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COMPARING CITY PARK PERSPECTIVES: USERS VS ORGANIZERS

by

Kalli Hull

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

University Honors

with a major in
Environmental Studies

in the Department of Environment & Society

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Abstract

Green spaces and parks are an essential aspect of a healthy community. Incorporating parks into the landscape of a city can benefit the community. Understanding the relationship between park management and park users is important for creating the most effective use of space and accessibility. This project looks at the comprehensive viewpoints of both park managers and park users through a series of interviews and reviews of previous research and literature. Logan City, Utah is used as the location of interest for collecting and determining outcomes. This project displays the key findings of the priorities and viewpoints of both park users and park managers and how this intricate relationship can work together in an effective way. With the global population surpassing eight billion, urban expansion has highlighted the importance of greenspaces, particularly in combating the challenges posed by urbanization. This research highlights the positive impact of nature on mental and physical health, and the role parks play in fostering this well-being within communities.

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Introduction

In the age of anthropogenic discovery, our communities and planet are experiencing a dramatic shift in systems that have been in play for millions of years. With a growing population, rising from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 8 billion in 2023 (US Census), the world has seen a shift in the way civilization is run. Urbanization of populations has increased the number of areas deemed greenspaces, as expansion makes accessing the outdoors more challenging. There is debate over the necessity of areas to be put aside for these greenspaces as urban areas expand. Greenspaces are believed to be beneficial to growing communities because of their positive impact on mental and physical health. This project will look at how parks, one of the most well implemented community green spaces, are perceived and experienced by the community, in comparison to the perspectives and objectives of park organizers.

Spending time in nature has been scientifically proven to have a positive effect on mental health and cognitive enrichment. The main idea behind this connection is the positive mind and body experience resulted from being in a natural environment or landscape (Bratman et al., 2012). As human beings, it is our innate desire to surround ourselves with nature. Access to sunlight for example, is known to improve your mood and boost serotonin levels (Sansone, 2013). Recent research confirms this theory through studies showing a decrease in self-reported stress levels and more positive moods after spending time in natural environments (Hartig et al., 1991). The idea surrounding this theory proposed by American biologist Edward O. Wilson in his book, *The Biophilia Hypothesis* is humans possess this natural tendency to seek connections with nature and surrounding ecosystems. Wilson describes how cutting ourselves off

from nature is indeed “cutting ourselves off from the source of sanity itself” (Wilson, 1984, p.437). This prophetic statement holds true when looking at what we know about human design and emotions. Our evolutionary path has been one surrounded with flourishing ecosystems and natural environments, not one of dimly lit offices and the stagnant air of apartment buildings. Having access to parks in our communities is crucial for our wellness and mental health.

A healthy community is made up of several key components some of which include social interaction or making strong connections, consistent time outdoors, and physical activity. Intentionally working to build healthy communities is a relatively new movement as the age of urbanization continues to grow. One of the main driving factors for building a healthy community is individuals coming together by re-examining the way things have been done in the past, and how improvements can be made going forward (Lee et al., 2000). This fostering of social connection can be enhanced by incorporating green spaces into communities. Communities referred to as Blue Zones, otherwise known as communities with extreme longevity, note daily time outside as a consistent practice and one of their biggest secrets to a long healthy life (Adams, 2020). Blue Zones are areas where individuals are known to prioritize wellness and healthy living patterns which have been directly correlated with longer and healthier lives. Daily movement by community members in these blue zones, and constant time outdoors walking, socializing while engaging in natural environments has proven to be an effective method for creating a healthy happy community. Parks are a way to bring these factors together, for example, going on a walk in the park with your friends.

Activities like these are crucial for our well-being and create an environment people want to be a part of.

A third place is a space that is not work or home where people go to find connections, build relationships and create a more enriching life. These locations can add vibrancy to communities, help foster new friendships, and be a place to feel belonging (Torres, 2023). Some modern-day examples of third places are coffee shops, churches, bars, libraries, etc. Parks are a great example included in this encompassing idea of third places within a community. In Ray Oldenburg's book "Celebrating the Third Place", these third places "lend a public balance to the increased privatization of homelife. Third places are nothing more than informal public gathering places" (PPS, 2008). Ray Oldenburg, the sociologist responsible for creating the term 'third place' refers to them as locations where we "host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" (PPS, 2008). These places are what bring joy and fun into life and create the moments we all work so hard for in life. Greenspaces, in turn, are a place available that can help nourish this idea in communities in a way that also gives individuals access to the outside world and beauty of nature around them.

One specific aspect of almost all parks that has been proven to benefit human health and wellbeing are trees. World expert on trees, Diana Beresford-Kroeger has written a book on the way trees can positively impact us called "40 Ways Trees Can Save Us" (2010). This book discusses the ways we can benefit from trees holistically, medicinally, and mentally. Beresford mentions how "Trees don't simply maintain the conditions necessary for human and most animal life on earth, trees created these

conditions through the community of forests” (Beresford-Kroger, 2019, p.105).

Beresford also discusses the ways in which tree compounds are like the combination of chemicals we have in our brains. Beresford has proven “Trees have the neural ability to listen and think, they have all the component parts necessary to have a mind or consciousness” (Beresford-Kroger, 2019, p.124). Beresford also scientifically discusses how plants contain a sucrose version of serotonin like that in humans. These connections prove our need for interaction with trees and other aspects of our ecosystems. Planting trees in parks, along roads and incorporating them wherever possible can add a lot to a community, both visually and health-wise. The continued movement towards urbanized communities does not come without a cost and it is our responsibility to ensure a healthy happy environment as much as we can alongside these changes. “The one process now going on that will take millions of years to correct is loss of genetic and species diversity by the destruction of natural habitats. This is the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us” (Wilson, 1984, p.12).

