

The Green Conservation Group

By Dr. Drew Harris, Director of the Scholarly Inquiry-Health Policy Track at the Sidney Kimmel Medical College and Kimberlee Douglas, Director of the Landscape Architecture Program at Thomas Jefferson University

As the world is gripped by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we are pummeled by the twin shocks of health and economic crises. We face the stark possibility that when this is over a significant number of lives and livelihoods will be gone. As usual, the most vulnerable in society will bear the brunt. The pain will be particularly acute in Philadelphia, the poorest big city in the country. So, we must plan now for a future that makes Philadelphia stronger and better.

For the way forward, we propose a shovel-ready economic stimulus program that builds upon two of the City's key assets: people and land. We propose the creation of a Green Conservation Corps (GCC) with the twin goals of putting people to work as quickly as possible while building a better and greener Philadelphia.

People are losing their jobs due to the simple fact that the economy is partially frozen. Hourly and gig-economy workers have few reserves to outlast the many weeks or months of shelter-at-home. Families that still have a paycheck must juggle work and childcare when schools and daycare are closed. Children dependent upon school breakfast and lunch programs are at risk of malnutrition. Short-term federal support programs will provide temporary income, but the long-term outlook is bleak as the COVID-19 storm washes away many businesses. There may not be jobs to come back to when the all-clear is given.

The fallout for the Philadelphia region's already disadvantaged communities is dire and will certainly exacerbate the litany of social and health disparities. Life expectancy already varies by as much as 20 years between neighborhoods a few miles apart as people succumb to deaths of despair -- avoidable chronic illness, depression and suicide. Intractable problems such as drug abuse and gun violence will only worsen when the coming economic crisis uncovers fundamental weaknesses in our social safety net. Despite the challenges, nature offers a solution.

The benefits of open green space were evident long before shelter-in-place orders made them ever-more precious. Exposure to natural environments boosts mental health and psychological well-being beyond the benefits of physical activity alone. Parks help reduce blood pressure, decrease cardiovascular disease mortality, increase social well-being and promote positive health behaviors. In Philadelphia, adequate access to networks of safe and convenient green spaces has long been counted amongst the many disparities people endure. At this critical moment, a walk in a park is an act of liberation and defiance against a virus that spreads so easily.

The Green Conservation Corp proposal, modeled after the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) program, will turn unused lots in neighborhoods throughout the city into a shovel-ready network of community park-building projects. Like the CCC, the GCC will offer out-of-work Americans a job and an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy. Except, this legacy will be walking distance from where they live -- a testament to a neighborhood's resilience and fortitude. These projects will become places where neighbors can come together

safely and celebrate the luxury of gathering outdoors. The GCC will create networks of parks that bring nature back into the city through block-by-block green corridors.

The GCC builds upon the Park in a Truck program, an already successful model to engage the community in the design, building and maintenance of parks that reflect the unique needs and character of the neighborhood. These parks are pre-designed, shovel ready, do not require permits as they sit on top of the ground and use local community members to build them.

Like other successful New Deal programs, we could put Philadelphia's talented corps of artists to work painting murals, performing theater and music in collaboration with local residents in these newly created urban oases. The vacant lots are also a means to connect a whole generation to local food production through urban agriculture programs. Even local restaurants can use these spaces for socially distanced al fresco dining.

Like our world today, the GCC program is divided into two parts: Phase 1 is done during this stay-at-home period; and Phase 2, is the on-the-ground action period. Here are the major steps.

Phase 1: working virtually:

1. Working with the agencies managing vacant lots in Philadelphia, the GCC team will identify parcels of land that are shovel-ready for transformation into contiguous neighborhood parks.
2. Work virtually during the shutdown with residents around these targeted parcels to design the parks on a website.
3. Hire local residents (young and old) interested in becoming park builders and park ambassadors. Five or so people for each of potentially hundreds of sites.
4. Provide online training until the all-clear is given when they will start their work.
5. Establish a park component build team ready to start assembly on day one.
6. Identify unused warehouses to become GCC workspaces where the components can be stored and built.

Phase II: After the all-clear is given:

7. Launch the GCC workspaces and begin work on the park components.
8. Begin site preparation work on each of the park sites.
9. Install the park components and launch the new park.
10. Park Ambassadors, local youth who assist in maintenance, organize park programming and interpretation, will begin their work under the supervision of local community organizations.

Our focus is on converting open and available lots into community parks, but the Philadelphia region is vibrant, creative and innovative. We welcome other ideas that promote sustainability and create value, a legacy that we can leave for generations to come. GCC teams could improve streetscapes by planting trees, repairing blighted buildings, assisting neighbors with backyard gardens, repairing playground equipment and any other effort that makes the City better for all.

This crisis can be an opportunity for us to go beyond recovery and make important changes to how we live, work and play in Philadelphia and beyond. We shouldn't let this moment pass us by.



Park in a Truckle Prior to construction, 38th and Melon Streets, Mantua section of Philadelphia.

September 2019

Photo Credit: Kimberlee Douglas



Park completed by the community of Mantua.

November 2019

Photo Credit: Kimberlee Douglas

Author bios

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Dr. Harris presents regularly on population health and health policy to regional and national audiences. He is an active health advocate, publishing frequently in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Wall Street Journal*, and other publications on topical health policy issues.