



# CATALYZING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

How Philadelphia Can Create Equitable  
Right-Of-Way Stewardship

Executive Summary prepared by the Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation, July 2019

# PROJECT OVERVIEW

Democratic design is in Philadelphia's DNA, from William Penn's groundbreaking street grid and public squares to recent innovative blight recovery clean and green programs to counter post-war disinvestment. The city's rich history of do-it-yourself design now includes community-created and stewarded public realm improvements like pedestrian plazas, parklets and other in-street amenities. These citizen-led enhancements reflect national trends in tactical urbanism and recent local vigor in some communities to take ownership of streets. Unfortunately, the agency and capacity of some communities is not equitably shared, especially in low income neighborhoods, and this study seeks to understand and develop recommendations to address disparities and increase stewardship of the public realm.

The Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation at Drexel University, created in 2012 to forge innovative strategies to equitably advance cities, began this study in 2018 to document the current state of right-of-way (ROW) improvements in Philadelphia, understand barriers and pain-points associated with their community-based stewardship model, to analyze relevant best practices, and synthesize these inputs. The outcome of this research was a series of recommendations to increase stewardship opportunities, particularly in underserved communities, including:

- 1 Streamlined processes and improved communications and marketing related to program requirements
- 2 Greater attention paid to equity indicators and increased transparency to best serve communities with the greatest need but low capacity
- 3 Building capacity within the City administration to support the ROW Stewardship program through dedicated staffing at leadership levels
- 4 Designing support programs to work within or alongside city staff to bolster community capacity

This study examined processes associated with:

- **Pedestrian Plazas:** Areas of the ROW usually located in an unused or underused portion of a street, required to be public and often furnished with plants and moveable seating
- **Parklets:** Seasonal installations, usually occupying 1-2 parking spaces and providing public seating; required to be public; typically built and maintained by an adjacent business
- **Bicycle Corrals:** Large-scale bicycle parking units placed in an on-street parking space for public use and typically sponsored and maintained by an adjacent business
- **Small-scale Additions:** Additional interventions in the public ROW that provide public space and placemaking to the neighborhood, such as a bench

Philadelphia initiated parklet pilots in 2012 in University City and formally created its ROW stewardship program in 2014, followed by a micro-grant program intended to encourage other communities to spur stewarded public space improvements. Unfortunately, the pilot projects' impact as a catalyst was limited, with relatively few projects created in the intervening years, and the numbers reaching a plateau of less than 30 overall improvements. This lack of momentum was the premise for this study.

Cover image: An artistic treatment to the newly upgraded bike corral at Tattooed Mom adds character and crucial bike parking space to South Street.

# RESEARCH SUMMARY

The study was conducted through a series of in-depth interviews with stewards of current ROW interventions, users who did not successfully complete the application process, experts on ROW programs and processes both locally and nationally, and city employees and stakeholders involved in ROW processes. In addition, local and national data was gathered and analyzed, and research was conducted on ROW elements and their impact. The various ROW applications, review and approval processes were critiqued, and case studies from neighborhoods in Philadelphia, and national best practice examples of ROW programs in San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, and New York City were developed.

## NATIONAL CONTEXT

ROW stewardship programs are common in large cities across the country, with cities like San Francisco and New York City blazing trails on parklets and pedestrian plazas, respectively. While Philadelphia is competitive with some of its peers in number of ROW amenities, it's important to acknowledge that it's not always easy to prioritize ROW improvements as city addressing deep and widespread poverty. Because of this, the case studies were selected to show exemplars Philadelphia can aspire to match while focusing resources on the study's overall goal of building equity in ROW stewardship. In this spirit, the study identified the following best practices:

- Cities like San Francisco have simplified processes and lowered barriers to allow for more participation through streamlined review and approvals and increased transparency about application status and expected costs/timelines.
- New York City has demonstrated the power that visible and vocal leadership can have in making ROW Stewardship a priority.
- Resource allocation varied widely among cities, which is unsurprising considering the lack of uniformity in how cities support programs, but most cities spent their resources on staff, albeit with only a few dedicated full-time employees.

- Some cities like Chicago dedicated funds to make programs turnkey by providing a kit of parts or standardized designs or materials.
- A single agency, point of contact, and champion for all ROW projects made programs more user-friendly and successful in several observed case cities, including Boston and Portland.
- Conveying a City's requirements and likely approval via a "playbook" of goals and quick wins for ROW improvements expedited improvements, as did soliciting optimum locations for improvements by residents.

