

Technical Assistance Application – City of San Antonio

I. Challenge & Opportunity

Parks is a quality of life issue and across the industry accessibility of these public spaces has become increasingly important in today's climate. Parks are a representation of the values of the community, which historically equity has not consistently been the priority. Citizens recognize the importance of public green spaces as venues where fitness, nature exploration, and overall health can flourish and a call to action exists.

One potential focus area that can overlay with park access is the issue of childhood obesity. San Antonio has faced an obesity problem for several years with alarmingly high rates amongst youth in underserved communities. Health risks associated with obesity in school-aged children are immense and have life-long impacts. In Bexar County, 65.7% of adults are overweight or obese. In Texas, 32.4% of children aged 10-17 are overweight or obese. Obesity rates among African-American and Hispanic groups in San Antonio are disproportionately high. For example, in Bexar County, 27% of black and Hispanic children are obese, while only 12% of white children are obese. In addition to obesity-prevention efforts aimed at the city's entire population, certain initiatives target high-risk groups.

There is an opportunity to use this data to drive policy and project initiatives to connect nature play and recreation resources to these historically underserved communities. For example, the City has installed forty-four (44) fitness stations in parks located in parts of the city with high obesity rates. Also, the City has begun to acquire park properties to build trails with neighborhood connectivity in mind. The expansion of the Howard W. Peak Greenway system into neighborhoods across San Antonio is a great case in point. Once completed, the 150+ miles of greenway trails will weave throughout the city, connecting parks and neighborhoods across the economic spectrum.

Yet, simply building parks is not a complete answer to addressing childhood obesity issues. Programming fitness classes and nature exploration opportunities is a key element ready for expansion here in San Antonio. The foundation to do so has already been established through the ever-popular Parks and Recreation Summer Fit Pass and Fitness in the Park programs. Another avenue to explore is expanding resources to bring school field trips to our Natural Area Parks. These locations feature structured classes and hikes as well as free-form nature exploration. Establishing resources to bring in urban core students would do a great deal to address both the childhood obesity rates and the problem of nature deficit disorder amongst San Antonio youth.

With 240 parks covering over 16,000 acres in the City inventory, there is ample opportunity to implement new programming opportunities. We recognize that nature deficit disorder is a real issue amongst San Antonio youth. The lack of access to parks and natural areas combined with increased usage of computers and mobile devices, decreased dedication to recreational recess periods in school, and lack of education in regards to healthy eating habits have contributed to the City's high childhood obesity rates. New programming and increased green space access and education will help combat this trend.

Mayor Nirenberg has a strong focus on incorporating citizen input into policymaking decisions and is a key driver for the City's adoption of the equity lens in budget and departmental decision-making. As a

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tri-chair of the SA Tomorrow Plan, he is committed to building a city that works for all, adapts to rapid growth, and advances innovation and opportunity for local businesses while balancing sustainability goals. He has also recognized the need for improving transportation access and connectivity and has directing increased funding towards VIA Metropolitan (public bus service) as well as starting to explore new transportation avenues. This focus on transportation could serve as a key element in connecting people to parks.

II. Commitment & Capacity

This is an exciting time in San Antonio in terms of engagement. There is an increased understanding and awareness of what equity means amongst the community. There has also been a rise in awareness of the importance for parks in terms of community health. The Technical Assistance funding provided by CCCN would allow the City of San Antonio to delve further into understanding what urban core communities need and would respond to.

In response to the increased attention to healthy living and park access amongst the San Antonio community the City has supported the following:

- The ¡Por Vida! restaurant recognition program that helps residents make healthier food choices when dining out by identifying healthy options. Healthier menu items are available in more than 100 restaurants, youth summer meal programs, and business and hospital cafeterias citywide.
- B-Cycle bike-share program. Fourteen kiosks have been installed and four more kiosks currently are being planned. Subsidized memberships and bike signage in 43 locations have encouraged residents to exercise on their way to work, school, and leisure locations.
- Installation of fitness equipment stations in forty-four (44) parks and public spaces, making physical activity more accessible to residents throughout the community.
- Síclovía: A twice-yearly event where community streets were temporarily closed to automobiles and made available to residents for a range of physical activities such as bicycling, running, skating, yoga, and aerobics classes. Attendees are able to learn about healthy living options from vendors as well as participate in guided fitness exercises along the route.
- Mayor's Monarch Butterfly Pledge. In 2016 San Antonio became one of the only cities in the nation to pledge to the entirety of the National Wildlife Federation's Monarch Initiative resulting in a dramatic increase in butterfly gardens and education efforts across the city. In 2017 the Mayor recommitted to the pledge. New butterfly gardens will encourage park visitors to better understand the natural environment.

The San Antonio City Council took an equity lens approach to making budget investment beginning with the Fiscal Year 2018 and drives City Department decision-making today. In terms of nature equity, there is the opportunity to create more neighborhood connections to parks and linear greenways as well as to expand nature education into more urban core areas. The Parks and Recreation Department is currently in the process of selecting locations for pollinator gardens throughout the city. The emphasis on

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community feedback through the technical funding opportunity would allow the Parks Department to do a focused outreach into underserved communities to see what types of amenities and programs would be truly beneficial.

San Antonio Parks and Recreation has several strong partnerships with local businesses and agencies as well as local neighborhood associations and non-profits, to include:

- Phil Hardberger Park Conservancy
- San Antonio Parks Foundation
- San Antonio River Authority
- San Antonio Public Library
- Friends of San Antonio Natural Areas
- Beacon Hill Neighborhood Association
- H-E-B Grocery Stores
- San Antonio Zoo
- San Antonio Botanical Gardens
- YMCA of Greater San Antonio
- Texas Children in Nature Network San Antonio

All of these agencies would be excellent partners in the planning and implementation phases of the project.

Current policy initiatives (SA Tomorrow, Parks System Plan, and the Equity Lens) all lend themselves to drawing support for the CCCN funding initiatives in terms of data collection and community input. The Parks and Recreation budget is another source for leveraging staffing and funding resources towards education and park access/development.

While the City works hard at developing positive solutions to equitable access to parks and healthy programming resources, there are obstacles. The San Antonio community is segregated in terms of socio-economics and people often do not have the resources or opportunity to explore beyond their part of town. The issues with transportation access and the lack of walkability to public green spaces in many parts of the city will require long-term planning and substantial resources to fully address.

The timing of the CCCN funding opportunity comes at a critical point in the City's planning endeavors. The alignment of current policy initiatives and the increased attention to community input makes this a wonderful time to create deliverables that address both childhood obesity issues and park connectivity and programming. San Antonio is poised to make truly impactful and positive projects and policies that would connect children to the beauty of nature all across San Antonio. Building on the current tide of citizen engagement, a progressive City Council and Mayor, and the policy initiatives described above make for an extremely positive environment to create long-lasting equitable connections between children and nature in underserved communities across San Antonio.