



# Reimagining the Civic Commons

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Reimagining the Civic Commons is an ambitious national initiative demonstrating that strategic investments in public spaces can connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust and create more resilient communities. Since 2016, cities across the U.S. have been transforming how they design, manage and program their civic assets—and are nurturing critical social impacts that are improving neighborhoods and lives.

**Learn more at [www.civiccommons.us](http://www.civiccommons.us).**

# Investing with Intention

Reimagining the Civic Commons is a collaboration of national foundations and local civic leaders working to reimagine local public spaces—such as parks, libraries, trails and community centers—in ways that benefit communities.

**We believe in the power of the public realm to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits. These four outcomes guide our approach:**



## Civic Engagement

Bring people of all backgrounds into public life as stewards and advocates, shaping their city's future.



## Socioeconomic Mixing

Create places where everyone belongs and that generate opportunities for shared experiences among people of all incomes and backgrounds.



## Environmental Sustainability

Connect people to nature, incorporate green infrastructure and increase walking, biking and transit accessibility.



## Value Creation

Encourage equitable development in neighborhoods so they become better places to thrive.

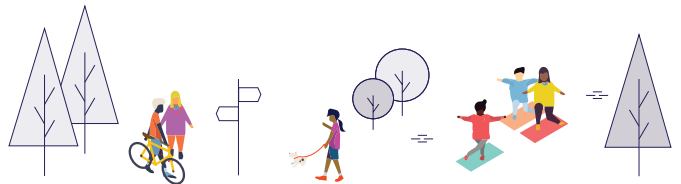
## The Power of the Commons

Cities across the U.S. are transforming public spaces from places of untapped potential to places that bridge differences, create increased and more equitably shared prosperity, and contribute solutions to pressing national challenges. In a time when loneliness, distrust, harmful climate impacts and economic segregation are on the rise, this work is critical.

The Reimagining the Civic Commons model represents a paradigm shift in how cities design, program and manage their civic assets. It emphasizes managing public spaces as a portfolio of connected assets rather than as individual sites, collaborating across sectors and organizations for lasting change, innovating to achieve the initiative's four outcomes, measuring progress, and participating in a national community of practice.

Data collected over the life of the initiative is demonstrating measurable results. In the cities employing our model, more people are connecting across differences of income and race, engaging in local community life and feeling hopeful about the future. Visits to public spaces and interactions with new people have increased, and support and funding for the public realm have grown. These investments are not only changing public spaces, but also elevating social connection, building trust and generating hope for a better future.

After nearly a decade of innovation, collaboration and investment, it's clear that intentionally managed public spaces can help restitch America's communities and strengthen our democracy.



**In Memphis, diverse public life flourishes on the riverfront, with yoga classes in 2023 drawing more than 5,000 participants from 37 zip codes.**



**In Akron's Summit Lake neighborhood between 2017 and 2023, the percentage of residents who trust local institutions nearly doubled from 29% to 57%.**



**In Detroit's Fitzgerald neighborhood, 94% of residents say the neighborhood has changed for the better in recent years, compared with just 34% in 2017. And 97% feel hopeful about the neighborhood's future.**

## The Cities

### Akron

Investments in three neighborhoods—and the trail that connects them—are knitting together isolated communities through collaborative reimagining of public spaces. Started in 2016, this work is fostering stewardship and connection, building trust, addressing difficult histories and spurring hope for the future.

### Camden

In Camden, New Jersey, a diverse collaboration is piloting a new operating model in four public spaces, employing strategies for programming and maintenance that could be expanded citywide. This approach is helping ensure that a network of newly renovated parks and public spaces will remain welcoming nodes of community while nurturing civic engagement, trust and a more hopeful future.

### Cincinnati

Cincinnati is reconnecting isolated neighborhoods to each other, a revitalized waterfront and major employment hubs with the Mill Creek Greenway. This walking and biking path will transform an industrial waterfront into a model of equitable redevelopment, linking residents to nature and the citywide CROWN trail network.

### Detroit

Since 2016, Detroit's diverse collaboration has transformed vacant lots and underutilized assets in the Fitzgerald neighborhood into inviting public spaces. With a pivot toward stewardship, operations and programming, Detroit will sustain these assets for years. This work has inspired the adoption of a citywide model for equitable neighborhood redevelopment.

### Lexington

As the city advances an ambitious 20-year plan that prioritizes public spaces, a parallel focus on testing and evaluating the effect of policies, deeply involving residents in implementation and nurturing local leadership is amplifying the impact of investments. In addition, pilot demonstrations of public space options are enabling neighbors to experience design solutions and contribute to the future of their city.

### Macon

The Ocmulgee Heritage Trail network draws people to Macon's riverfront and neighborhoods. But Pleasant Hill—a historically Black neighborhood harmed by highway construction—needs extra attention. With residents in the lead, Macon is revitalizing Pleasant Hill's public realm, improving connections to downtown and the trail, and realizing resident-envisioned programming.

### Memphis

Founded on the banks of the Mississippi River, Memphis returned to the river in 2016 to create a network of inclusive, world-class gathering spaces. These efforts catalyzed a citywide movement of organizations changing the way they work in service to a shared goal: a vibrant, diverse and unified community through the power of public spaces.

### Minneapolis | St. Paul

Although known for incredible parks, the public realm of Minneapolis and St. Paul's majority-Black and -brown neighborhoods has historically been underfunded. A diverse coalition will pilot a design justice studio to heal generational harms and co-create welcoming civic spaces, focusing along two commercial corridors where major capital improvements are planned, within a neighborhood cultural and commercial district, and at police stations that will be reconceived as true community assets.

### Philadelphia—Pilot

Since 2015, a diverse coalition has championed public space and civic life in three neighborhoods that were functionally disconnected from nearby natural assets. Partners have centered community development and collaboration, paving the way for new programs, staffing policies, physical improvements and maintenance. Communities now engage with Fairmount Park and Bartram's Garden in new and meaningful ways, and investment is directed to new community gathering spaces and local organizations.

### San José

San José is cultivating an inclusive, dynamic and enriching ecosystem of public spaces downtown. By reimagining an underutilized park, turning a neglected lot into a local food destination and reactivating a historic civic square, the local collaboration is reinvigorating downtown with the heartbeat of community.

“We believe in the power of creating shared experience, and our parks, trails, libraries and community centers provide those opportunities every day. Reinvigorating those spaces through the Reimagining the Civic Commons collaborative is an important part of our strategy to make Memphis a more welcoming, inclusive and vibrant city.”

- Mayor Paul Young  
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE



# Make an Impact

Our insights and resources are available to anyone who wants to transform their city's parks, libraries, trails, main streets and more into places that strengthen communities.

Visit [www.civiccommons.us](http://www.civiccommons.us) to:

- **Get started:** Learn about Reimagining the Civic Commons, why it matters for cities and our nation, and how to turn your public realm into a catalyst for trust, social connection and resilience.
- **Measure what matters:** Uncover the multifaceted value of investments in your civic commons—and make a strong case for additional investment.
- **Stay connected:** Sign up for our newsletter to receive public space news and ideas from thought leaders in the U.S. and around the world.

## Initiative Details

Reimagining the Civic Commons was piloted in Philadelphia in 2015 to counter concerning increases in economic segregation, social isolation and distrust by investing strategically in our shared civic spaces. With growing evidence that the public realm has an important role to play in addressing these national challenges, the initiative expanded to four additional cities in 2016. Today, 10 cities are actively demonstrating this transformative model.

### The Funders

The JPB Foundation, Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, William Penn Foundation

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## The Cities