Nationally, it's clear that there is no standardized process for a ROW program. Philadelphia has an opportunity to break new ground, particularly in making ROW stewardship more inclusive by catalyzing a sense of ownership for ROW space in low-income communities.

## CURRENT STATE OF PHILADELPHIA ROW STEWARDSHIP

The study examined ROW stewardship locally through the lens of the City's requirements to create and maintain pedestrian plazas, parklets, and bike corrals. In examining how the public interacts with the City in creating these amenities, it became clear that City Departments within Philadelphia lack capacity to foster a nurturing environment for increased ROW stewardship, despite positive intentions and support from municipal staff.

There is a demand among community development leaders for quick, cost-effective improvements to the ROW because of the opportunity for placemaking, increased neighborhood ownership of public space, and potential for high impact in reaching residents where they are. However, ROW stewardship is largely the province of well-resourced BIDs or CDCs with staff or volunteers experienced in design, law, insurance, or other fields helpful to navigating the ROW approval process. This happens almost exclusively in the fastest-growing communities in the city with

the highest levels of social capital, leaving large swaths of neighborhoods, mostly outside of the greater central business district, untouched by ROW stewardship improvements. This limited geographic impact is a result of compounding barriers to community entry, such as limited administrative and marketing capacity, and lack of urgency among competing administration priorities.

Multiple pain-points—process steps that inhibit progress—are caused by lack of capacity in the form of time and expertise, lack of capital due to an inability to raise funds for either initial construction and/or ongoing maintenance, and confusion or lack of helpful information creating uncertainty for applicants daunted by the guidelines:

- **Lack of Knowledge:** Before the application process began, communities encountered a substantial barrier in navigating regulations and assembling resources.
- **Lack of Capital:** Cost of materials, design consulting, and off-season storage are barriers for community groups and businesses in low-income neighborhoods.
- **Meeting Insurance Requirements:** While most businesses and many civic organizations

already have the required insurance or an insurance policy that might be amended, the City’s insurance requirements can intimidate potential applicants.

- **Understanding Technical Specifications:** Design and engineering specifications, including strict ADA requirements for parklets, can be a barrier for those without access to design expertise.
- **Understanding the Process:** Beyond technical specifications, the process timeline and required tasks can be confusing to those unfamiliar with how city departments work, especially without a clear estimated timeline.
- **Lack of Clarity on Location Constraints:** Despite best intentions, some projects run the risk of stopping before they start if the interested applicant has a lack of understanding on siting ROW improvements.
- **Communication Concerns:** For some, the need to contact the City in the first step of the process can be a barrier, especially for those uncomfortable engaging city government or those who are non-English speakers.
- **Taking on the Maintenance Responsibility—keeping it clean and safe**

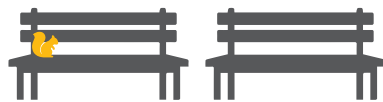
RIGHT OF WAY IMPROVEMENTS

# PEDESTRIAN PLAZAS

IN SELECT CITIES

## ENTRY LEVEL

Seattle: 13  
 San Francisco: 5  
 Philadelphia: 4  
 Los Angeles: 4  
 Boston: 1



ASPIRATIONAL  
 New York: 73

The number of publicly stewarded pedestrian plazas in most American cities, including Philadelphia, is dwarfed by New York City.

# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Despite being viewed highly positively among stakeholders who have engaged with ROW processes, the following barriers were identified as significant for the city to address:

## SYSTEMATIC STRUGGLES

- **ROW programs are viewed as “inherently inequitable”** in their impact and access. Only privileged neighborhoods have capacity to implement them, and some residents feel that the amenities are not for them.
- **Citizens would like to see a complete streets overhaul** with ROW supported by the City as a part of these systemic improvements.
- **Philadelphia lacks a civic figurehead** or dedicated employee/staffing for ROW, particularly with communication and coordination on ROW projects, inhibiting potential growth of ROW stewardship. Implementers yearned for a leader to champion this work.

