

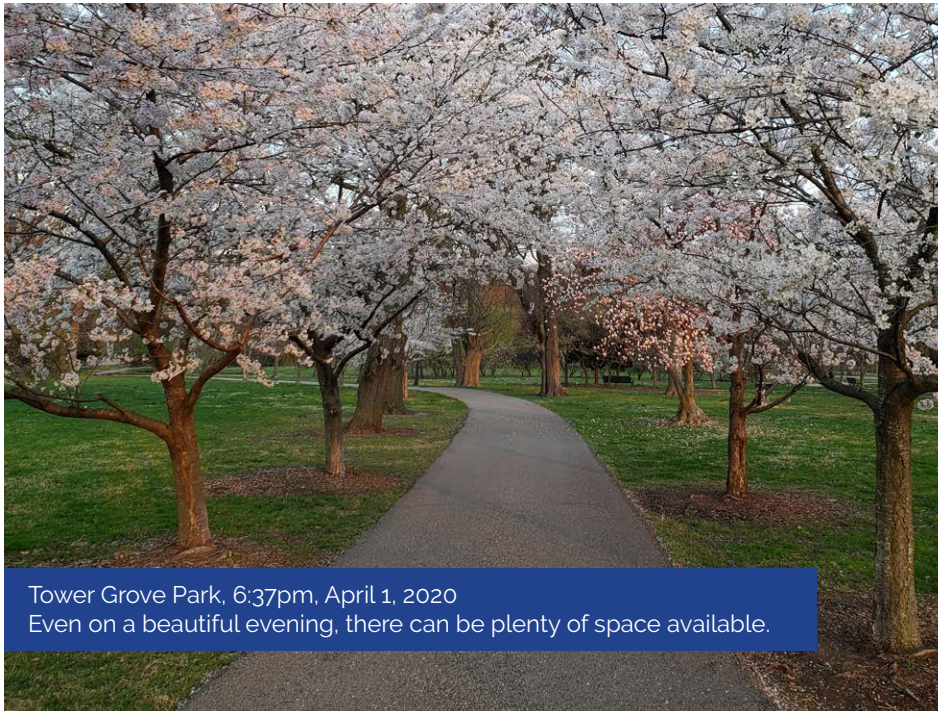
THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING OPEN PARKS AND TRAILS



The current COVID19 crisis is unprecedented. The impacts to our health and economy are devastating. The need to support our courageous health care workers, first responders, and others on the front lines battling the coronavirus is paramount.

However, we must make good strategic decisions. Complete closure of our parks and trails is a strategic decision we should avoid. The negative impacts of complete closure include reduced mental and physical health, inequitable access to open space, a cascading effect of closures, and a slippery slope of reduced civil authority.

Keeping parks and trails open will be no easy task. Concerns about staff safety and available resources to ensure outdoor social-distancing are very real. This short document is intended to provide support in keeping parks and trails open. While not comprehensive, it is intended to provide some resources and recommendations. This document and other resources can be found at: www.thei5Group.net/outdoorsocialdistancing



Tower Grove Park, 6:37pm, April 1, 2020
Even on a beautiful evening, there can be plenty of space available.

"Through this pandemic, local parks, trails and open spaces have become even more of a haven and place of respite from the stresses of daily life and the uncertainty we face. We know the physical and mental health benefits that these spaces provide and urge them to remain open wherever possible."

March 30th, National Recreation and Park Association statement.

"We're going to push against [park closure] because, as we all know, park space is critical for our own physical, mental, and emotional well being."

March 25th, Jayne Miller, President & CEO of Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy during a City Parks Alliance webinar.

"Surely some middle ground can be found between asking for public compliance with personal distancing and then making large public spaces inaccessible.... If officials push too far, many people will ignore both reasonable and unreasonable restrictions."

March 24th, Wall Street Journal editorial.

"It has been a mistake, particularly, to close some [parks], even temporarily.... Provided social-distancing rules are met, individuals and families should not have to feel either guilty or like potential fugitives for walking in the fresh air."

April 1st, London Times editorial

1. Physical and Mental Health



Everyone understands the power of open space and nature for our mental and physical health. In this period of high anxiety regarding both health and economic concerns, the importance of fresh air, exercise, and the restorative impacts of parks and trails has never been greater.

Exercise for children and youth is essential. For households with a small home, limited backyard, or who live in an apartment, access to parks and trails are one of the few options for exercise with schools closed.

