

# Community-Led Improvement of Congress Heights' Green Spaces as a Tool to Cultivate Neighborhood Public Health and Wellness

By Molly Blei Fellus

**THESIS QUESTION:** Can the community-led improvement of green spaces like Shepherd Park in Congress Heights also act as a tool to cultivate neighborhood public health and wellness?

Are improvements to Shep. Park possible in light of legal and financial barriers?

What counts as a Park “improvement” in the context of public health/wellness?

Is Thesis feasible given legal and policy context of District city planning frameworks?

Who is included, accessed, or prioritized in this “Congress Heights community”?

What would community’s “leadership” over improving Shepherd Park look like?

Where is being spoken of when one refers to “Congress Heights”?

Why is cultivating Congress Heights’ public health and wellness necessary?

Why would park improvement play a role in this cultivation?

Why Congress Heights/Shepherd Park as an example?

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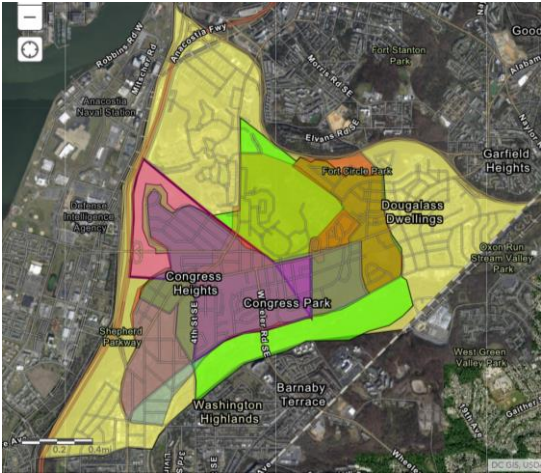
Why Congress Heights/Shepherd Park as an example?

- Developed from multiple sources = “most inclusive boundary”

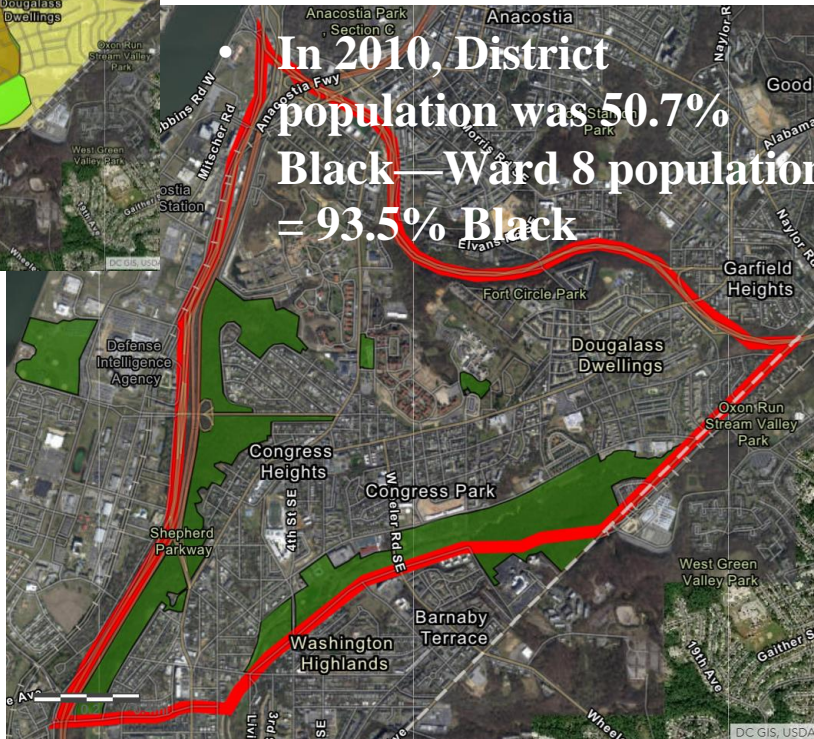
- Issues of race (structural racism) + issues of place (segregation) shown to negatively impact public health/wellness, especially for Black Americans.