The city of New York, known most as a ‘concrete jungle’ is home to just over 8 million people as of 2021 (US Census, 2021). This infamous city still prioritizes parks and outdoor spaces for their community’s health and well-being. A famous example of this is a stunning rooftop garden located at Pier 57. A restoration project turned this industrial wasteland into a public open space with a beautiful rooftop park. It is commonly known as the ‘Sky Park’ and is the largest stretch of public rooftop in New York City at just about 2 acres. This rooftop park is open to the public daily and serves as an outdoor venue for events bringing community members together as well (Hickman, 2022). Even in large cities like New York, there are innovative ways

greenspaces can be incorporated to help make a more positive environment for the community. Local government prioritizing funds to be set aside to go towards these places can go a long way in the community. Even in smaller cities where there is a lot more open land, deeming areas as green spaces where people can come together is becoming more essential.

Parks and outdoor spaces can have a positive impact on climate change. With over half of the world population living in urban areas, cities are going to be the first to have severe impacts from climate change (Kabisch et al., 2017). Climate stress is being caused by urbanization and is leading to cities having more heat, more droughts, more flooding, and less native species. This is a problem as architecture is only considering climate change as a mild problem, when predictions are showing immense impacts are going to be caused by the way we have built our systems. Although it seems green spaces are a very small contribution to fixing this problem, they can go a long way. UGI (Urban Green Infrastructure) is a way of approaching infrastructure that takes into consideration implementing green spaces and using nature and 'ecosystem services' to their benefit. For example, studies have shown urban parks can have a cooling effect on urbanized areas (Kabisch et al, 2017). Urban parks have been proven to have a cooling effect of 1 °C on the daytime temperature (Kabisch et al, 2017). With the increasing heat cities are facing today, stress is being brought to native plant species causing them to have lower survival rates. Something as simple as having more trees to create a canopy effect and more bare soil can go a long way in helping these plant species to survive. These are just two examples of many ways UGI can have a positive effect on preventing the severe impacts of climate change in our communities. If these ideas are

more of a focus during the construction of new infrastructure, we will see positive impacts in the future.

Indigenous teachings tell us a lot about how incorporating nature into our daily lives is essential for having a happy healthy life. The book “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer dives deep into this idea. Kimmerer says, “even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us” (Kimmerer, 2013, p.327). Kimmerer discusses in this book this idea of ‘species loneliness’ which is described as a state of isolation and disconnection which is becoming the state of our planet “As our human dominance of the world has grown” (Kimmerer, 2013, p.208). The land is described as a teacher, a home, and a place of peace. It is something that should be cherished and celebrated instead of covered up.

Parks and outdoor spaces are essential for mental wellness, a growing society, healthy families, and prosperous land. There are so many positive reasons why green spaces should be more of a focus in our communities. We need to create opportunities where the future and maintenance of green spaces like parks are talked about and considered frequently. Learning what is working and what needs improvement can prevent us from losing the opportunity to prioritize such an important part of every community. This project will compare a location of interest, Logan City, park managers and park users to get a better perspective on what the commonalities and disconnections are between the two groups, and what we can learn from that.

Background

Logan City, Utah is a vibrant and loved community known especially for its natural beauty and cultural heritage. Logan is known for its inclusion of agricultural tradition, consistent downtown arts and music events, a bustling university, and outdoor attractions. Logan will be used as our case study location for this research analysis because of its small-town atmosphere, close-knit community, and care for access to outdoor attractions.

The Utah Wellbeing Project led by Dr. Courtney Flint and her research team at Utah State University, surveys the rapidly changing and growing ideas and input from the community on wellbeing and quality of life. This data has been collected since 2019 and continues to make yearly reports on the findings across the state of Utah. Logan is a main hub where this research is being conducted, under the supervision of Dr. Flint, a trusted expert and professor in natural research sociology at Utah State University. Doctor Flint graciously agreed to share findings from polls of Logan community members in 2021-2022 as part of the Utah Wellbeing Project related to the purposes of this research (Flint et al., 2021).

According to the wellbeing survey, 83% of respondents reported having recreated in parks in Logan City in the past 12 months. This is an astounding majority of the population who prioritize these public spaces in their lives. The survey also reports that in 2022, 90% of surveyed community members noted parks to be a positive influence on wellbeing, a 4% raise from 2021. There are mixed opinions on the current park situation in Logan. There are mixed opinions on the current park situation in Logan. Some individuals feel that it would be nice to open more parks, while others, including

community members, state, “I enjoy the access to trails, recreation, parks, mountains, and outdoor opportunities”. Some individuals believe more should be done for the improvement of parks, with one local stating, “Logan needs new leadership for the Parks and Rec Department.” The statement continues, “There is a lot of space and opportunity for additional facilities/uses at our existing parks, but we have a Parks Director who doesn’t want to maintain anything except grass”. Other locals disagree however, some mentioning comments such as discussing how Logan has been better for their personal wellbeing, one of the reasons being “the level that the parks and public areas are maintained”.

Overall, there is a diverse set of opinions when it comes to open space such as parks in the Logan community. This study will help in improving our understanding of the current viewpoint on parks from both the community and the individuals in charge of making decisions and maintaining these areas, and where there might be some misunderstanding between the two parties.

