

**National Park System Advisory Board**  
**DEVELOPING THE NPS ROLE IN URBAN AMERICA**

**May 21, 2014**

In March 2013, NPS Director Jarvis asked the Advisory Board to help the NPS become a more relevant and vital part of city environments and urban life, offering advice and guidance as the NPS explores possible policy, structural and organizational changes and new partnership opportunities to accomplish this goal. He asked that the Board create a committee of urban experts to assist in coordinating this work.

**Status of Activities**

In February of this year, Board Chairman Tony Knowles appointed the following 13 members to an Urban Committee, chaired by Belinda Faustinos:

Carlos Alcazar, *President and CEO of Hispanic Communications Network*;  
Adrian Benepe, *Senior VP and Director of City Park Development at the Trust for Public Land*;  
Stephen Burrington, *Executive Director of Groundwork USA*;  
Honorable Alvin Brown, *Mayor of Jacksonville, Florida*;  
Honorable Mick Cornett, *Mayor of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*;  
Dennis Frenchman, *Professor of Urban Design and Planning, MIT*;  
Catherine Nagel, *Executive Director of City Parks Alliance*;  
Melinda Pruett-Jones, *Executive Director, American Ornithologists' Union*;  
Kevin Shanley, *CEO of SWA*;  
Frederick Steiner, *Dean of the School of Architecture, University of Texas*;  
Michael Suk, M.D., *Chairman, Department of Orthopedic Surgery, Geisinger Health System*;  
Stacey Triplett, *Senior Managing Analyst, Sustainability Center, Portland Metro*;  
Jennifer Wolch, *Dean, College of Environmental Design, UC Berkeley*.

In initiating the Committee's work, the Board is collaborating closely with the National Park Service's team that is coordinating efforts to develop an NPS "Urban Agenda." A first webinar meeting of the Committee was held on April 25 to brief Members on NPS history and work underway on the Urban Agenda and to consider existing and proposed models for NPS urban engagement and potential Committee roles supporting this work.

Comments/questions from Committee members:

- It is important to identify and promote model activities and programs that have been successful and traits that make for good partnerships in urban areas
- Good partnerships start with knowing about the place. Place-based knowledge includes history, current challenges, and who the players are. More than simply demographic profiles, this knowledge is about what's happening in the community, its current concerns and anticipated challenges and problems.

- To what extent is the culture of the NPS encouraged to collaborate, to be more engaged, and entrepreneurial?
- As the NPS goes through changes in leadership, those making hiring decisions should have clear understanding of desired skillsets and behaviors for work in urban areas.
- Groundwork USA partnerships have been successful in large part based on engaging youth and spotlighting their community action and environmental work. NPS staff are needed who are excited about working in communities.
- What can the Committee do to help operationalize NPS commitments to urban programming and physical access?
- Senior NPS leadership must be involved in this work because “it all starts from the top.”
- The NPS can increase branding through program success stories like Healthy Parks (physical activities; seniors engaged in parks; empowering young people; offering activities that are fun and educational and that reach diverse groups).
- It is important to engage diverse organizations that are deeply committed to working in the urban core. The key to change is creating sustainability through long term strategies that create sustainable impact.
- There is a need to examine how NPS assets and expertise, which include natural and cultural resource data, create value not only for communities, but also to a greater extent for the NPS. Better articulated branding and promotion of NPS places and image are also assets. University partnerships are very important for data collection.
- While not mentioned in the NPS presentation, the private sector needs to be tapped to collaborate and participate in NPS work. Major companies are moving back into cities.
- The “network within networks” way of thinking is especially important in urban areas which are characterized by so much knowledge, specialization and innovation. It’s not for each partner to know its role; these must be defined every time within the agenda area.
- It would be helpful to understand the competing interests within any given urban environment. People, commitments to stewardship and value sharing are commodities for which local, state and national entities compete. This recalls the notion of co-branding through use of unique NPS assets; i.e., park police, interpretation, etc.

## **Next Steps**

The Committee will meet in person on June 6, 2014. Initial plans for this meeting are to:

- Discuss NPS park and program assets that can be deployed in urban areas;
- Review questions/comments arising from the April webinar and background/context materials provided to Committee Members;
- Identify short and long term actions the Committee might take to help the NPS prioritize emerging urban strategies, including: hosting city forums; articulating anew the case for urban engagement; and providing input to the development of model NPS approaches for work in three types of metropolitan areas: (1) where a park is imbedded inside a city; (2) where a park unit is located adjacent to a city; and, (3) where there is no park unit within 50 miles of the city.