- Parks → physical activity, nature appreciation, socialization, and more.

- Shepherd Park has ~145 acres in Congress Heights → example of CH’s **extensive and valuable parkland resources**



In 2010, District population was 50.7% Black — Ward 8 population = 93.5% Black



- Nearby residents → **increased physical activity within parks** → helps cultivate physical health (i.e. cardiovascular) and wellbeing (i.e. healthier weights, especially in children).

  - Physical activity → further benefits to mental health.

- Link between parks and public health → known to community + community **will to improve parks = second valuable community resource**

- “Congress Heights” = 1,900 acres within Ward 8
  - Of this, 314 acres (~16.5%) is open spaces and parks

- Parks provide ecosystem services → support human welfare in multiple ways

  - Trees filter PM → improves air quality → reduces respiratory illness

- Community seems highly dissatisfied with Shepherd Park → “triage” approach
- Homeless shelter near Park being replaced by one w/ Day Center in >2 years → “timing” approach

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Who is included, accessed, or prioritized in this “Congress Heights community”?

What would community’s “leadership” over improving Shepherd Park look like?

“Community-led” improvements to any space (*e.g.* Shepherd Park) will be shaped by meaningful (or not) **community engagement** or participation.



**Offline: “Traditional” participation** including holding public meetings, sending ANCs notices of public meetings, sending notices to past meeting attendees, and establishing Advisory Committees (ACs) for each small area plan. ACs draw from sources select representation from prominent local sources.

**Online: Meant to expand participation** via Internet, e-mail, streaming video, etc. → make more info instantly accessible to many

- Thesis is feasible because it would complement all applicable DC planning frameworks including:
  - ✓ Comprehensive Plan, Esp.
    - ✓ Land Use Element
    - ✓ Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element
  - ✓ Small Area Plan: Far Southeast/ Southwest
  - ✓ 2004 NPS GMP for Fort Circle Parks, guided by...
    - ✓ NCPC’s 2001 Comprehensive Plan

Who is included, accessed, or prioritized in this “Congress Heights community”?

What would community’s “leadership” over improving Shepherd Park look like?

“Community-led” improvements to any space (e.g. Shepherd Park) can only happen through meaningful **community engagement** or participation.



- Equity as Process: “when **those most impacted** by structural **racial inequity** are **meaningfully** involved in the **creation and implementation** of the...policies and practices that impact their lives.” - *Center for Social Inclusion*

- Interviewed two leaders within the Congress Heights community

**Offline: “Traditional” participation including**

**Apparent Policy Defect:**

All these strategies will tend to engage the same, relatively small segment of the community who is already engaged.

**Online: Meant to expand participation via**

**Apparent Policy Defect:**

Research shows internet use only increases community engagement among those who are already politically active, may decrease engagement among older people

**Main Takeaways from Community Interviews:**

- When creatively attempted actual forms of engagement with District to better reflect community (i.e. desire for Black cultural festivals) DC was not receptive.
- Acceptable “engagement” strategies to District all predicated on requirement that a community member either 1) already be engaged, or 2) seek out a previously not evident, acceptable way to engage.
  - This is not reasonable, esp. in underserved communities.
- More appropriate ways for District to engage communities would 1) “meet” people “where they are,” and 2) be sensitive to what Brenda Richardson has termed “community trauma”

**Legal/Financial Barrier:** Shepherd Park is currently under NPS's sole jurisdiction, which legally prevents any entity besides NPS from maintaining or improving the park in any way.

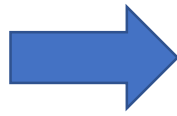
Are improvements to Shep. Park possible in light of legal and financial barriers?

What counts as a Park "improvement" in the context of public health/wellness?