Methods

The main goal of this research was to determine the main similarities and differences between how park users and maintainers viewed city parks. To address this question, the project looked at a location of interest (Logan, Utah) and determined a list of city-run parks to visit and use as interview locations. Interviews were then conducted with both individuals using public city parks and individuals tasked with managing Logan’s public city parks.

The first group comprised park users, and interviews were conducted in-person and at random with individuals using local city parks. Interviews were collected over a multiple-

day timespan at different times of the day to create the most randomized environment. Interviews were done in-person, and on an individual basis, with the only requirement being that individuals were part of the Logan community and used city parks.

The second group included key stakeholders whose positions related in some way to decisions or management of local city parks. These individuals were chosen based on public databases available online and on Logan city directory sites. More in-depth, informational interviews were conducted with these individuals, as they were the city members tasked with the management and success of Logan City Parks.

Ethical Considerations

To maintain ethical standing during this research, I have received approval through the USU Institutional Review Board to ensure I am conducting ethical data research. In line with the USU consent form template for exempt research, I have drafted a university approved consent form that has been filled out by all individuals included in this study. I have ensured all participants included in the interviewing process provided consent to participation in the project, and to being identified by name and/or title.

While conducting interviews, individuals were treated with respect and gratitude for participation in this study. No individuals were pressured or forced into participating. All data collected has been stored securely and protected. All findings have been reported transparently and truthfully throughout this thesis. This research aims to explore the differences in the perceptions of parks. Efforts will be made to ensure the research results are used to inform changes in the community in a positive way.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with two different groups involved with parks in Logan city. The first group interviewed comprised individuals using public city parks. This data was collected by randomly interviewing community members during a range of different times and dates. The second group of interviews comprised individuals whose positions related in some way to either maintaining or managing Logan's public city parks. These individuals worked as part of the Logan City Parks & Rec department. The following set of questions were included during the interviews with park users and managers.

Park Users:

- Which Park/parks did you use the most, and how often did you visit city parks?
- What was your primary reason for attending city parks? (i.e., exercise, social, relaxing)
- What amenities did you value most in a park and why?
- In your opinion, what role did city parks play in the community, and what impact did they have on the quality of life in Logan City?
- What was one way you thought city parks could be improved?
- Did you encounter any challenges or negative experiences while using city parks?
- Were there any recent positive events or initiatives that you knew of in the community for the improvement of parks?

Park Management:

- What was your role in managing parks in Logan?
- What were the primary goals and objectives of managing city parks?
- Can you describe the key features or amenities that were prioritized in city parks?
- Was there any method of gathering input or feedback from community members when making decisions on improvements to the parks?
- In your experience, what was the biggest challenge in managing or improving parks?
- Were there any measures or metrics used by your department to measure the success of parks in the community?
- Were there any recent positive or effective changes that you knew of in the maintaining process or management of parks?
- Did you use any strategies to balance the various interests and preferences of city park users?
- How did you envision the future of city parks in this community, and in an ideal environment, what would be different?

Limitations

The location of interest served as a limitation since the insights gained from Logan City may not be directly transferable to other cities or regions, as the unique community dynamics and characteristics that make up Logan could significantly impact the perspectives of both park users and organizers.

A limited sample size was another constraint. Practical constraints such as time and weather limited the number of participants in the study among park users. Due to the short nature of this project, individualistic approach, and purpose, the number of individuals interviewed who use Logan City parks was constrained to only a small group of individuals representing the whole community.

Selection bias was a consideration, particularly in the context of the park user interviews. Those who voluntarily participated may hold different perspectives from those who declined or were not approached for an interview, potentially affecting the representativeness of the findings.

Time constraints due to the short length of the project prevented the opportunity for comparison over time. The possibility of park users' and managers' input to change and evolve over time could not be adequately accounted for in this study.

Despite these limitations, this research project provided valuable insights into the dynamics between park users and organizers in Logan City. By acknowledging these constraints, the project aimed to ensure transparency and enhance the understanding of its findings.

Results

The main goal of this project was to look at how the perceptions and experiences of city park users differed from the perspectives and objectives of park managers. One main takeaway from conducting interviews was focusing on the diverse needs and preferences that must be understood and addressed when making decisions surrounding the parks. The importance of community engagement was also a driving

theme throughout the interviews. Having both community input and participation was essential for park managers to complete their job successfully.

