Adams Park: A Catalyst for Community Revitalization and Health

October 2012

Adams Park - a 68 acre green space located near 30th and Bedford - is a focus of current community revitalization efforts in North Omaha. The North Omaha Village Revitalization Plan, which was completed in 2011, called for Adams Park to become the "Central Park of North Omaha." Along with the Malcolm X Birthsite immediately to the north, Adams Park is intended to:

- Create a new public image for North Omaha
- Catalyze continued development and private investment
- Create an energy in the neighborhood
- Attract tourists and outside visitors

As a result of the adoption of North Omaha Village Revitalization Plan by the Omaha City Council, the Parks, Recreation, and Public Property Department initiated a public visioning process for Adams Park. The vision created calls for:

- Creating a resource for people across the region by building an urban farming and community gardening center at the heart of the park
- Increasing the visibility and versatility of the park by expanding it to include a multi-purpose field (for summer sports camps and festivals) and eventually, a new swimming pool
- Make the park easier to access by increasing the number of entrances as well as building new roads and trails through the park

The Douglas County Health Department (DCHD) saw in this vision - especially the urban farming and community gardening center - the potential for Adams Park to be a catalyst for health, as well as community revitalization. Using a new tool at their disposal - Health Impact Assessments - DCHD and its community, nonprofit, and government partners were able to use an evidence-based approach for determining how the renovation to Adams Park would likely affect the health of the community and to make recommendations for maximizing the benefit to the community.

From this evidence, recommendations were made to maximize the benefit the renovation of Adams Park would bring to the community. The recommendations focus on:

1) Creating new gardening and farming sites that will improve access and affordability of healthy foods while decreasing crime and community disinvestment
2) Developing partnerships with nearby schools and community agencies to offer innovative afterschool and summer programming
3) Promoting financial sustainability by exploring ways to divide the functions of a park conservancy between the Omaha Parks Foundation and the urban farming and community gardening center.

For decades the greater community has said come together and the support will be there. Well, we've done that now, and I have to say we've had good vibes all along the way from those various entities.

We are speaking together with a united front. With the Village Plan we now have many opportunities for everyone to participate. We've done this in a collaborative way that engaged the city and the business and philanthropic community.

It has the potential for anybody who wants to be part of the change in North Omaha. We have a way for all the pieces to work together.

Michael Maroney, President of the Omaha Economic Development Corporation, on the North Omaha Village Revitalization Plan

The Path to Adams Park

The Adams Park Health Impact Assessment grew out of a focus on access to healthy foods. Beginning in 2009, DCHD took on the daunting task of rating all grocery and convenience stores on how many healthy food options they carried. Using the Nutrition Environment Measures Survey (NEMS), each location was ranked on a scale of 0 (no healthy options) to 5 (wide variety of healthy options). Figure 1 shows the location of stores - plus a 1 mile radius - that received a 5, which mainly reflects full-service grocery stores such Hy-Vee, Bakers, or No Frills. The map also shows which parts of our community could make the greatest strides through improved access to healthy foods. The darker areas represent places that have low fruit and vegetable consumption, high rates of obesity, high death rates from heart disease and diabetes, low median income and high population density. Figure 1 clearly shows the need and value of improving access to healthy affordable foods in North Omaha.

In 2011, DCHD was one of only six communities selected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to receive training and funding for utilizing an emerging best practice called Health Impact Assessments (HIAs). HIAs were developed as an evidence-based tool to better inform decision-makers outside of the health sector on how the options they are weighing would likely impact people's health.

One of the major strengths cited by CDC's Healthy Community Design Initiative in selecting DCHD was the breadth and depth of the partners involved, which includes:

- The City of Omaha (including the Parks, Recreation & Public Property Department, the Planning Department, the Public Works Department, and the Mayor's Office)
- The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
- The Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA)
- Omaha by Design

In deciding to use an HIA to determine how the renovation to Adams Park could serve as a catalyst for health, the partners involved sought to answer the following questions.

