

**Testimony provided by William Penn Foundation for
Pennsylvania Democratic House Policy Committee Hearing**

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Introduction and Background on William Penn Foundation

Thank you to the Pennsylvania Democratic House Policy Committee for the invitation to speak about the William Penn Foundation's approach to investing in public space. My name is Cara Ferrentino, and I am the program officer who leads the Foundation's public space grantmaking, a \$16M annual portfolio focused on supporting more equitable access to the many benefits that public and community spaces provide in Philadelphia. In this testimony I will share what we know about the benefits of public space, based on academic research and the experiences of our grantees, and how we approach public space funding to maximize these benefits.

While many see public spaces as an amenity – nice to have but not required – at the William Penn Foundation we see public spaces as an *essential* part of community health and wellbeing, and a key aspect of how we achieve our overall mission of improving quality of life in the Philadelphia region.

All told, the William Penn Foundation invests more than \$120M each year in the greater Philadelphia region in the areas of education, watershed protection, arts and culture, and public space in pursuit of this mission. Public spaces have received funding throughout the foundation's 75-year history, with \$200M granted or committed since 2013 alone. We fund parks, libraries, recreation centers, trails, community centers, plazas, community gardens, and more.

Throughout this pandemic, we've seen just how essential public space is. People are turning to parks and trails as places to socialize and unwind. Last spring, community centers large and small rapidly switched gears to distribute food and household essentials, such as diapers and masks, and now, vaccines. We've seen recreation centers transform into education centers – safe places for children to learn. In these ways and many others, public and community spaces serve as vital infrastructure, helping us work together and increase our collective resilience to the challenges we face.

Research on the Costs and Benefits of Urban Public Spaces

The William Penn Foundation recently commissioned a team of researchers, led by Hamil Pearsall of Temple University, to synthesize what academic literature tells us about the benefits of public space. Drawing on their wide range of expertise, including economics, geography, sociology, public health, and the environment, the researchers systematically identified and reviewed more than 450 articles. Below are key takeaways from their report, also available at <https://williampennfoundation.org/what-we-are-learning/benefits-and-costs-urban-public-spaces>.

Research shows that access to high-quality public spaces provides a wealth of benefits by:

- Creating opportunities for building social contacts and connections
- Providing places for expressing free speech
- Increasing economic activity and property values
- Lowering temperatures, reducing stormwater runoff, and promoting biodiversity
- Improving mental health
- Providing spaces for physical activity
- Serving as places of refuge during extreme weather events

However, study after study demonstrates how inequitable investment in public space serves some communities while failing others. Public spaces can be unevenly distributed, and quality varies across neighborhoods. Low-income communities and communities of color have less access to high-quality public spaces than whiter and wealthier neighborhoods. Far too many public spaces remain chronically under-resourced, negatively impacting usage, safety, local pride, and more.

In fact, research reveals an important lesson about the potential HARMS of public space: poorly maintained public spaces *depress* property values, attract litter and civil disorder, incite fear of crime, and can cause other harm to mental well-being. In fact, one study suggested blighted vacant lots can reduce household values by as much as 20% in some Philadelphia neighborhoods.

On the other hand, we know the economic benefits of well-maintained public spaces can be substantial. Research shows that investment in well-maintained public and community spaces can:

- Increase property values (with studies showing that living across from a park may boost property values by up to 14%).
- Enhance foot traffic and business activity (e.g., increased commercial office rents, at least prior to the pandemic)
- Provide employment and/or contracting opportunities

However, these economic benefits can occur to those who already have wealth, while low-wealth communities often experience negative economic impacts associated with public space, specifically:

- increased rental burdens following major reinvestment in public space
- residential and business displacement following major investment in public space

In fact, there is sufficient evidence from research that major investments in public space which are guided by pro-business interests and focus on economic development contribute to user, residential, and commercial displacement; exclusion from processes; and changes in the social and cultural tone of a neighborhood.

Our Approach to Funding Public Space

How does this influence the William Penn Foundation's approach to public space investment?

First, we believe that public spaces must be designed and operated to meet local needs and wants, and that community-based organizations are often best positioned to lead public space work. We support work that goes beyond perfunctory engagement to focus on **empowering local participation** in decision-making about public space, including how they are operated and how communities will benefit over time. We see how this translates into a sense of local belonging and ownership, and to deeper, more varied, and more lasting local benefits.

Second, we emphasize the importance of ongoing **maintenance** of existing infrastructure— not just new capital investments. We fund efforts to improve maintenance and operations practices knowing that they are essential to ensuring community benefit – not harm. We want to work counter to cycles of deferred maintenance, which require *future generations* to pay more later for equipment or structures failures and full replacements. We believe that the costs of deferred maintenance are grossly undervalued and poorly misunderstood and deserve far greater focus given the profound inequities and harms associated with poor maintenance of public space.

Third, we emphasize **economic equity** in our work. We look beyond short term returns and ask how public space efforts are exploring possible economic linkages to low-income people of color and their communities, for example through entrepreneurship, employment, and vending. We have even funded critical home repair work near major public space investments. This is to ensure that long-time homeowners can benefit from property value increases, by helping them avoid the need to sell a home because they can't pay for a new roof.

Finally, we are increasingly focused on **climate resiliency**. Public spaces must be designed and operated in the context of the extreme heat, precipitation, and storms that will only become more common. In this way, resilient public space can help communities stay cool, manage flooding, and stay safe during extreme weather. Resiliency is also, from the Foundation's perspective, simply part of making a smart investment decision.

The City of Philadelphia's **Rebuilding Community Infrastructure Initiative** is a prime example of public space work that takes a holistic approach to achieving local benefits. The Foundation has committed up to \$100M to support Rebuild, which will deliver hundreds of millions of dollars toward improving neighborhood parks, libraries, and recreation centers. Yet Rebuild is much more than a capital program. Equally important are its programs promoting diversity and inclusion in the design and construction industries, through workforce development, partnership with unions, and small-business development.

In conclusion, for public space investments to maximize benefits for our communities, they cannot be seen in a silo. They must be seen as an essential means for achieving broader goals

for equity, wellbeing, and climate resiliency. With the possibility of significant federal funding on the horizon, the Foundation is committed to helping our grantees attract support for public space locally. We are appreciative of the Committee's interest in this topic and would be happy to provide any further information requested.