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lively parks. healthy people.

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By Natural Lands

Less than an hour's drive from

Philadelphia is Coatesville, the only city in Chester County. Once considered the "Pittsburgh of the East" because of its then-thriving steel industry, Coatesville has faced the same economic and social challenges that other steel towns have experienced following the industry's decline. Dramatic growth in Chester County has made it the wealthiest and healthiest county in Pennsylvania, but Coatesville has not shared in this success.

At Palmer Park, a one-acre neighborhood park on the east end of Coatesville, the City's challenges are evident. A chain-link fence and barbed wire surround the swimming pool that's been closed for more than a decade. The basketball court's blacktop is decaying, and community members voice

concerns about safety.

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It wasn't always this way. Lifelong Coatesville resident James Bookman remembers when Palmer Park first opened. "Everyone went there," he says. "It wasn't just a park; it was like the hub of the community." Bookman's childhood memories include basketball tournaments, night swimming at the pool and summer block parties, where the sound of laughter and music would echo into the twilight. He watched Coatesville's parks decline over the decades, and with them, opportunities for kids to have safe outdoor places to play and for older adults to gather with friends.

Thanks to a partnership among the City of Coatesville; Natural Lands; the Brandywine Health Foundation; and countless residents—like Bookman and his wife, Deborah—and community groups, Coatesville's parks are being revitalized. When the Bookmans learned there were openings on the Parks and Recreation Commission, they jumped at the chance to get involved. They were among the more than 140 people who attended a 2016 public forum, co-hosted by the City of Coatesville, Brandywine Health Foundation, and Natural Lands. The forum, along with an online survey completed by nearly 700 residents, was a critical first step in developing an action plan for the City's parks.

"From the outset, we knew public input was essential to the planning process," says Oliver Bass, Natural Lands' vice president of communications and engagement. "Typically, a public forum about parks might attract a dozen people. The response from Coatesville residents was greater than we could have dreamed. Their priorities came through loud, clear and with remarkable consistency. They want safe, clean, beautiful parks for people of all ages to use, engaging park programs, and a commitment to ongoing maintenance... and they are eager to help."

The resulting plan, called *Coatesville Parks 2021: An Action Plan for Lively Parks and Healthy People*, marked the beginning of a now two-year-old initiative—Greening Coatesville—that's aimed at improving access to the outdoors in the City. Greening Coatesville brings together City leadership, residents, and community organizations—with help from the Brandywine Health Foundation, which works to achieve health equity for all who live and work in the Greater Coatesville area, and Natural Lands.

One of the early goals was to craft a vision for the revitalization of Palmer Park. That plan was completed in 2017 and the partners moved quickly to begin its implementation. Thanks to a lead grant from the American Water Charitable Foundation and National Recreation and Park Association, and support from Chester County, Disney, and Areclor Mittal, by later this year the park's long-closed swimming pool will be replaced by a unique nature and water play area. A splashpad area with water features will feed a man-made stream that leads to a shallow, rock-lined

wading area. The top of the stream originates in a circular plaza surrounded by benches, with an old-fashioned hand-pump that can also be used by children (or childlike adults!) to interact with the water.

From the plaza, a series of concrete paths will wind through the park past inviting grassy areas, newly planted shade trees, scattered boulders, and "nature play" features, including an embankment slide, a post hop, web climber, tension line, log balance, stump jump, and branch climber.

Palmer Park

A new nature and water play area (upper right) will replace a long-closed pool. The plan for the remainder of the park will be implemented as funds become available.

parks as an investment.

Parks and recreation planner Ann Toole, a frequent Natural Lands collaborator who worked on Coatesville Parks 2021, asserts that parks are more than just places for children to play. "Better access to parks has been shown to result in a 25 percent increase in people exercising three or more days per week. In southeastern PA, a study found more than $1.3 billion in avoided annual health costs due to access to parks and open space," she points out.

"Investing in our parks has long-term benefits for the community as a whole in building social cohesion, creating healthy environments, and increasing opportunities for Coatesville residents to be active," says Vanessa Briggs, president/CEO of the Brandywine Health Foundation. "The

Greening Coatesville initiative is a prime example of the transformative work that leads to healthier communities and has already spurred interest among the surrounding municipalities to examine the use of their parks and green spaces as a population health intervention," she adds.

What's more, positive changes in urban parks and green spaces play a role in economic revitalization. Cities where parks, recreation, and trails play a vital role in the lives of their residents are vibrant places to live and are, therefore, attractive to businesses and residents.

"While the factors that contribute to a community's well-being are complex, many cities have found that execution of a green vision can redefine its image, spur economic development and create a much-improved quality of place for residents," noted Molly Morrison, president of Natural Lands.

The Greening Coatesville initiative is part of a larger, citywide effort to stimulate investment in the City. In 2017, the Chester County Economic Development Foundation and the Coatesville Area Partners for Progress completed a neighborhood revitalization strategy. The resulting plan—called Coatesville Growing Greater—lays out five-year action strategies to address issues of resident engagement, jobs and economic opportunity, youth empowerment, and community safety.

That Greening Coatesville and Coatesville Growing Greater are happening simultaneously is not an accident. Community leaders recognize that improving the economy and enhancing quality of life through parks are complementary and essential.

"The reawakening and renewal of our City parks translate into regeneration of the lives of our families," says Linda Lavender-Norris, Coatesville City Council president. "We will be forever grateful for the relationship that we've established with Natural Lands, which will last throughout time. We extend these same sentiments to the Brandywine Health Foundation and our county government for investing in our health and well-being."

Every success will advance the City's vision for the future. While Palmer Park is just a small space, its revitalization will make a world of difference to the community and will represent the winds of change that are stirring for Coatesville.

Bookman agrees. "You might think, does it matter to change one little park? But, change one and who knows where it leads! The good energy in Coatesville is snowballing."

Patton Park

As the *Coatesville Parks 2021* action plan was completed, Natural Lands joined forces with PECO, the City of Coatesville, the nonprofit KaBOOM!, and more than 200 community volunteers to build a new playground in Patton Park—in just one day!

The new playground served as a catalyst for engaging the neighborhood and enlivening the park. Soon, the Friends of Patton Park formed to help maintain the park and find ways to attract more activity. Last fall, the group held a fall festival, featuring games, a cookout, and movie night, with groups of children running and playing from morning to night. Through its efforts, the Coatesville Little League renovated a little-used baseball field, and, this spring, the joyful sounds of T-ball and softball games returned.

A new playground for Patton Park in just one day! Photo: Mae Axelrod

‹ spring/summer 2018 magazine (https://natlands.org/news/spring-summer-2018-magazine/)

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