**To Overcome Barrier:** Form NPS partnership—many options, such as:

- **"Basic Fundraising Agreements"**: For any entity soliciting funds and/or goods or services with a goal of < \$100,000 for the benefit of NPS;
- **"Design and Construction Agreements"**: Partner designs, constructs, or renovates facilities/structures/trails, then donates all work to NPS;
- **"Friends Group Agreements"**: For "any nonprofit... established primarily to assist or benefit a specific park area, a series of park areas, a program, or the entire National Parks System";
- **"VIP Program"**: A formal vehicle through which NPS can accept volunteers (and reimburse them for any out-of-pocket costs) to fill an "identified need" within NPS-owned parks;
- **"Challenge Cost Share Program"**: Applications from NPS staff must include a project partner(s)—preferably non-governmental. Selected projects have funds "matched" by NPS up to \$25,000.
- **"Cooperating Association Agreements"**: For nonprofits providing program or financial assistance to NPS in areas such as public education, supported by specific types of income, such as that earned from conducting educational programs.

What counts as a Park  
“improvement” in the context  
of public health/wellness?



**Issue: “Improvement”  
can be subjective**



**To Overcome Issue:** Look to objective standards  
that measure “improvements,” for example:

1. As a change in park “quality,” as reflected in:  
1) Accessibility, 2) Features, 3) Conditions, 4) Aesthetics,  
and 5) Safety.

3. By *decreasing* features  
studies show are  
*universally unattractive* →

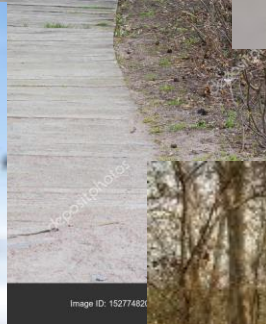
2. By *increasing* features studies show are *universally attractive*...



gg57048673 GoGraph ©



...especially where also shown to  
increase physical activity in parks:



**THESIS QUESTION:** Can the community-led improvement of green spaces like Shepherd Park in Congress Heights also act as a tool to cultivate neighborhood public health and wellness?

✓ Improvements are feasible; overcome legal/financial barriers through NPS partnership

✓ Park improvements should be objectively evaluated according to one or more of three methods given

✓ Thesis feasible given legal/policy context of District planning

✓ Showed who is/isn't likely being heard as part of CH community

✓ Gave examples of ways community would feel empowered

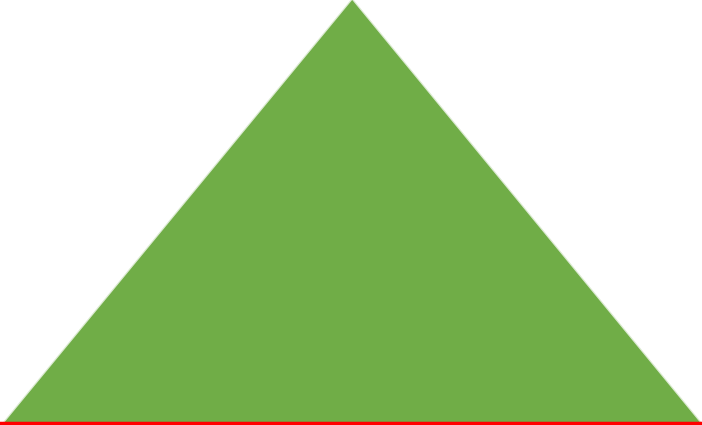
✓ Defined boundary for Congress Heights neighborhood

✓ Explained need to cultivate CHs' public health and wellness

✓ Explained role of park improvement in health & wellness cultivation.

✓ Why Congress Heights/ Shepherd Park as example.





**THESIS QUESTION:** Can community-led improvement of Congress Heights’ green spaces (*e.g.* Shepherd Park) also cultivate neighborhood public health and wellness?

**THESIS ANSWER:** Community-led improvement of Shepherd Park **COULD** help to cultivate neighborhood public health and wellness in Congress Heights, **IF and only if** **three important “foundational” conditions are met:**

1. District government’s involvement must meaningfully and equitably engage the community more so than in the past, by “meeting” the community “where they are” and being sensitive to community trauma.

2. The Congress Heights community must engage in the formation of one or more types of partnerships between entities in the community and NPS.

3. Park improvements must be planned to maximize for the community’s use of the park, as well as to maximize for the encouragement of physical activity within the park.