1. How could an urban farming and community gardening center in Adams Park best increase access to healthy and affordable fruits and vegetables - especially for North Omaha residents?
2. How could Adams Park increase the amount of physical activity people were getting - either from being active in the park or from walking, riding a bike, or taking transit to get there?
3. How could injuries be prevented through better safety from crime or traffic as part of the Adams Park renovation?
4. Since education and health are so closely connected and with so many schools and youth programs nearby, how could the changes to Adams Park impact educational opportunities?

Answering the HIA Questions

The first step for answering the questions posed under the HIA was to assess the current situation. Data on health indicators, demographics, food access, crime, traffic crashes, and land use were all collected and analyzed to profile the baseline conditions experienced by the community living near Adams Park. GIS mapping was used extensively to make this information easier to understand by presenting it visually. Stakeholder interviews were used to gather and better understand the perspective of nearby residents.

The second step was finding the best evidence possible for determining how the proposed changes to Adams Park would affect the current conditions in terms of direction, magnitude, distribution, likelihood, and permanence. This involved reviewing the scientific literature on the issues in question. For example, the research on community gardens was explored to see whether people who participate in them actually eat more fruits and vegetables. Interviews with experts (such as police officers certified in Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) were also used for determining the likely effects and developing recommendations.

Adams Park: Potential Impacts

Adams Park: Existing Conditions

Potential for Impact on Food Access (Figure 1)

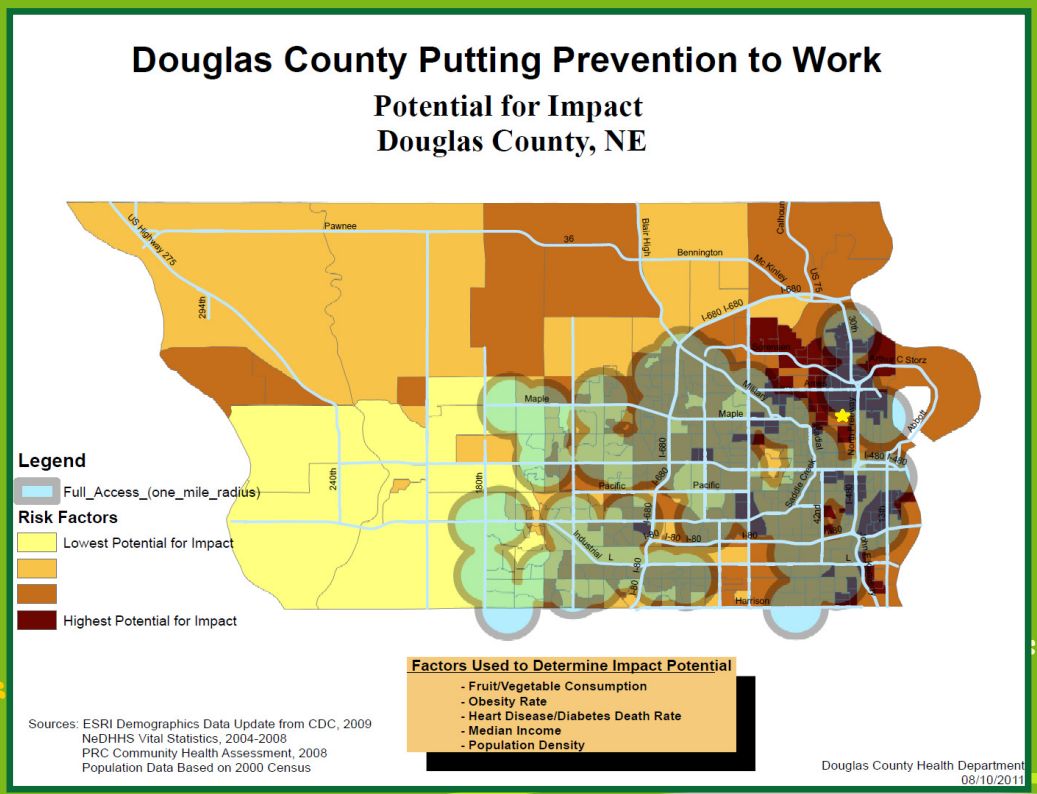

Figure 1 Note:

The yellow star is the location of Adams Park. Blue circles represent the locations of full-service grocery stores plus a 1 mile radius.