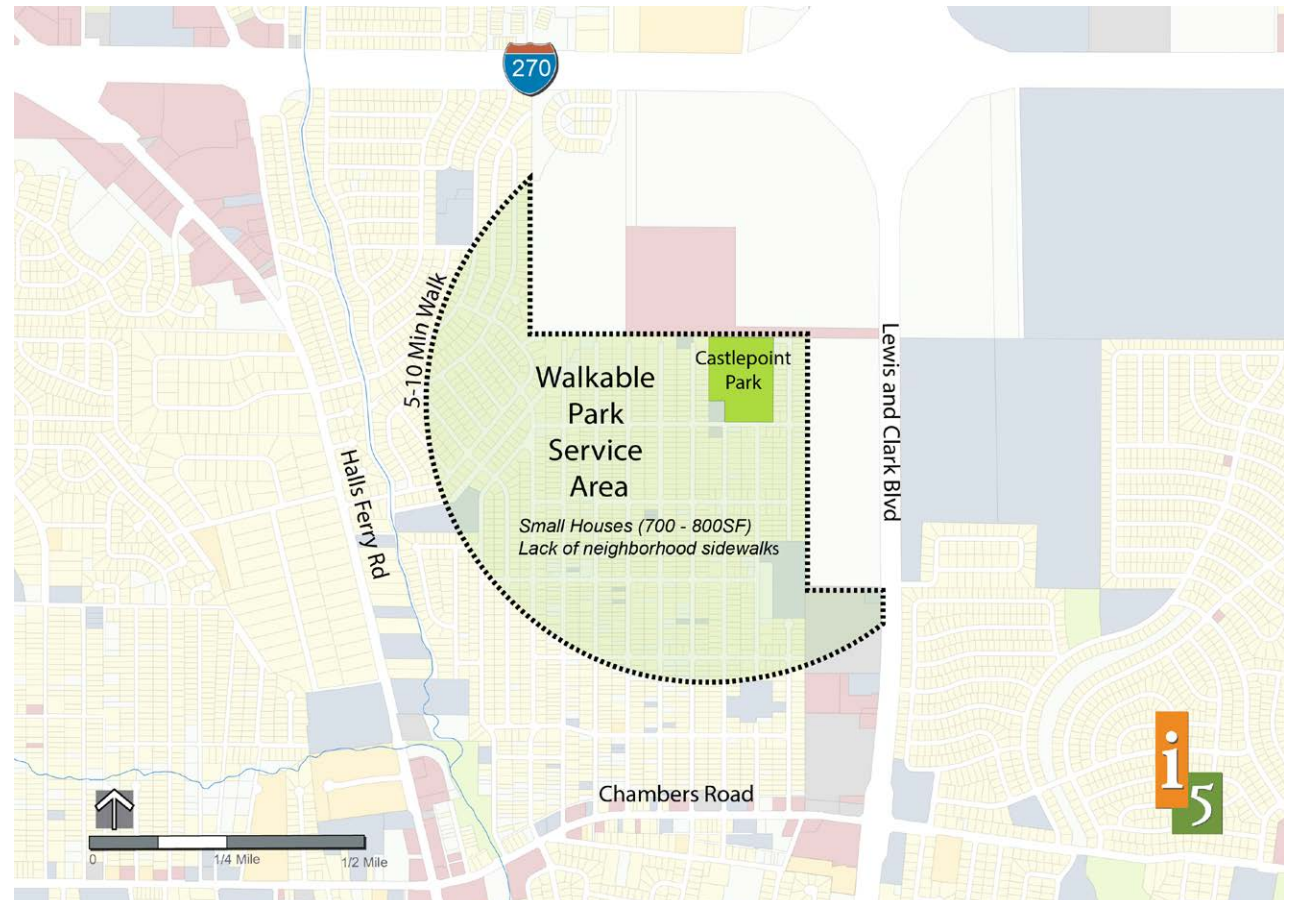
Catherine Nagel, Executive Director of City Parks Alliance on April 3rd stated, "Parks and greenspace are more essential now than ever, providing much-needed solace and helping people cope with the uncertainty of the health crisis."

2. Ensuring Equitable Access to Open Space and Nature

Many St. Louis County parks function as neighborhood parks where nearby households can easily walk to access the park. County-wide closures will result in many neighborhoods inequitably not having access to open space and nature.

The below example shows Castlepoint Park, a neighborhood park in north St. Louis County.

The surrounding neighborhood is mostly small homes (700-800sf) and yards. The neighborhood lacks sidewalks. The neighborhood is bounded by four busy roads. Without access to Castlepoint Park, the neighborhood will lack nearby access to open space. Resident options will include utilizing the street (because of lack of sidewalks) or overcrowding other quasi-public spaces, such as the local elementary school grounds.



3. Avoiding the Cascading Effect of Additional Overcrowding and Closures

Without innovative measures to keep parks and trails open, there will likely be a cascading effect of overcrowding and additional closures. As state and county parks close, the public will put more pressure on regional trails and municipal parks. That pressure will lead to further closures. Semi-public spaces such as subdivision common ground, school yards, and cemeteries will next feel the pressure. If those are closed or restricted, neighborhood sidewalks, streets, and plazas will be the only outlet for fresh air and exercise.