Parks Surveyed

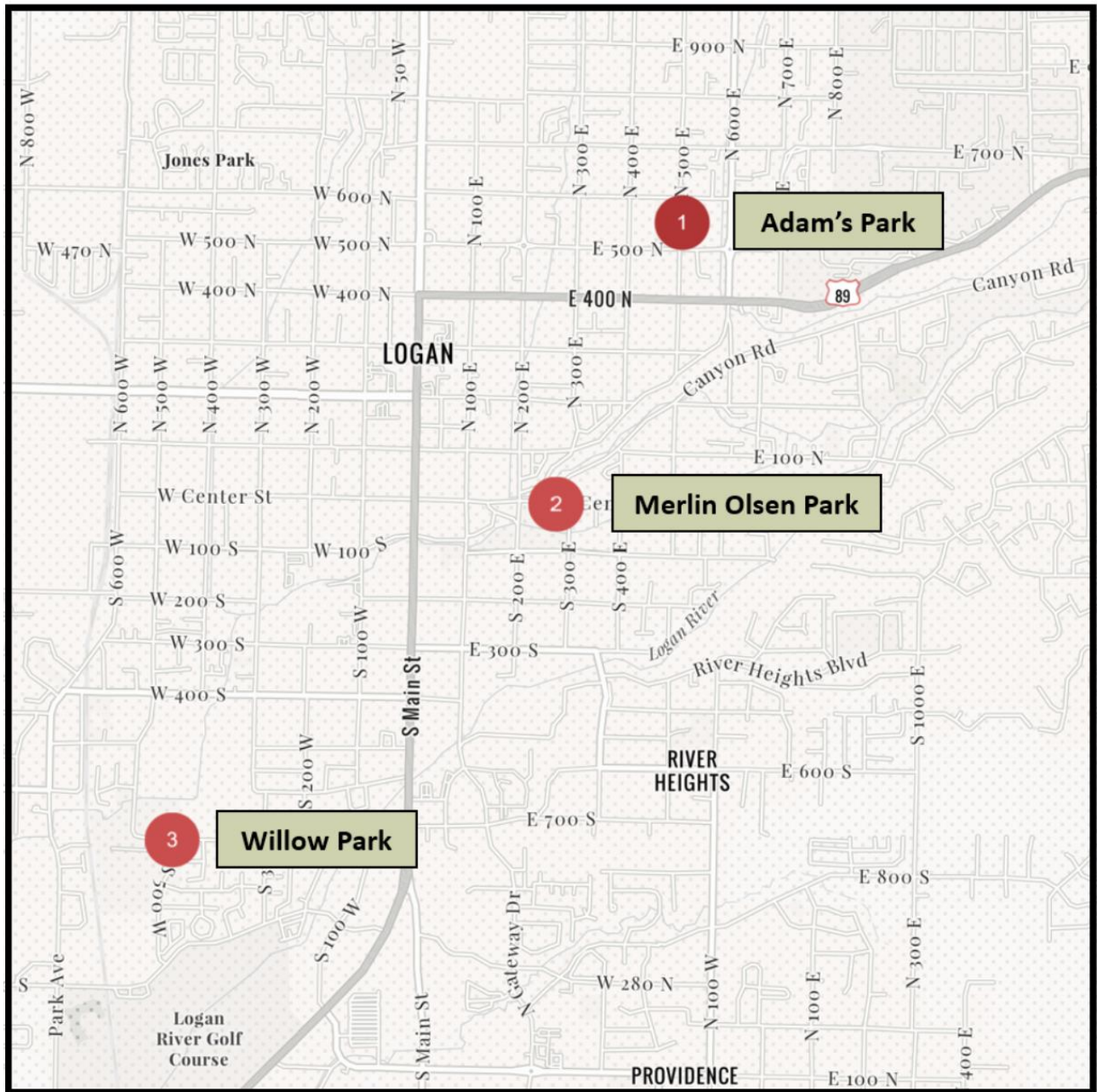


Figure 1: Parks Map

Park Managers

One interview conducted was with Russ Akina, Logan City's Director of Parks & Recreation. Akina's roles and responsibilities included working under the mayor to spearhead the management and direction of Parks & Recreation. When discussing the topic of parks with Akina, he shared how the city's primary goal when it came to planning for parks was acquiring public park land to house city parks. Without this land, the development and continuation of building more parks in Logan would not be possible. Once this land was acquired by the city, it was set aside to be used as public land for, in theory, the duration of time. Akina described the Parks & Recreation department acquiring this city park land as "100-year investments". Since the parks were expected to be around for a long time, the most important aspect was ensuring the continuation of public land availability that could evolve or adapt to the changing community over time.

Ed Stephens, Logan City's Park Superintendent, and Reed Bytendorp, Logan City's Parks Supervisor were the individuals tasked mainly with the management, maintenance, and growth of the parks in Logan city. Their roles focused more on the day-to-day responsibilities and tasks of running the parks. Stephen's role as superintendent included overseeing the budget, managing a handful of employees, and overseeing park operations. Bytendorp's role focused more on overseeing the maintenance and upkeep of the parks. Both Stephens and Bytendorp mentioned how their roles were interchangeable to an extent if needed, depending on who was around that day. The Parks & Recreation department worked as a team to get everything done.

Bytendorp stating: “but to see all the new development that we’ve done is very rewarding.”

The Parks & Recreation department worked to create a comprehensive plan every five to 10 years that incorporated the city budget, goals, community input, and an overall plan for the development and improvement of Logan parks. Akina mentioned how “public outreach is important and valuable to us” when it comes to what taxpayer money should be going to funding within this department. The main goal of the Parks & Recreation department was to see an improvement during outreach from one plan to another. One important note Akina mentioned was how “when we do outreach, the outcome of that may not be realized for a couple of years.” This is important to note as many of the issues that may surface from community outreach might not have the possibility of being addressed until a few years after the initial mention. This is something Akina discussed as important for the community to understand when it comes to bringing up concerns and expecting improvements.