The Potential for Impact shading indicates which parts of Douglas County could make the greatest strides through improved access to healthy foods. Darker shading represents places that have low fruit and vegetable consumption, high rates of obesity, high death rates from heart diseases and diabetes, low median income and high population density.

Data Source: Douglas County Health Department

Potential for Impact on Crime (Figure 2)

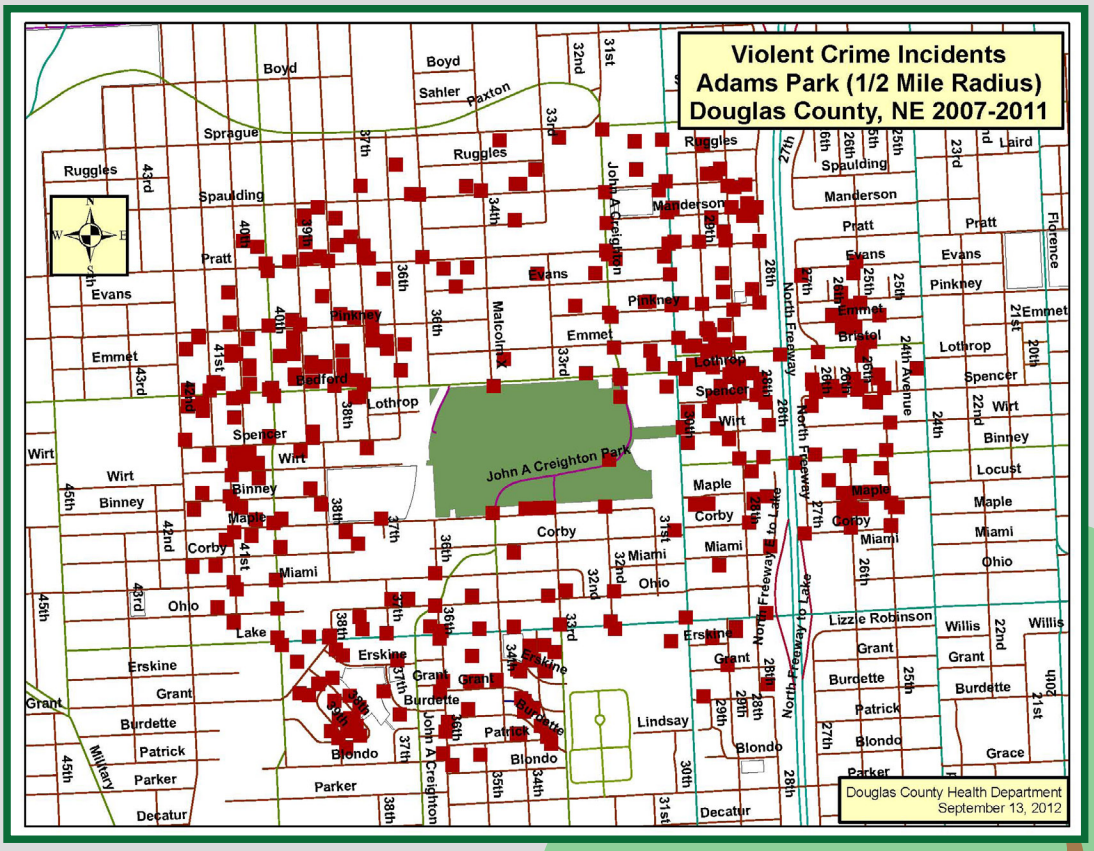

Figure 2 Note:

Violent crimes that were reported as occurring within a half-mile radius of Adams Park. Very few crimes were reported occurring within the park.

