



leading
together

2020

cities
agenda

To: Biden-Harris U.S. Department of the Interior – Agency Review Team
From: National League of Cities
Re: Policy Areas Important to America’s Cities, Towns and Villages
Date: January 15, 2021

As the voice of America’s cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people across the country, the National League of Cities (NLC) looks forward to working with the Biden-Harris Administration and with the team at the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) to improve access to local parks and public lands, protect the environment, and rebuild the economies of gateway communities.

NLC looks forward to serving as both a resource and partner with DOI in meeting our mutual goals. As cities, towns and villages look to partner with the Biden-Harris Administration in the first 100 days and beyond, we hope that the following local government priority areas will be taken into consideration:

Direct Fiscal Relief to Cities, Towns and Villages

Cities are the engine of our nation’s economy and essential to America’s economic recovery. From infrastructure like roads and water to parks and open spaces, cities, towns and villages create the conditions that drive new business, spur innovation, and attract talent and investment. However, America’s communities are hurting. As the findings of NLC’s [2020 City Fiscal Conditions report](#) reveals, America’s cities are experiencing the fiscal consequences of the coronavirus pandemic-downturn at an unprecedented speed – and like recent recessions, it will take years for municipal budgets to recover from the impact of COVID-19. Cities, towns and villages across the country need direct fiscal relief to communities of all sizes to ensure that essential city services and important community-anchoring programs can remain in operation. NLC’s latest [survey data](#) of over 900 cities, towns and villages found that 71% believe their government’s fiscal condition will worsen if Congress doesn’t pass another stimulus package. Local parks and recreation programs and facilities stand at particular risk of cuts during times of fiscal constraints.

Regular Communication with Stakeholders and Commitment to Federalism

Local leaders are committed to intergovernmental partnership, through federalism, requiring a cooperative partnership among local, state and federal governments that must be strengthened through all levels of government. Local leaders look forward to working collaboratively with the Biden-Harris Administration and in a manner that recognizes the importance of a federal-local partnership. We hope DOI will host regular stakeholder meetings and have open conversations and dialogues with local officials and national organizations, such as NLC, on ongoing and emerging issues and priorities.

While the federalism consultation under Executive Order 13132 can be improved, it is an essential component of the intergovernmental process, and local elected officials value the opportunity to provide direct input into the rulemaking process before rules are even drafted. This early feedback and input helps the federal government develop rules that are effective, reasonable and implementable at the local level. Local officials can provide an important perspective on ensuring that rules offer local flexibility, avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach and avoid an unfunded mandate. We continue to urge the federal government to listen to and consider the perspective of local governments early and often during the rulemaking process.

Commitment to Racial Equity and Environmental Justice

The coronavirus pandemic [exposed the inequities](#) that long existed in communities, particularly evident in Black, Indigenous, Latin/Hispanic and other communities of color. These communities are often the areas most affected by flooding, extreme heat, poor air quality, and [inequitable access to outdoor spaces](#).

The impacts of climate change and extreme weather events pose an especially pressing threat to persons with disabilities, economically disadvantaged households, the elderly, Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), and other vulnerable populations.

As local leaders look to reimagine government policies, procedures and processes to build more equitable communities, NLC's [Race, Equity And Leadership \(REAL\)](#) department helps city, town and village leaders strengthen their knowledge and capacity to learn about the impact of historical inequities and design programs that dismantle structural and system racism. NLC aims to achieve this goal by centering racial equity in our all our work including our direct technical assistance and research. NLC calls on the federal government to prioritize federal investments in communities that have been left behind, specifically our BIPOC communities, which have been disproportionately impacted by the effects of COVID-19, climate change and historical policies and underinvestment. The equity-focused [Cities Connecting Children to Nature](#) initiative serves as another leading edge of NLC's efforts to dismantle structural barriers, in this case to park and nature access.

Support Local Parks and Green Infrastructure

Parks, natural areas and green infrastructure provide a multitude of community benefits, including stormwater management, providing recreation opportunities, extending the life of local infrastructure, saving the city and taxpayers money, positive impacts on public health, and community resilience and well-being. Parks, natural areas and green infrastructure serve as an economic development tool—they are part of what make a community a great place to live, work and play.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the outdoors has taken on a whole new importance. Parks are where we turn for exercise, fresh air and finding respite from anxiety and grief. But in too many communities, parks are too few and far between, unwelcoming, rundown or unsafe. Elsewhere, open space is blocked by locked gates and “No Trespassing” signs.

According to the [Trust for Public Land](#), 100 million U.S. residents, including 28 million children, do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of home. Moreover, many of the parks serving primarily nonwhite populations are half the size of parks that serve majority white populations and serve five times more people per acre.

Just as America's great outdoors have never been more in demand than they are during the pandemic, the consequences of park inequities—for our health, resilience, and prosperity—have never been more acute. COVID-19 is a wake-up call: the time to address the long-standing gaps in outdoor access and quality has come.