One of the main challenges mentioned by Akina the Parks & Recreation department was always keeping in mind was demographics and demand. Demographics were a focus to ensure the parks catered to the most comprehensive Logan community. The increase in and demand for products and services could have a big impact on the planning. The last comprehensive plan done in Logan was in 2016, and with the Covid19 pandemic a few years later, Akina described how the parks saw an enormous jump in demand and use. This is one challenge the Parks & Recreation department focused on to ensure there was enough space and upkeep of the parks to cater to the public interested in utilizing city parks. Akina mentioned how “There’s never

enough resources to address demand.” This is something Akina thought was most important for the community to understand. Stephens mentioned how “the challenges are endless” when it comes to managing the parks. Due to new projects being implemented, the department was not super familiar with other problems like increased rainfall creating runoff and flooding. There were always new problems that arose; however, Bytendorp and Stephens felt it was their role to come up with the solutions and solve these problems to ensure the availability of parks to the public.

Support and participation by the community, for example, putting on a 5K, had a lot of behind-the-scenes effort and participation that might not be noticed by the community. For example, if a road needed to be closed, or the police/paramedics needed to be on site, etc. With the increase in demand for parks, there had also been an increase in special event permits by the public. Although necessary for some events, one of the main goals for the Parks & Recreation department in the next few years was to help aid the public in being capable of self-directing. If the public land in the form of parks was available, individual groups or organizations could handle the planning and management of their events independently, which could free up some time for Akina’s department to focus on different issues. One issue that could go along with this, however, was the vast number of different interests happening in the community all at once. At times, Bytendorp mentioned “there are so many different groups that are requesting space” which could create a difficult task for determining the best schedule and use of the parks. A lot of beforehand preparation and scheduling could help offset this issue.

Key Takeaways:

Park Managers	
Land investment and long-term planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The primary goal for the parks & recreation department is acquiring public land for the development and expansion of Logan city parks.• This is considered a “100-year investment” to ensure long-term availability of public spaces that can adapt to changing community needs overtime.
Roles and responsibilities of park management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Russ Akina is the Director of Parks & Recreation and oversees the management and direction of the parks under the mayor.• Ed Stephens, the Park Superintendent and Reed Bytendorp, Park Supervisor handle the day-to-day management, maintenance and growth of parks in Logan.• Their roles are interchangeable and adaptable, they work together as a team.
Comprehensive planning and community outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Parks & Recreation department makes a comprehensive plan every 5-10 years which considers factors such as budget, goals, community input and plans for development.• Public outreach is an important aspect of planning to allocate tax-payer money in the most effective way.
Challenges faced by park managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demographics and demand are key considerations to cater to the diverse needs and increasing demand of the community.• Resource constraints pose a challenge, managers emphasize that there are never enough resources to fully address demand.
Adapting to new challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stephens and Bytendorp work to problem-solve in their positions by coming up with solutions when a problem like runoff and flooding occurs.• The team sees their role is to find solutions to emerging problems to ensure the continued availability and high quality of Logan parks.
Community support and self-direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support and participation from the community goes a long way when it comes to organizing and hosting events.• Balancing the diverse interests and various community groups requesting park space require time, scheduling, and preparation.

Park Users

The residents interviewed were all individuals using Logan City parks. Most of the interviewees were spending time at the park with family, studying, walking their dogs, playing sports, etc. These interviews help relay the feelings and viewpoints of Logan City, their preferences, concerns, and experiences related to the city's parks. Overall, 25 Logan city park users were interviewed, their suggestions and viewpoints are described as follows.



Figure 2: Word Map

Parks Frequently Visited:

Logan's park users mainly mentioned their preferred park or most attended park being whichever park they were stopped in for an interview. The parks most frequently visited during the interview portion of this project were Merlin Olsen Park, Willow Park, and Adams Park. These parks were the most populated and had the largest number of park users, which made them the primary spots to conduct interviews. These parks are also larger than some of the other parks available in Logan city. Additional parks mentioned Adams Park, First Dam, Bridger Bike Park, River Hollow Park, and the use of trails in the area were mentioned. Some interviewees were unfamiliar with the names of parks and described them in proximity to their home, or other descriptive factors, which have not been included due to uncertainty about the specific names of the parks they were referring to.



Figure 4: Willow Park



Figure 3: Horseshoe Park

Primary Reasons for Visiting Parks:

The park users displayed a variety of reasons for visiting parks, this helped shed light on the vast number of options parks provide to individuals, both as third spaces and areas to promote wellness and community connection. Leisure and relaxation emerged as a common theme for park use, many individuals were out laying on the grass, listening to music or reading, and just enjoying sunlight and time outside. Exercise was another commonly mentioned reason for utilizing parks. Many individuals were there walking their dogs, out on a walk or jogging, or playing sports. Since parks provide an ideal setting for jogging, walking, and playing sports, which makes parks a primary location for those looking to get some exercise in. The last main reason mentioned by park users was the appeal of spending time in nature and connecting with family and friends. There were many individuals out spending time with their kids or having family bonding time at the parks. With abundance of available grass space, and trees, connecting with nature also stood out to be an important reason for the park users that chose to visit the parks.

Valued Park Amenities:

When discussing park amenities, interviewees highlighted the importance of well-maintained parks overall as an important factor to them. Parks are viewed as spaces that should be kept clean, safe, and enjoyable for all users. Open grassy areas and walking paths were the main amenity mentioned as being most important. Many park users said how having grassy areas for sports, or just relaxing on is what makes a park valuable. Pavilions and shaded areas were also highly mentioned as an important factor

especially for hot sunny weather. Many park users were out having picnics or studying at the pavilions, having these spaces creates a comfortable environment for these types of activities. Bathrooms were also mentioned as an important amenity that should be available when needed during a park visit. Overall, these amenities create an experience that makes it possible for park users to enjoy the outdoors with friends and family.