Studies have found that community gardens and other green space reduce crime.

Data Source:
Omaha Police Department

Potential for Reusing Vacant Land (Figure 3)

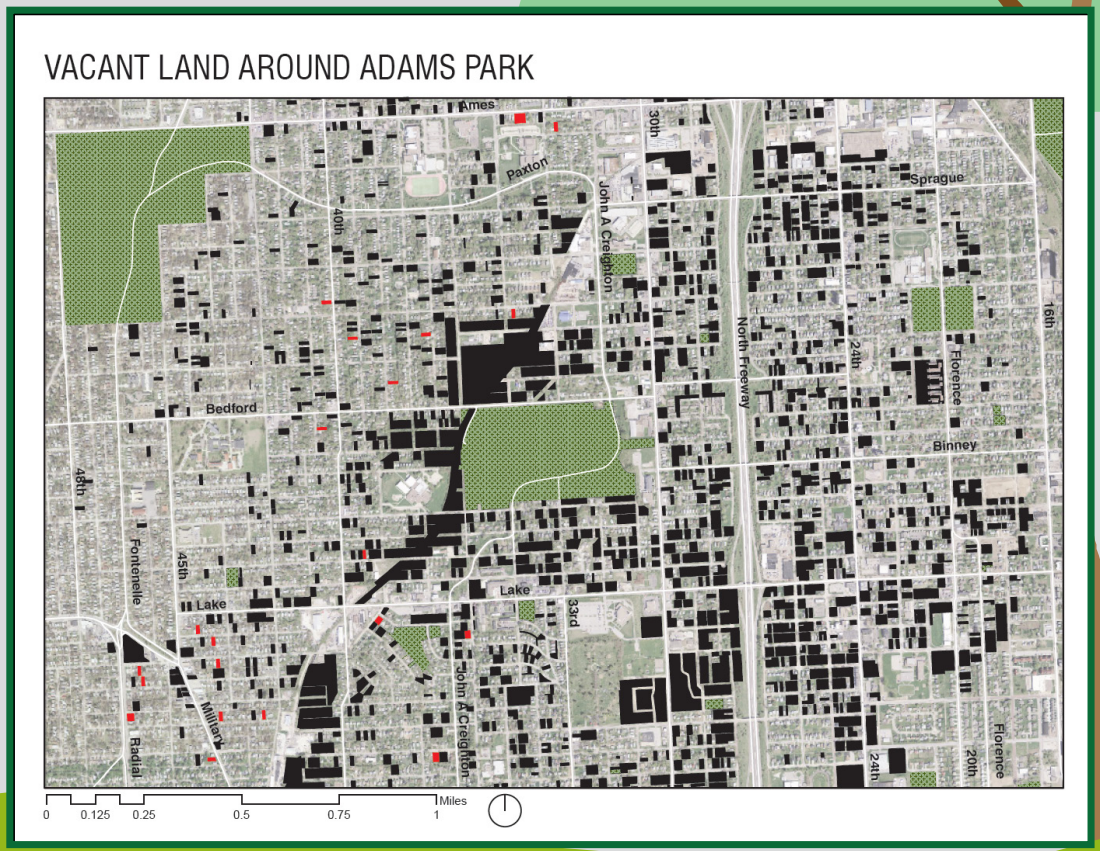

Figure 3 Note:

Parcels that are vacant are shown in black. Parcels in foreclosure are shown in red.

Vacant land was defined as parcels with no buildings, exempting parks, schools and public utilities.

Data Source:
Douglas County Assessors Office

Box 1: Lessons from NYC's Central Park (Box 1)

"The once-verdant lawns had been reduced to trampled, barren dustbowls. Paths and architecture were crumbling; benches and light fixtures were broken; graffiti covered every available surface; clogged catch basins resulted in routine flooding that further eroded the landscapes and made paths impassable.

