

I [previously wrote](#) about the potential to generate greater support for environmental initiatives, by improving community engagement with the natural environment. One mechanism to improve community engagement in this manner is quite simple: **make it easier for people to access parks and open spaces by public transit.**

Access is a widespread issue in Los Angeles, as many residents live in communities without a local community park in their neighborhood. These residents are currently required to travel outside of their communities to utilize these resources, which can be costly and time-consuming and can increase the strain on key roads, highways, and public transportation infrastructure. To make matters worse, these communities without easy access to nature are more often than not low-income or otherwise disadvantaged communities, creating a serious environmental justice problem for something as basic as being able to go outside and enjoy nature. In fact, recent studies continue to find linkages between access to nature and improvements in human health, ranging from physiological conditions to mental health and cognitive functions. (A few examples of scientific studies or reviews can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

LA Metro's strategic plan



LA Metro bus traveling on its route through green space (William Garrett, Flickr)

This past June, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (“Metro”) adopted the [Transit to Parks Strategic Plan](#), which aims to improve public transportation options to access parks and open space in the county. As stated in the plan, “Metro envisions a Los Angeles in which people can use a network of varied and connected transportation options to get to parks and open spaces.” In the plan, Metro notes that Los

Angeles County has only 3.3 acres of park space per 1,000 people, which is less than half of the 6.8 acres that other high-density cities in the United States currently offer. Metro also states that 41% of lower-income households in the city do not have immediate access to a park, and that 22% of high-quality parks do not have direct access by means of public transportation (defined as having a “high-quality” transit stop within a 0.25-mile walk), which is commonly cited as a primary barrier for access for many Los Angeles residents.

In the plan, Metro ranked parks in Los Angeles based on their potential for interest relating to improved public access, weighing factors including the park size, park amenities and their condition of upkeep, park demand, and trail presence or beach access. Metro also identified various “communities of interest,” or communities (typically disadvantaged ones) that would most benefit from improved public transit to open spaces, by assessing human health, environmental, economic, and social indicators such as the [Health Disadvantage Index](#) and the [SB535 CalEnviroScreen](#). Metro's assessment identified 80 communities of “High” or “Very High” interest, totaling 22% of the entire population within Los Angeles County and including areas with higher percentages of seniors, youth, rates of obesity, and communities of color. The plan provides multiple case studies of other successful public transit programs locally and in other jurisdictions and identifies lessons to be learned from those programs.

Ultimately, Metro's plan serves merely as a general guide for future policymaking decisions for transit infrastructure improvements and extensions, and Metro did not commit to any binding actions to implement the plan. However, as part of the plan, Metro identifies four examples of pilot project recommendations that would advance the means of access between certain communities of interest and public parks:

1. Provide a direct connection from the communities of Alondra Park, Lawndale, and Hawthorne to the [Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area](#);
2. Develop local shuttle connections to [Hansen Dam Park](#) and [Aquatic Center](#), along with an accompanying regional connection to the metro system;
3. Adopt schedule enhancements for a bus route that connects the metro system to Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, and Redondo Beach; and
4. Re-institute a former pilot shuttle program connecting a nearby metro station to [Chantry Flat Recreation Area](#) in the Angeles National Forest.

Metro also mentions other “supportive programs and initiatives” that would encourage improved public transportation connections, make it easier for interested individuals to identify public transportation routes to open spaces, and ensure for long-lasting impacts and policy changes at both the county and local levels. A summary of the plan's proposals as a

whole can be found in [this spreadsheet](#) included as an attachment to the plan.

Lastly, in terms of funding, Metro identifies several sources of grants and other funding mechanisms—varying from those available at the local, regional, state, or federal level—that could be utilized to support the proposed pilot projects or other similar initiatives to improve transit access to public parks.

In approving the plan, the [Metro board also directed Metro to take additional steps](#) to advance the policy goals of the plan and implement the plan's proposals. These measures include, among others: the designation of a "Metro Transit to Parks liaison" for coordination and monitoring of plan activities; creation of marketing and promotional materials for transit lines serving open space areas; outreach to partner agencies, including other government councils, to promote the plan; contribution of \$1 million in grant funding for cities and non-profit entities establishing transit-to-parks programs; and improved data collection on park access. Metro also is required to make status reports to the board every six months, providing a mechanism for continued monitoring of Metro's transit-to-parks efforts.

More action is necessary to establish equity in park access

Metro's strategic plan is certainly a step in the right direction and promotes important policy goals looking forward. In developing its strategic plan, Metro focused on important matters related to environmental justice, including by expressly valuing equity in its plan to identify the communities with the greatest need for improved access. The strategic plan may serve as a useful model for other municipalities or regional governments that wish to expand upon public access to nearby open spaces, which may improve the health and happiness of disadvantaged communities.

Nevertheless, the limited nature of the pilot projects proposed in Metro's strategic plan solves only a few discrete transit deficiencies in certain communities and does not fully address the broader discrepancy between easy and affordable access to parks and socioeconomic status. Members of disadvantaged communities would benefit from greater transit options to attractive regional parks, but improving transit does not address the core of the environmental justice issue: the absence of accessible open spaces within the disadvantaged communities themselves. To illustrate, Metro's scoring system for ranking parks focused on the value of each park to the broader Los Angeles community, which ultimately prioritizes regional desirable parks that all Angelenos wish to visit over local community spaces. Thus, although the plan identified the communities most in need of improved access to parks, the parks ultimately selected for proposed transit improvements

are not necessarily those that provide the easiest access to nearby open spaces for the disadvantaged communities of interest identified in the plan. All things considered, the plan prioritizes access to regional parks over improved access to local community parks, the latter of which may provide more tangible benefits to the local community through the form of easier and more frequent visitation.

Furthermore, the \$1 million allocation for implementing the strategic plan is not much in the way of funding when compared to the expected cost of greater transit infrastructure development across Los Angeles County, as the strategic plan seems to encourage. Given that extensive transit-to-parks measures will require large sources of funding, obtaining funding through politically palatable means may be a substantial obstacle to future endeavors proposed under Metro's strategic plan or otherwise. As a result, it may ultimately prove more financially feasible to enhance access to local parks and open spaces within communities of interest, rather than finding ways to transport people in those communities elsewhere.

In the end, I am hopeful that, in addition to improving connectivity, transit-to-parks measures such as those promoted in Metro's strategic plan may generate additional community engagement with the natural environment for those that utilize the new transit resources to travel to regional parks. However, more action than transit improvements would be required to place all communities on equal footing in terms of local access to open spaces. Metro's strategic plan serves as a helpful starting point for policy considerations, but even assuming all of the plan's pilot project proposals are adopted, the result may end up being an expensive program of transit improvements that does not remedy the underlying issues causing the need for transit-to-parks initiatives in the first place. Nevertheless, Metro certainly should be commended for showing its support for measures to improve access to parks that fall within Metro's transit responsibilities, even if supplemental action and coordination would be required from other agencies and stakeholders.

In a future post, I plan to highlight environmental justice organizations working to promote community empowerment with respect to local land use, which presents a different perspective on how to approach the discrepancy in access to open spaces.