## PROGRAMMATIC PROBLEMS

- **Insurance and overall cost of materials and design are seen as key barriers of entry**, even if the actual cost is relatively low. The intimidation or cooling effect is real enough to prevent communities from assuming risk and responsibility.
- **ROW program guidelines are inconsistent and confusing**, lacking clear expectations on timing, cost estimates, or clarity on whether requirements are necessary or just highly recommended.
- **The City’s rules for some other ROW elements are unclear or nonexistent** (i.e. curb markets, chairs/tables outside of residences, the Italian Market stalls, benches, crosswalk treatments, etc.), creating confusion around what is and is not covered by different departments and programs. Stakeholders craved consistency.



Philadelphia is in the middle of the pack of peer cities in number of parklets, but far behind San Francisco, where the first parklet was created.

## COMMUNITY CONSTERNATION

- **Organizations and staff tasked with spearheading these projects are over-worked**, leading to a sense of burnout and pessimism toward the City agencies.
- **There is a hunger among existing users for the City to champion these projects** and spur on an entrepreneurial spirit, urban innovation, and equitable access to public space.
- **There is a desire for the city to vocally support tactical urbanism in its streets.** Stakeholders felt that residents are ready for (and already using) tactical urbanism and an embrace by the city would be catalytic.
- **Activists would like to collaborate with the city to improve its programs but are concerned about reprisals for speaking up or for their voice to fall on deaf ears.**

## INTERNAL WORKFLOW AND COMMUNICATIONS

- **Internal process varies depending on context and personnel**, and transfer of information is largely informal, based on interpersonal connections and opportunistic interactions without a formalized tracking or recording process, reflecting the city's ad hoc approach to the programs.
- **There is support for a more robust ROW program across city departments**, and an opportunity for collaboration with the public to disseminate information through trainings or information sessions, lend financial support through microgrants, dedicated staff members, and target marketing toward communities with high capacity and high need. Related city departments like Commerce and Planning and Development have expressed support for collaboration in future improvements to the programs either through resources, information, or additional conversations on how to collaborate.
- **Capacity is cited as a persistent problem**, especially in the form of necessary time among various city staff members required to review applications.

RIGHT OF WAY IMPROVEMENTS

## BIKE CORRALS

IN SELECT CITIES

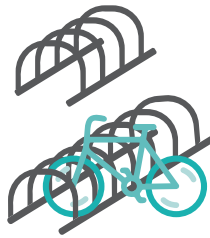
### ENTRY LEVEL

Philadelphia: 10  
Los Angeles: 16



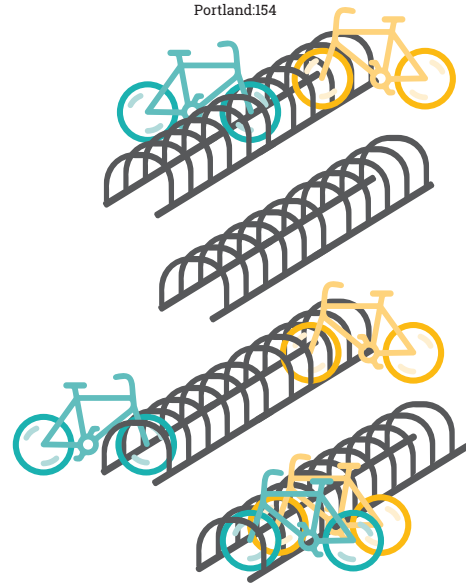
### THRIVING

New York: 55  
San Francisco: 67



### ASPIRATIONAL

Seattle: 90  
Portland: 154



Despite its reputation as a large city with many bike commuters, Philadelphia lags behind peer cities in the number of publicly stewarded corrals.

# RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

The Institute recommends the City focus on the following recommendations to better equip community stakeholders to steward ROW projects:

- **Streamline ROW Processes:** Streamline ROW review and approval processes by identifying primary points of contact and consolidating responsibility for review and approval, include a “kit of parts” and/or preapproved open-source designs, develop seasonal deadlines to increase interest and give urgency to marketing, extend usage throughout the year, and make small scale interventions like benches turnkey.
- **Create ROW Stewardship Program Guidebooks:** Guidebooks should be created to improve usability, including what potential stewards should expect in terms of cost and timing and, as much as possible, reflect a simple step-by-step approach for each intervention.
- **Increase stewardship through education and outreach guided by equity indicators, data-driven prioritization and data transparency:** The city should develop an education and outreach strategy using data indicators focused on identifying communities that have the capacity but are otherwise underserved, uninformed, and/or underfunded. These communities should be the focus of a campaign to receive outreach/support to address inherent inequities in capacity for implementing and stewarding ROW improvements. Data should also be used to develop equity goals for ROW improvements, inform how it can achieve them, and track progress and impact. Longer term, the City can also identify and designate areas which might best support stewarded interventions, hopefully easing the review and approval process and possibly allowing for proactive outreach and marketing to community groups to initiate an application process. This can be coordinated with Vision Zero goals and other strategic city plans for maximum efficacy across administration goals for public safety, open space, transportation and inclusion.