Figure 5: Merlin Olsen Park

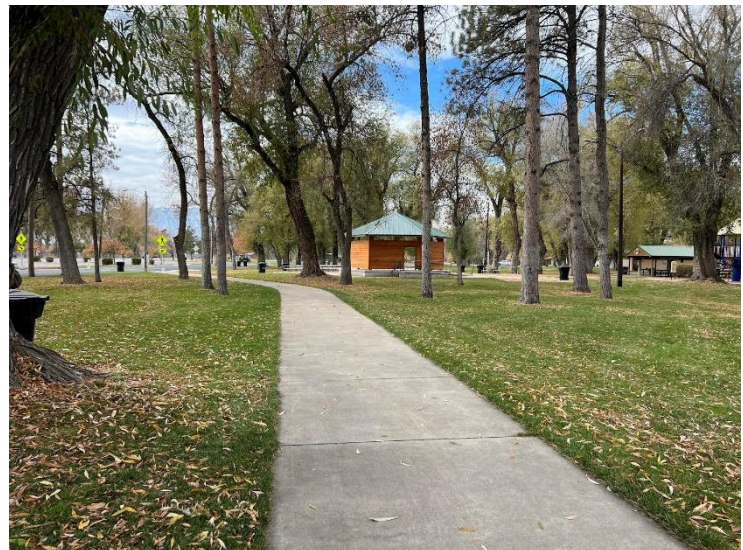


Figure 6: Willow Park

Suggestions for Park Improvement:

While expressing their overall satisfaction with Logan's parks, some park users identified potential areas for enhancement.

One main suggestion brought up would be the need for more shaded areas whether it be additional trees or pavilion areas. One Park user also mentioned how watching kids sporting events can be unbearable if there isn't adequate shading available. Better signage was also mentioned to help with navigation to the parks, or to make it easier for visitors to be able to get there easily. Furthermore, interviewees highlighted the importance of improved accessibility for individuals with disabilities and the necessity of

adequate lighting in the evenings to enhance safety. Overall, however, most park users said there weren't any specific suggestions for improvement they could think of and believed Logan city was doing an excellent job in maintaining the parks and providing necessary amenities to create a positive inviting atmosphere.

Positive Initiatives and Events:

A notable aspect of Logan's park users' experiences was their participation in positive initiatives and events within the parks. Several interviewees shared their involvement in community projects such as gardening initiatives, concerts in the park, art installations, and park clean-up events. These activities display great community involvement and community care for the maintenance and events happening at the parks. Many interviewees mentioned they had not been to any events recently that had to do with the parks.

Overall Satisfaction:

In summary, park users in Logan expressed high levels of satisfaction with the city's parks. They praised the cleanliness, maintenance, and overall upkeep of the parks, noting the sense of security they felt during their visits. While they recognized minor areas for improvement, such as increasing the availability of shaded areas and providing better signage, their feedback emphasized the value of well-kept public spaces within the community. Logan's parks were celebrated for their ability to offer a wide range of recreational opportunities and the chance to connect with nature, fostering a stronger sense of community and well-being among its residents.

Key Takeaways:

Park Users	
Park visitation preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The main park visitation preferences were spending time with family, studying, walking dogs, and playing sports.• Due to the larger size and location of the three parks where interviews were conducted, these three parks were deemed more frequently visited.
Primary reasons for visiting parks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leisure and relaxation stood out as the main theme for why parks are utilized. Laying in the grass, listening to music, reading, and events were all frequently mentioned.• Exercise was another significant category of reasons mentioned, including playing sports, walking, walking dogs, and jogging.• Spending time with family and friends was another key reason for park visitation with many park users mentioning playing with kids, having picnics, family reunions, or other family events hosted at parks.
Most valued park amenities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Well-maintained parks were a common theme among interviews and seemed to be the most important amenity to an enjoyable park experience.• Open grassy areas, walking paths, pavilions and shaded areas were also mentioned frequently.• Some park interviewees mentioned having access to bathrooms as the most important amenity.
Park improvement suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More shaded areas, better signage for park navigation, improved accessibility for individuals with disabilities and improved lighting for safety in the evenings were the most mentioned areas for improvement.• Overall, there was a very positive perception of Logan city parks with many park users mentioning they believe the parks are very well maintained.
Positive events and initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some park users had recently attended or participated in events or initiatives held at parks including gardening projects, concerts, art installations and clean-up events.• Most interviewees concluded they had not participated in any park events recently.
Overall satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overall, Logan Park users expressed high levels of satisfaction with the parks and praised the city for the well-maintained areas.• Many minor suggestions were mentioned for areas of improvement; however, the consensus was not much needs to be improved.



Figure 7: Merlin Olsen Park

Discussion

The findings of this research offer insights into the viewpoints of park users and park managers in Logan City. The dynamic relationship between park users and managers reflects a functional working relationship where the individual's decisions are informed by the community and the community can see the improvements being made over time.

The first major theme discovered through interviews is the diverse needs of park users. Community members all have different reasons for utilizing park spaces so catering to many different interests is a consistent challenge for park managers. Users highlighted the importance of parks providing spaces for rest and relaxation, sports,

events, family time, etc. This diverse set of needs align with broader research indicating that urban parks serve as crucial spaces for physical activity, social interaction, and mental well-being (Bratman et al., 2012). The ability of parks to cater to these needs is essential in creating an atmosphere of inclusivity in parks and making them a place the community wants to spend time at and utilize.

