

OPINION

Parks are essential — especially during the coronavirus pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parks should be celebrated, protected, and ultimately leveraged to support public health.

By **Julia Africa, Cheri Ruane, Gary Hilderbrand, and Chris Reed** Updated May 6, 2020, 4:51 a.m.



Visitors to Jamaica Pond on March 24. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Now, more than ever, our parks must be understood as essential public infrastructure. Not unlike essential workers, their contributions during a pandemic should be

celebrated, protected, and ultimately leveraged to support public health. We must shift our thinking to repurpose public spaces during times of crisis, restore their ecologies when the crisis abates, and adapt our parks to better accommodate urban populations (especially those who have been historically underserved) for the future.

[In Boston, we rely on our Emerald Necklace park system](#) — which stretches from Olmsted Park in Brookline to Franklin Park in Dorchester — for so much more than a walk in the park. In times of peace, these iconic landscapes have played just about every starring role: as cow pastures, premodern sewage treatment ecologies, muster grounds, performance venues, flood-retention basins, and stages for visiting dignitaries, and historic movements (civil rights, Women’s March, March for Science). As we struggle to contain and defeat this terrible virus, the role of parks as critical open space for respite and restoration is both more important and more fragile given the risk of transmission. Responsible use guidelines — including appropriate distancing, masks, and restriction of shared recreational equipment — can be modified with the benefit of emerging research and enhanced civic awareness. And although Boston benefits from world-class hospitals, talented clinicians, and pioneering pharmaceutical companies in the fight against COVID-19, it’s possible that our public commons will be more extensively harnessed in our hour of need.

One could be forgiven for thinking that time is not linear but rather running in a loop: shortages of critical medical equipment and heavy reliance on social distancing seem like public health realities. Almost 150 years ago, [Boston’s own Frederick Law Olmsted](#) (an originator of American landscape architecture practice and the steady hand behind our Emerald Necklace) was hard at work with the US Sanitary Commission crafting guidelines for battlefield encampments where too many Civil War soldiers died from preventable infectious diseases like typhoid, cholera, and influenza. Now another battle is raging, exposing inequity and privilege as dramatically as we once divided North from South, but this time the world at large is riven. Across from New York’s Mount Sinai Hospital in Olmsted’s beloved Central Park, a field hospital was erected to receive the swelling ranks of New Yorkers sickened by COVID-19. Temporary interments of bodies

on Hart Island may follow as mortuaries and mobile freezer units are projected to exceed capacity. Then as now, cities lean heavily on open space during times of crisis.

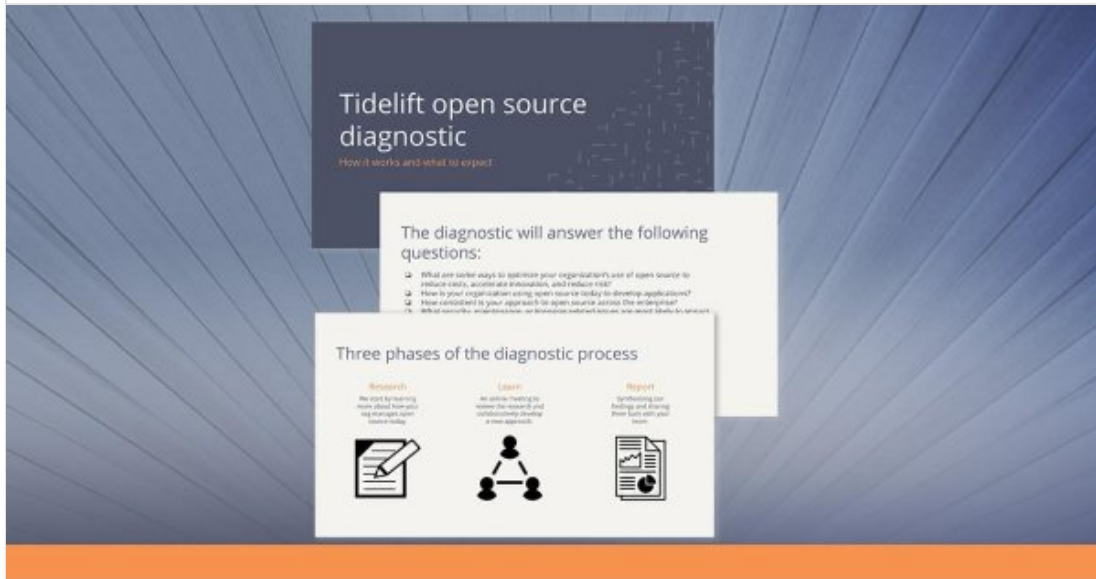


The white tents of the Samaritan's Purse field hospital stand in a field in Central Park across the street from Mt. Sinai Hospital on the Upper East Side neighborhood in New York City. Mt. Sinai reports that the surge in COVID-19 hospital admissions is reaching manageable levels; therefore, Mt. Sinai will stop admitting new patients to the Central Park field hospital run by Samaritan's Purse as of May 4. STEPHANIE KEITH/GETTY

Rather fortuitously, Boston is revising the master planning of its three largest and most significant open spaces (Boston Common, Franklin Park, and Moakley Park). Objectives include accommodating increased population pressure, responding to climate risk, and — perhaps most important — surfacing the support that these parks provide for public health, especially for our most vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens. It's a time to embrace bold thinking and turn resolutely toward planning a healthier and more equitable future for Boston.



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Over the next century, infectious disease epidemics are projected to increase in severity and frequency given current trends in urbanization, globalization, and greater consumption of animal proteins. Sea-level rise and global warming will further endanger our coastal city. One aspect of fostering resilience will involve developing flexible infrastructure in Boston parks to accommodate serious health challenges like the one we face today. When this moment has passed — as it will — envisioning a Boston park system that is more agile in supporting public health should become the norm.

In times of relative health and peace, this includes designing and maintaining big parks and parkways with ample walking, biking, and running trails that extend into all parts of the city — especially underserved areas — and provide the simple, healthy pleasure of a long stroll or ride as an escape from the toils of everyday life (to paraphrase Olmsted). This can also include provisions for kiosks with sunscreen, sun hats, drinking water, and insect repellent, along with message boards or text alerts that provide information about air quality and heat indexes. Extreme heat, in particular, is endured daily by inner-city residents, utility workers, park maintenance professionals, and can cause heatstroke and

other debilitating conditions in otherwise healthy individuals. We must embrace the opportunity to curate safe enjoyment of our legacy parks.

We must make every effort to serve the public, whether by providing an individual with fleeting sanctuary or providing critical care institutions with increased support. Our public parks are an essential public health infrastructure that warrants the protection and investment provided for our water, sewer, and electrical infrastructure. We must embrace the opportunity to curate safe enjoyment of our legacy parks by adapting their usage guidelines to reflect the best available science of health and disease prevention.

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