State Parks

County Parks

Regional Trails / Municipal Parks

Common Grounds / School Grounds

Sidewalks / Plazas



4. Avoiding the Loss of Civil Authority

A real danger in further restrictions and closures is the slippery slope of the loss of civil authority. As the Wall Street Journal editorialized, "If officials push too far, many people will ignore both *reasonable* and *unreasonable* restrictions."

There needs to be a balance between negative enforcement and education / positive reinforcement. When enforcement and restrictions become too heavy-handed, eventually, there will be pushback. The use of behavior science should be used to encourage proper behavior.

"If officials push too far, many people will ignore both *reasonable* and *unreasonable* restrictions."

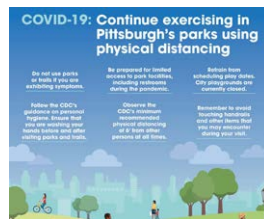
How can parks and trails be kept open? It won't be easy. Unfortunately, there's not a one-size fits all approach. Every park and trail has unique aspects and needs. Staffing capacity and organizational resources vary between departments, agencies, and cities.

The following are recommendations based on precedents from across the country. It is a rapidly changing dynamic as guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), and local authorities frequently change.

Increase Education and Positive Reinforcement

Many parks and trails throughout the country have developed additional educational materials to help explain CDC and local health department requirements. The draw-back to messaging to date has been inconsistencies in the details of social-distancing. For example, New York City closed all playgrounds on April 1st compared to March 27th for the City of St. Louis. Other inconsistencies include details about restrooms, trash, benches/tables, and types of park activities. However, a key take-away is the use of education, positive reinforcement, and constantly adapting to keep parks and trails open.

Links to the below examples and others can be found on the i5Group website at: www.thei5Group.net/outdoorsocialdistancing



Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy

Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy expanded on the National Recreational and Park Association infographic to customize for local requirements.



San Diego Parks

San Diego Parks created an infographic to explain what park features could be visited versus not to visit.



New York City Parks

New York City Parks developed infographic/video that helps to explain how to measure 6' of distance in parks.



Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy

Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy promoted good examples of social-distancing behavior on their social media channels.

Managing Peak Demand

For parks with limited entries for vehicles (Castlewood State Park, Queeny Park, etc.) or large parking capacity (Forest Park), restricting motor vehicle access can be useful in managing peak demand.

Complete Motor Vehicle Restrictions

Completely restricting motor vehicles, but allowing pedestrians and bicycle access would make parks accessible for neighborhood use. As of March 31st, Marin County Parks (in the San Francisco Bay area) closed all motor vehicle access. Individuals can access parks close to their homes via walking, biking, or other non-motorized access.

Limited Motor Vehicle Restrictions

Instead of completely restricting motor vehicle access, restrictions could be implemented just during anticipated peak times (evenings and weekends). Another variation would be to reduce the amount of available parking. Once parking is filled, the park is "full".

Parking Reservations

Individuals can reserve parking/entry times at parks. Muir Woods, prior to the COVID19 crisis, had a parking reservation system.

Opening Up More Space

To create more space for pedestrians and bicyclists, parks should close roads and parking lots. These closures have the additional advantage of limiting overall crowd size by reducing overall arrivals. Tower Grove Park and Forest Park have already implemented road closures.

Parks should also consider separating uses where possible. The different speeds of walkers, dog-walkers, families with strollers, runners, and bicyclists make social-distancing on trails and paths difficult as usage increases.

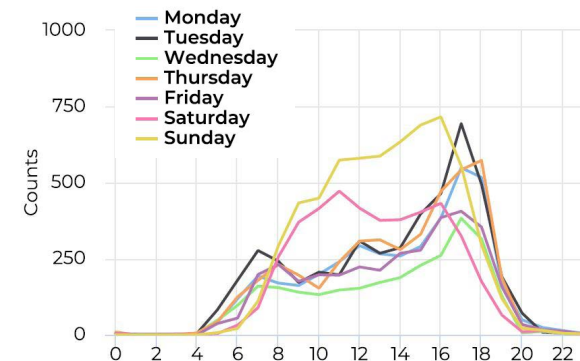
Similar to how grocery stores have implemented seniors only hours, parks could recommend special time periods for seniors or families with children under the age of 10, etc.

Using Data and Technology

Much like the peak times graph when you Google a business or restaurant, if the public could see when a park or trail is already busy, they could avoid visiting during peak times.

Pedestrian / bicycle counter technology such as EcoCounter and trackers such as Strava already are measuring usage. The chart below is an example of multi-use trail usage in Arlington County for March 2020 (source EcoCounter). If this type of data could be shared real-time (or near-time) with the public, the public could make better decisions in where and when to visit a park or trail.

2020 Daily profile by hour



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