

# Reimagining the Civic Commons



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## Five American cities join national effort to radically reimagine public spaces for stronger communities

*In a nation emerging from a pandemic, Reimagining the Civic Commons  
responds to a growing need for revitalized civic assets*

May 27, 2020— A national initiative to advance ambitious social, economic and environmental goals through public spaces announced a major expansion today. Reimagining the Civic Commons has added five new U.S. cities who join the original cohort of cities making strategic investments in parks, libraries, trails and community centers across the country.

Lexington, Macon, Miami, Minneapolis and San José will join Reimagining the Civic Commons, comprised of innovative civic leaders forging new ways to design, manage and operate public spaces for the benefit of all. The five new cities join the original five demonstration cities of Akron, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis and Philadelphia, forming a network of 10 cities transforming civic assets to connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust and create more resilient communities.

Reimagining the Civic Commons is supported by The JPB Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Kresge Foundation and William Penn Foundation. The initiative is designed to demonstrate how strategic investments in our civic assets can advance engagement, equity, environmental sustainability and economic development in cities and neighborhoods.

Leaders at these foundations acknowledged that a robust civic commons is key to the nation's recovery from COVID-19, allowing cities to rebuild social capital and create more equitable and resilient communities.

“Amidst the safer-at-home measures during this pandemic, we have seen public spaces—our parks, open spaces and trails—sustaining people in ways we only contemplated a few months ago,” said Dana Bourland, vice president of environment at The JPB Foundation. “A growing number of people have now deeply experienced that our civic commons delivers multiple benefits—reduced

stress, improved health, a necessary sense of human connection. High quality, well-maintained public spaces are critical infrastructure and they must be available to everyone within walking distance from their home. And they should be at the top of the to-do list for policymakers, leaders and cities.”

In addition to the expansion into new cities, the more than \$10 million in new philanthropic investment will continue to support the leading-edge public space efforts in the five original demonstration cities. These demonstration cities have made substantial strides since they began four years ago:

- In **Akron**, formerly neglected Summit Lake in one of the city’s hardest hit neighborhoods has become a gathering place where residents can experience nature every day. Ninety-four percent of visitors to the lake believe the previously isolated neighborhood now has a bright future.
- In **Chicago**, investments in unique civic spaces like the Stony Island Arts Bank Campus and the formerly vacant St. Laurence School are sparking a South Side neighborhood revitalization. More than 650 free programs held in civic commons sites drew over 26,000 people to neighborhood spaces in the last three years.
- **Detroit** has transformed vacant lots into a new park and greenway, and an empty storefront into the Neighborhood HomeBase, a welcoming community hub. The result is increased public life throughout the neighborhood and 10 new storefronts for local businesses on the commercial corridor.
- **Memphis** has reimagined a set of all but abandoned spaces along the Mississippi River to become an active, revitalized waterfront. Formerly home to Confederate monuments, the renamed and revitalized Fourth Bluff Park and River Garden now welcome a diversity of Memphians every day, and River Garden has nearly doubled visitor numbers.
- **Philadelphia** has a new riverfront bike and pedestrian trail, a renovated public library and park space, an elevated park, a nature and youth education center and a neighborhood-oriented gathering space in West Fairmount Park. The project created a robust, collaborative network of public space practitioners and helped set the stage for \$500 million of new civic asset funding through the Rebuild initiative.

“Months of quarantine has brought home to all of us just how much we need great public spaces.” said Sam Gill, Knight’s senior vice president and chief program officer. “These spaces will be key to supporting socially connected, healthy communities as we emerge from this pandemic.”

The expansion into five new cities presents opportunities to:

- Enhance civic engagement and civic trust through public spaces that are programmed to support authentic neighborhood and community participation.
- Engender support for — and investment in — public spaces within communities as an approach to a more engaged and vibrant community.
- Grow the capabilities of leaders in communities, both in civil society and in public administration, to conceive of, build and program public spaces that deliver outcomes in communities.

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### **About The JPB Foundation**

The mission of The JPB Foundation is to enhance the quality of life in the United States through transformational initiatives that promote the health of our communities by creating opportunities for those in poverty, promoting pioneering medical research, and enriching and sustaining our environment. For more, visit [jpbfoundation.org](http://jpbfoundation.org).

### **About the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation**

Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots. We invest in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. Our goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which we believe are essential for a healthy democracy. For more, visit [kf.org](http://kf.org).

### **About The Kresge Foundation**

The Kresge Foundation was founded in 1924 to promote human progress. Today, Kresge fulfills that mission by building and strengthening pathways to opportunity for low-income people in America's cities, seeking to dismantle structural and systemic barriers to equality and justice. Using a full array of grant, loan, and other investment tools, Kresge invests more than \$160 million annually to foster economic and social change. For more information visit [kresge.org](http://kresge.org)

### **About William Penn Foundation**

The William Penn Foundation, founded in 1945 by Otto and Phoebe Haas, is dedicated to improving the quality of life in the Greater Philadelphia region through efforts that increase educational opportunities for children from low-income families, ensure a sustainable environment, foster creativity that enhances civic life, and advance philanthropy in the Philadelphia region. The Foundation's assets exceed \$2.5 billion. For more, visit [williampennfoundation.org](http://williampennfoundation.org).