Community engagement in decision making has been outlined as a top priority by park managers. Park managers agree, it is essential to know and understand what the community is looking for to guide the direction of improvement for parks. The needs and desires of the community can change over time which is why park managers mentioned how essential it is to set aside spaces that are adaptable and multifunctional. Park management in Logan has shown an understanding of the needs and interests of the broader community and works towards making sure park development aligns with the preferences of the residents. Research has shown that involving the community in the design and planning of public spaces leads to more successful and sustainable outcomes (Lee et al., 2000).

Both park users and managers emphasized the need for well-maintained parks. Users mentioned most valued amenities such as open grassy areas, walking paths, pavilions, and bathrooms. Park managers interviewed in this study note that the focal point of their job is the maintenance of the parks and problem solving when unfavorable situations arise. They understand the importance of keeping amenities in good condition and ensuring parks are a safe and enjoyable environment for everyone. In addition to favored amenities, Urban green spaces such as parks have been linked to improved air quality, reduced noise pollution, and mitigation of urban heating effects (Kabisch et al.,

2017). These environmental benefits further highlight the importance of continuous maintenance of parks.

While overall satisfaction with parks was high among park users, there were specific suggestions for areas of improvement that could be implemented in coming years. These include the need for more shaded areas to help curb the dangerous heat levels that occur during the summer months, better signage, improved accessibility for individuals with disabilities and enhanced lighting for safety during the evening. These areas for improvement are understood by park managers, and some parks may be doing better in some areas, and worse in others. These suggestions align with the best practices outlined in urban park design which emphasizes the importance of safety, inclusivity and accessibility for all park users (PPS, 2008).

Engagement in park events and community initiatives reflects residents' satisfaction with available spaces. Many park users identified events they had recently attended such as concerts, garden or cleanup initiatives, or art displays. Many park users mentioned they have not attended any events held at parks recently. Park managers mentioned the difficulty of considering every group that requests special access or reservation of parks. This can be a long process of approval and overseeing on the management side. Park managers appreciate and encourage involvement from the community when it comes to planning and executing events. This can help ensure a wide variety of events are offered to the community, and the residents have a say in what goes on in the parks on a regular basis. Parks as communal spaces can foster social cohesion and a sense of belonging (Torres, 2023).

Urban planning is a main point of attention when it comes to the positive impact parks can have in a community. With over half the world's population living in urban areas, parks contribute to urban green infrastructure in a positive way, by offering essential ecosystem services back into the land (Kabisch et al., 2017). With the continuation of infrastructure development, having areas to help mediate the climate impacts of these spaces can contribute to the health and balance of an area, leading to the benefit of all residents. The contribution of parks to the cooling and mitigation of climate change is an integral part of sustainable city development and something that both park users and managers recognize as important and necessary to create a positive future for the city.

Future Considerations and Recommendations from the Literature

This study helps in laying the groundwork for understanding the ongoing dynamics between park users and managers in Logan City. While considering the future of Logan City parks, it is essential to explore additional dimensions and address potential future challenges.

Future research and initiatives should put an increased emphasis on implementing innovative approaches to community feedback and engagement. Utilizing digital platforms and social media can facilitate broader participation when it comes to receiving feedback and contribution of ideas. Preferences and concerns can be more widely discussed and organized when digital tools are utilized for this cause. The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health highlights this

potential for how technology can be used as a tool to enhance community engagement and participation in the future of park development (MDPI, 2008).

Implementing sustainable practices in park management is vital to ensure the longevity and ecological health of these spaces. Exploring more environmentally friendly maintenance methods such as zero-emission landscaping equipment or water conservation initiatives can lead to a more successful future. UGI outlines how solar-powered lighting and green roofs on park structures are ideas that have been implemented and proven effective in a variety of locations (Kabisch et al., 2017).

Leveraging technology to implement more accessible options can increase the inclusivity of parks in Logan. Smart Park infrastructure such as accessible pathways or interactive installations can help cater to a larger number of needs. For those facing physical or mobility challenges, enhanced technology can also create virtual park experiences or other alternatives to help create a more inclusive space. The Smart Cities Council emphasizes how the role of technology in the improvement of parks is the direction all city management should be taking to create a more positive future. Technological solutions can help benefit all community members (Jones, 2023).

Considering the future impacts of climate change, future park planning must consider possible problems that could arise in the future and how parks can be made more resilient when this happens. Strategies such as incorporating more climate-adaptive plant species, creating water-wise landscapes, and implementing green infrastructure to mitigate heat can all lead to the improvement of these spaces amidst a changing world.

Future considerations must address social equity when it comes to park access and amenities. This involves conducting equity assessments to identify any disparities when it comes to park availability and quality. Park distribution and ensuring underprivileged communities have enough access to these spaces is essential for building a healthy community. Incorporating diverse cultural elements in park designs and making sure many different groups of people have their voice heard and a seat at the table can help make a more positive future.

Conclusion

This project explores the perceptions and experiences of city park users, in comparison to the perspectives and objectives of park organizers in Logan City and has revealed several insights. The dynamic relationship between the community and those tasked with the stewardship of public green spaces offers valuable lessons for the ongoing development and maintenance of urban parks.

Parks, as discovered through interviews and analysis, emerge as vital components of community well-being, fostering physical health, social connection, and a deeper appreciation for the natural environment. The findings show how the role of parks is not only to be recreational spaces but also areas for community building, mental rejuvenation, and the promotion of a healthier, more sustainable urban lifestyle.