- **Build capacity within the City administration to support the ROW Stewardship program:** The following steps aim to build capacity within the city administration, and are predicated on ROW stewardship being prioritized, ideally at the mayoral and cabinet level, as a cost-effective way to have significant impact in the public realm of all neighborhoods:

- **Step 1:** Dedicate a staff member exclusively to ROW stewardship to ensure the time and attention the program needs to produce, demonstrate, and document marked success. This staff member should be public-facing and accessible to facilitate open communication with the public, champion successful ROW improvements internally and externally, coordinate all approvals and project phases, and conduct outreach to and build relationships with communities. Internally, this person can collaborate with other city agencies and share resources, particularly important in securing funding to support increased stewardship.
- **Step 2:** Increase ROW capacity through additional staffing, overseen by a senior level staff member in the Streets, OTIS or OCS hierarchy: As the potential for ROW stewardship opportunities increases, the city should seek to add a team of dedicated staff members like that described above, working as a team under the leadership of a senior-level staff member. Ideally this person would serve as a recognizable champion and an architect of bolstering the program, including overseeing the streamlining of ROW processes. To succeed, this position should be sufficiently high-level to put ROW amenities on equal footing with other divisions and be able to guide resources. San Francisco and Boston are two examples of cities who have created this type of position to the benefit of their respective ROW programs. It's important to note that this person will need scalable staff support to back up her/his evangelism of ROW stewardship with on-the-ground staff who can help to implement the program.

- **Explore the creation of a ROW Stewardship-focused organization:** On a parallel track with staffing upgrades, ROW stewardship leaders in the City administration and community development should support an organization that can work alongside the city and communities to catalyze ROW upgrades. This could take the form of a new city agency, a city-affiliated non-profit, or a public-private partnership to focus on gathering and distributing resources to manage, promote, and process ROW requests. This organization and its dedicated staff could use its focused mission and aggregated resources to create efficiencies, such as manage insurance, amenity design, and sourcing materials for all communities, regardless of their RCO status. The organization could also serve as a hub to create benchmarks that can be measured and publicized and oversee the creation of a “playbook” with prioritized areas of focus and seek pre-approval for tactical urbanism projects for quicker deployment. Philadelphia has a great tradition of city-affiliated entities like Mural Arts and the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation making public realm improvements, but the city and interested funders must be intentional in structuring this organization to ensure accountability and transparency, and to successfully collaborate, not compete, with the City.



The parklet at Green Line Cafe is a popular outdoor public space in University City District where studies have demonstrated an increase to revenue at nearby businesses.



Baltimore Crossing was one of the first publicly stewarded in-street interventions in Philadelphia, improving the aesthetics at South 48th Street and shortening the crossing, providing significant safety benefits.



# CONCLUSION

In today's Philadelphia, with its twinned trends of increasing property values in invigorated neighborhoods within blocks of entrenched poverty and intractable wage and wealth gaps, our streets are an equalizer and an opportunity to create focal points for realizing common goals. We are encouraged by the appetite of citizens, civic organizations, businesses and public benefit corporations to adopt and shape the public realm in their communities, as well as by the City's interest in supporting them. We are optimistic that with clearer, more efficient processes and increased, strategically deployed capacity, Philadelphians will benefit from this report's recommendations and the city will serve as a model for others trying to maximize the impact of limited resources. With adequate support and clear expectations, we have no doubt Philadelphia's neighborhood stewards will harness their civic power to lead and innovate in shaping their streetscape in decades to come.



The porticos and parklets at the Italian Market on South 9th Street appear to be “grandfathered” in to the Right-of-Way in Philadelphia, serving as popular attractions for tourists and locals alike.