Atlanta, the BeltLine tax-increment financing district has generated less money for affordable housing than anticipated due to the 2008 recession and a slow recovery. Furthermore, the value captured can be limited in jurisdictions that limit property tax increases (for example in California, due to Proposition 13). In these contexts, increases in property taxes may depend on major zoning changes (from industrial to mixed-use residential, for example) or a high rate of turnover in real estate transactions so that property taxes are recalculated based on the most recent sales. Finally, community land trusts and new public or nonprofit-owned subsidized housing units can be harder to implement successfully in hot markets. Thus starting early is crucial (although this can be difficult in periods following economic recessions, as was seen in Chicago's 606 and Atlanta's BeltLine). When markets are already hot, some projects, such as those in Charleston and Greenville, SC, and in Houston, TX, have proposed to dedicate part of the land that would become parks or other nearby publicly-owned lots to affordable housing.

Capturing a percentage of projected property tax increases is not the only way to generate funds for affordable housing. Developer fees are another way, demonstrating that the strategies outlined in this report can be interdependent, reinforcing the need for a multidisciplinary approach.

For Public Park Funding Agencies (implementers)

We identified one type of strategy that can be used by park funding agencies, such as states, the federal government, and counties. Funders can require or incentivize grant recipients to include anti-displacement strategies in their proposals for park development projects. Los Angeles County has been a leader in this area. The implementation plan for Measure A, a Los Angeles County parcel-tax funding source for parks, includes displacement avoidance strategies. Measure A awards additional points to competitive grant applications that include such strategies. In California, some state conservancies that fund parks, open space, trails, environmental restoration, and green infrastructure projects are also beginning to implement this strategy, as is the state's Strategic Growth Council, which administers grants for climate resilience. This demonstrates how government agencies can create overarching policies that require or incentivize park developers to work with housing advocates and developers and local communities to deploy multidisciplinary anti-displacement strategies to unlock public funding for parks.

The 11th Street Bridge Park will span the Anacostia River between two very different communities in Washington, DC, and is seen by many as a model for the multidisciplinary approach and deep, long-term, community engagement necessary to ensure new parks contribute to equitable community development without gentrification and displacement. Photos used with permission from 11th Street Bridge Park and its partner, nonprofit housing developer MANNA, Inc.

Recommendations for Parks-Related Anti-Displacement Strategies (PRADS)

Based on this survey of the state of the field, we offer the following recommendations for project stakeholders—including park agencies and advocates and their allies working on housing and community development—who are committed to greening marginalized communities without displacing their most vulnerable residents:

- Implement park-related anti-displacement strategies at the very early stages of park planning and development. This means that for large park projects in low-income neighborhoods planning for PRADS needs to begin at the same time as planning a park, before investors recognize the potential of new park projects. Designing a park and designing displacement avoidance strategies should go hand-in-hand in an integrated planning process involving meaningful dialogue and collaborations between parks organizations and housing organizations.
- Engage communities in developing approaches to avoid displacement near new parks. Because public park agencies and elected officials do not always understand the threat of green gentrification, community engagement can create opportunities for local residents and community-based organizations to educate local governments about the challenges and opportunities for solutions.
- Create collaboratives that include park and housing advocates, such as the Los Angeles Regional Open Space and Affordable Housing collaborative (LA ROSAH), which can advocate locally for policy change, provide tools, and share lessons with other organizations in a wider network. Successful parks-related, anti-displacement strategies will be site-specific, but as this report shows, common solutions are already being deployed in many different projects
- Combine the creation and preservation of affordable housing with initiatives to create better-paying jobs for local residents to tackle gentrification threats from two different angles: increasing income and making housing affordable. These multidisciplinary approaches are being employed in projects that have had a more deliberate focus on equity from their conception, such as the 11th Street Bridge in Washington, DC, and the India Basin Shoreline Park in San Francisco.
- Integrate a requirement for displacement avoidance strategies into policies, laws, and park funding implementation at the city, county, and state level for wider, long-term impact beyond single park sites.
- Measure, evaluate, and report the successes and failures of PRADS for park projects. Engage third-party independent researchers in this process and publicly share data, results, and lessons learned. This will help all of us better understand which PRADS can be most effective in different contexts.

This report was written by Alessandro Rigolon, assistant professor in the Department of City & Metropolitan Planning at The University of Utah, and Jon Christensen, adjunct assistant professor in the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA. Contact the authors at alessandro.rigolon@utah.edu and jonchristensen@ioes.ucla.edu. The authors are especially interested in learning about examples of additional parks-related, anti-displacement strategies proposed and being implemented around park projects. Cartography and design by GreenInfo Network. This report is available online ioes.ucla.edu/project/prads.

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Parks-Related Anti-Displacement Strategies (PRADS)

For Renters

Strategies that protect renters or provide them with services, especially renters in existing units

- Just cause eviction ordinance
- Rent control
- Rent review board
- Renters workshops (education and empowerment)
- Risk mitigation fund for displaced renters
- Renters commission
- Other services for low-income renters

For Homeowners

Strategies to preserve or create homeownership among longtime, low-income residents

- Foreclosure assistance
- Forgivable loans for home improvements
- Homebuyers club (education)
- Homebuyer financial assistance (e.g. down payment)
- Property tax freeze for low-income homeowners
- Accessory dwelling units and compact lot subdivision

For Businesses and Jobs

Strategies to create or preserve jobs and small businesses for longtime, low-income residents

- Job creation for long-time, low-income residents (e.g. first source hiring)
- Small business creation and preservation (e.g. small business disruption funds)

For Private-Sector Housing Developers

Strategies that require or incentivize developers to produce affordable housing units in new developments

- Single-room occupancy preservation
- Condominium conversion ordinance
- Inclusionary zoning
- Production incentives (e.g. density bonus ordinance)
- Community benefits agreement
- Housing linkage fee
- Commercial linkage fee

For Non-Profit and Public Housing Organizations

Strategies to create permanently affordable housing, including units owned by nonprofits and public agencies

- Housing trust fund
- Community land trust and other nonprofit- or city-owned affordable housing
- Value capture (e.g. tax increment financing)

For Public Park Funding Agencies

Strategies wherein competitive funding for parks requires or incentivizes anti-displacement strategies

- Competitive funding for parks requiring or incentivizing anti-displacement strategies

This appendix is a supplement to **Greening without Gentrification**, a report written by Alessandro Rigolon, assistant professor in the Department of City & Metropolitan Planning at The University of Utah, and Jon Christensen, adjunct assistant professor in the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA. Contact the authors at alessandro.rigolon@utah.edu and jonchristensen@ioes.ucla.edu. **The full report is available online** ioes.ucla.edu/project/prads