In navigating the complexities of urbanization, climate change, and societal shifts, the role of city parks becomes increasingly pivotal. They are not only areas for relaxation and recreation but also active contributors to ecological resilience, social cohesion, and cultural vibrancy. The lessons learned from Logan City's experience can

be projected globally, inspiring cities to reevaluate their approach to green spaces and reaffirming the notion that well-designed, well-maintained parks are indispensable components of thriving, resilient urban landscapes.

In the spirit of continuous improvement, this project serves as a steppingstone towards a future where city parks are not just appreciated but actively shaped by the communities they serve, ensuring that they remain cherished, accessible, and sustainable for generations to come.

Reflective Writing

The final honors capstone project was the most daunting task I had in mind throughout all of college and was something I was very nervous about completing. At the beginning of the honors program, I really enjoyed the beginning years of being in the honors program. Taking honors classes and attending events for honors was very enjoyable and I loved getting involved with different projects and community initiatives. I don't think I would have gotten as involved in as many university and community projects if I did not have the structure and requirements of the honors program throughout my time at Utah State.

When I first started thinking about my capstone project for this program, I really had no idea what I wanted to investigate. I came up with some general ideas but had a really hard time refining those ideas into an accomplishable project. It took a great deal of trial and error to finally arrive at the topic I wanted to complete my project on. I started with a very broad topic of wanting to look at the relationship between nature and mental health and eventually refined my project into using Logan City parks as a case study location. I really love the final topic I landed on and feel like it was the right scope for the time and resources I had available for the completion of my project. It took a lot longer than I was expecting to finalize what direction I wanted to take my project in. I brought several different proposals to my committee before we finally found something that fit. After completing this portion of the project, the next big challenge I faced was getting IRB approval to conduct interviews for the research portion of the project. IRB was not something I was familiar with before beginning this project. Under the direction of my committee, I completed the IRB training process and believed that was the only

necessary step for completing undergraduate research for this project. Shortly after, I learned I would be required to submit a request to IRB to gain approval for this research. This was a very intensive yet informative process. It really forced me to figure out the very small details and requirements of the projects. Small tasks like coming up with interview questions, drafting a script for requesting interviews, creating a consent form, and other small tasks I had been putting off before this point. The IRB process really helped keep me on track and get these tasks done to prepare me for the interview portion of my project.

The IRB process required lots of revision and adjustments to ensure I was conducting ethical research. This process took longer than expected as I had to resubmit my request multiple times to ensure I was following all guidelines set by the university. This pushed my project back two weeks which worried me because of the time of year I was worried about not having enough individuals utilizing Logan Parks if the weather turned cold. Luckily this year had a very warm fall season which worked perfectly for having enough time to complete the interviews before the weather got too cold.

The next step in the process was reaching out to Logan City's Park managers to request interviews. I was worried about this step as well because I was unsure if anyone would respond to my request and be willing to be interviewed, especially with how specific and small the group of individuals were that had the expertise I was looking for. This turned out better than I was expecting, and I was able to conduct three interviews with the individuals that I would say have the most involvement with the management and maintenance of the parks. The park user interviews went better than expected as

well. I was very worried I would be bothering individuals or being a nuisance by walking around requesting interviews from the individual's utilizing parks. However, many people I interviewed seemed very interested and happy to help me with my project. This was a relief and I felt like I got some very helpful information from the people I interviewed. The last problem I encountered during the interview process was getting sick which stopped me from getting as many park user interviews as possible. I got a good amount of data from the interviews I conducted, however, in an ideal situation, I would have had the time and resources to conduct more interviews of a broader range of people at more parks.

The last portion of the project was completing the writing portion and creating visualizations as well as putting things together. This was my favorite part of the project because I could really take the time to investigate the data I collected and talk about what I found and learned. It was easier to accomplish this part because I had already done the portions of the project that had more of the unknown. It took a long time to get everything I wanted in this project; however, I feel proud of the final product I have created. I think the topic turned out to be something there was a lot I could learn about and discover interesting takeaways from.

Overall, I would say my biggest takeaway from this project was understanding the process and time commitment of completing a thesis type project. This feels like a really great start into entering the graduate level academic field. I feel more prepared to tackle a future graduate program and master's level thesis. I also feel I learned a lot about how to make this process smoother, my biggest lesson being working to create an accomplishable scope and refining a larger interest or idea into a project that can be

studied and completed. I really enjoyed working with my committee to complete this project and think having that support was a necessity in completing this project. Their help and support are invaluable to me, and I am very grateful they were willing to meet with me consistently and give help and support throughout this process. I am happy to continue my academic career and see what research I can accomplish and learn from in the future.

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Authors Biography

Kalli Hull is currently a senior at Utah State University graduating in fall 2023, majoring in Environmental Studies with a focus on Biology, Sustainable Systems, and GIS. Kalli is passionate about spending time in nature and getting involved with community sustainability efforts. During her undergraduate, Kalli has been involved in the honors program, community engaged scholar program, and volunteered as an AmeriCorps Volunteer with the USU sustainability office. After graduation, Kalli hopes to attend graduate school and gain more experience in her field. Kalli is interested in studying environmental management, sustainability, or ecosystem science and sustainability. Kalli loves to hike, read, spend time with friends, write poetry and get involved with community projects. Kalli has spent time volunteering with the Rotaract club and managing a local nonprofit focused on promoting Fair Trade in the community.