Additionally, parks, natural areas and green infrastructure play an important role in helping cities mitigate the impacts of extreme weather event on their residents and businesses. Extreme weather can cost local, state and federal governments trillions of dollars and severely impact local and regional infrastructure, the economy, public safety, public health, natural landscapes, environmental quality and national security.

This year, as communities struggled to maintain services and essential workers during the pandemic, they simultaneously faced a record number of climate-related disasters, such as wildfires, extreme heat, and hurricanes, which further increased fiscal pressure on local governments, residents and businesses.

Local leaders are acting on climate change because local governments are first responders on the front lines of delivering services and protecting residents. Local elected officials are entrusted with the stewardship of taxpayer dollars and know that the cost of prevention pales in comparison to the cost of inaction — in terms of dollars, property and human life. While cities are prepared to forge ahead on these initiatives and actions, we urge the federal government to be a partner in these efforts in support of our economy and to build resilient communities.

Recommendations for Administrative and Congressional Action:

- NLC supported efforts to permanently authorize and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). To build on this, we urge support for the Outdoors for All Act to codify and establish a dedicated funding source for the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program. ORLP is a competitive grant funded through LWCF that helps communities create and improve parks and other outdoor recreation areas to improve public access, particularly in disadvantaged or low-income communities.
- Support efforts to connect children to federally managed lands and natural areas, including through the Every Kid Outdoors program to provide fourth graders free access to publicly accessible federal lands and waters, and through multiple sites of the Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiative consistent with the DOI-NLC partnership envisioned in a 2014 Memorandum of Understanding.
- Update and reactivate the [2014 DOI-NLCI-YMCA Memorandum of Understanding](#) in support of initiatives that benefit children, youth, and families.
- Create a 21st Century Conservation Corps to scale the existing network of Service and Conservation Corps and other organizations to engage young adults and recent veterans in conservation, resource management and sustainable infrastructure jobs. This program is inspired by the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930's and should prioritize projects and hiring in communities facing disproportionate impacts from the COVID-19 crisis. Federal investment in international, national and community service is an important way to help cities, towns and villages meet pressing needs in areas such as neighborhood revitalization and conservation and the environment.
- Direct the Bureau of Reclamation to update and streamline the WaterSMART Grants application process by, at a minimum, establishing a consistent annual grant application period, extending the grant application timeline to three months for all WaterSMART grant applications, clarifying the online grant application process, methods for quantifying water savings, and required federal forms to support applications from small to mid-sized communities, and updating grant scoring criteria and eligible projects list to prioritize sustainable, environmentally-friendly projects.
- Take urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions across a broad sector of the economy and become carbon neutral to mitigate the effects of climate change and hold warming to 1.5°C.
- Require consideration of climate-related risks and vulnerabilities as part of all federal policies, practices, investments, regulatory and other programs.

NLC's Work with Cities

As NLC's key vehicle to increase access to green space for children and families, the [Cities Connecting Children to Nature \(CCCN\)](#) initiative supports a rapidly growing group of municipal leaders and their community partners in shifting planning, policies and programs to connect children to the benefits of nature more often and more equitably. Through technical assistance and peer learning, CCCN helps cities stand up, expand and measure the impact of nature connection strategies. As the initiative enters its seventh year, it has begun recruiting eight additional cities to install green schoolyards that bring nature to the schoolhouse door, create new green park space often in built-out neighborhoods, and capture stormwater.

The [Leadership in Community Resilience \(LCR\)](#) grant program supports and enhances local capacity among elected leaders and staff, communities and community-based organizations as they pursue coordinated climate resilience efforts. In addition to providing direct assistance to cities, the program gathers new insights related to the challenges and opportunities associated with local resilience initiatives. NLC is sharing the lessons learned with cities throughout the United States. Since 2017, 33 cities have participated in the LCR program.

Appendix

NLC's [Leading Together Cities Agenda](#) reflect the local government priorities for the Biden-Harris Administration. The [Building Sustainable Infrastructure](#) pillar brings together water infrastructure and community resilience.

[Coalition letter](#) to Biden-Harris team supporting an emergency investment in local parks in any stimulus or economic recovery package (December 16, 2020)

NLC [comment letter](#) to the Council on Environmental Quality on the proposed rule to update the regulations implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (March 10, 2020)

NLC [comment letter](#) to the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis (November 18, 2019)

NLC [Congressional testimony](#) on how the federal government can reduce unfunded mandates and unnecessary regulatory burdens on local governments and how the Federalism consultation process can be improved (April 26, 2017)

NLC resources for cities, towns and villages to respond to and recover from the coronavirus pandemic:

- [COVID-19 Local Response Principles](#) (See *"Supporting Full Access to Public Infrastructure and Broadband"*)