Several civic groups formed to combat this deterioration, including the Central Park Community Fund and Central Park Task Force. These organizations helped raise funds for projects in the park and promoted stewardship through education, youth programs, and volunteer initiatives. Their advocacy led to the creation of the Central Park Conservancy, a private not-for-profit organization that since 1980 has worked to restore the park in partnership with the city, and assumed the responsibility for its care.

As Douglas Blonsky, president of the Central Park Conservancy, recalls: 'Not all that long ago, Central Park had declined nearly to the point of no return. It was rescued through the efforts of a citizen-government partnership forged 28 years ago to breathe life back into this most cherished of New York landmarks making it, once again, the most beautiful, best-managed urban park in the country.'"

From the American Planning Association's Great Places in America: Public Spaces (http://www.planning.org/greatplaces/spaces/2008/centralpark.htm)

Key Findings

- A very common model for leveraging public-private partnerships to enhance parks has been to create a park conservancy. Cities that have found success using a conservancy model include New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, San Francisco, Charleston, and St. Louis. The primary functions of an conservancy are fundraising, park stewardship, and programming.
- Community gardens increase healthy behaviors such as eating fruits and vegetables and being active. They also have been shown to increase property values and decrease crime. The effects of community gardens are very localized - within approximately a quarter mile.
- By increasing the number of entrances, connections, and trails, Adams Park becomes easier to access by walking or riding a bicycle, which would increase physical activity.
- The perception that Adams Park is unsafe is made worse by inadequate park maintenance that results in fences that are falling down and missing or vandalized signage. Very little crime is reported within the park compared to the surrounding neighborhood (See Figure 2).
- Nearby schools only make use of Adams Park as an emergency gathering point or for an annual Field Day.
- There are a large number of vacant lots near Adams Park (See Figure 3). Community gardens or urban farms would represent one way to turn these lots from liabilities into assets. In addition, other cities have used "Clean and Green" or "Adopt a Lot" programs to address this issue cost-effectively. Studies on the Philadelphia Green program showed that greening vacant lots can increase property values by up to 30% and decrease crime such as gun assaults.

Recommendations

Given the very localized effect of community gardens, the urban farming and community garden center will have the greatest health benefits if it is "fruitful" - meaning if it focuses on creating new sites (in North Omaha and throughout the region) for growing affordable, healthy food. This role as a horticultural hub is fitting given the fact that historically Adams Park was known as Green Hill.

Partnership efforts should continue to closely involve community members in further refining and implementing the vision for Adams Park. With at least nine schools and youth programs within approximately a one-mile radius of the park, special emphasis should be placed on serving nearby children and youth. The urban farming and community gardening center should be utilized especially as a resource for afterschool and summer programming. Walking and biking routes to and through Adams Park should be safe and convenient enough that children and youth don't have to rely on parents and other caregivers driving them.

Crime and disinvestment in the neighborhood - as seen in the large number of vacant lots - represent the biggest challenges to the success of the Adams Park renovation. The City of Omaha, greening/horticulture organizations, and neighborhood residents should explore the viability of creating a "Clean and Green" or "Adopt a Lot" program in North Omaha as an inexpensive means to turn vacant land from a liability into an asset. The Adams Park area would be an ideal candidate for a pilot project given the potential overlap with the work of the urban farming and community garden center.

For the renovation of Adams Park to be successful in serving as a catalyst for both community revitalization and health, public-private partnerships will be essential. The example of Central Park's rise from a far worse state of disrepair (see Box 1) is indicative of what is possible. While the establishment of a full-fledged conservancy is probably not necessary, the Omaha Parks Foundation should oversee the fundraising aspect while the urban farming and community gardening center should take the lead on park stewardship and programming.

Contact Information:

Andy Wessel, MPH
Douglas County Health Department
(402) 444-7225
andy.wessel@douglascounty-ne.gov

Amber Miller, BS CFM
Omaha Parks Foundation
(402) 444-5947
amiller@omahaparksfoundation.org