

# Urban Park Fuels Downtown Revitalization in Stamford, Connecticut



*This document is part of a series of case studies that build upon the data and insights presented in “Land conservation helps local economies grow: New England-wide analysis shows gains in employment follow gains in land protection,” published in 2019 and authored by Katharine Sims, Amherst College; Jonathan Thompson, Harvard Forest, Harvard University; and Spencer Meyer, Harvard Forest, Harvard University.*

## An Urban Park for the Stamford Community

Amid the late 1990s building boom in Stamford, Connecticut, a strong partnership of local leaders carved out an urban park to anchor Downtown, accelerate its redevelopment, and provide a significant greenspace for the community. With natural open space, multi-use trails, copious programming, and attractive amenities, Mill River Park has boosted the revitalization of Stamford’s Downtown and contributed substantial economic benefits to the community. Using a public-private partnership model, Mill River Park Collaborative has leveraged generous federal, state, local, and private funds for the build-out and management of the Park. This 28-acre urban parkland improves community health through no-fee recreation, enhances environmental resilience through flood mitigation, serves as a community hub that brings diverse citizens together, increases the value of surrounding real estate, and attracts new developments, employers, and residents to the City, while delivering value to historic residents.

## Gaining Buy-In from Locals and Organizations

After his election in 1995, then-Mayor Dan Malloy engaged city leaders, residents, and the Trust for Public Land (TPL) to make reality the vision of a world-class park in a downtown lacking a major public space. TPL was an important early partner in the project, invited by Mayor Malloy to coordinate project planning and phasing, identify private and public funding sources, retain consultants and designers, acquire property to become part of the Park, and incubate the Mill River Park Collaborative (“The Collaborative”) as the local organizational backbone. Since becoming a 501(c)3 nonprofit in 2002, the Collaborative has led the effort, building the park and its programs. The Collaborative also engages Stamford Public Schools by hosting more than 650 fourth grade students annually to use the Park as an outdoor classroom, and hiring 25 Stamford teens per year as Stewards to work in the Park and receive job training and exposure.



View of Mill River Park / Will Belcher

## Conserving Land Leads to Flood Protection

Urban parks are known to provide environmental services to their surrounding area, including stormwater management and filtration. As part of the creation of Mill River Park, the US Army Corp of Engineers removed a dilapidated dam and engineered the Mill River to better absorb and filter runoff. This “green infrastructure” benefited Downtown Stamford economically as it shrank the River’s 100-year floodplain to within the borders of the Park thus taking Downtown out of the flood zone and lowering insurance rates for existing buildings, costs to build new structures, and clean-up expenditures after a big weather event.

**“[Mill River Park] is a great example of bringing together all these aspects, where you had this resilience element with the floodplain constraining, economic development piece, public health piece, [and] the wildlife that has come back to the river after the removal of the dam.”** — David Kooris, President of Stamford Downtown and Former City of Stamford Board of Representatives (6th District, Downtown)

## Improving Healthcare Costs Through Recreation

Survey data from park systems around the country indicate that visitors use urban parks to meet their recommended levels of physical activity. Health researchers know that this improves health and estimate that doing so saves health systems, insurers, and most importantly people in healthcare costs. The predominantly local users of Mill River Park enjoy various types of no-fee recreation, including walking, jogging, and biking, in both the open space and trails of the Park. Residents also utilize the Collaborative's free fitness programming, Fit Club, which attracted 2,320 attendees to the 75 classes offered in 2017 and 2018. In addition to improving health and lowering healthcare expenditures, these free offerings represent a cost savings for residents who do not have to travel further and pay fees to recreate elsewhere.



View of Mill River Park / Sahar Coston-Hardy

## Amenities that Boost the Local Economy

Mill River Park's amenities and events activate Downtown Stamford on nights and weekends when the business crowd dwindles, and provide a place for the community to gather while also providing economic benefit to local businesses. Local restaurants and retailers benefit from increased foot traffic from residents and office workers walking to and through the Park. In December 2019, the Collaborative partnered with Half Full Brewery on a tented Beer Garden that drew up to 1,000 people per night to celebrate local businesses.

## Attracting Economic Development

Along with strong efforts from the government and the private sector, Mill River Park contributed to the momentous revitalization of Stamford's Downtown. Real estate developers recognized that the Park would be a "bonus amenity" to their future residential and commercial tenants. Employers looking to hire a young workforce promote the millennial-friendly work-live-play appeal of the neighborhood, and explicitly supported the early fundraising for the Park as part of their strategy to attract talented workers to the City. Nowadays, the Park swells with both office workers on their weekday lunch

## Financing the Park through Community Investment

One of the most critical early actions taken by Stamford to support Mill River Park was the creation of a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district that surrounded the Park, and contracted for 50% of the increase in property tax for parcels immediately surrounding the Park to flow to the Collaborative, which generated roughly \$1.6 million in capital and operating expenses for MRPC—indicating a total increment of \$3.2 million, half of which goes directly to Stamford's general fund. With the surge in revitalization of Downtown to which Mill River Park contributed, property values have risen substantially.

**"9 West Broad, which is an office building that has been completely redone, has been filling up with tenants because it overlooks the Park, and they love that view. To be able to see the Park and walk over there and just have lunch in the Park," —**

Thomas Madden, Director of Economic Development, City of Stamford, and Executive Director Urban Redevelopment Commission, City of Stamford

## Future Environmental and Economic Improvements

As the first planned phases of the park near completion, and major capital projects that will complete Mill River Park break ground, several opportunities and challenges lie ahead. The Collaborative will continue to develop sustainable streams of fundraising and earned income to support programming, operations, and capital work. Based on community feedback, the Collaborative is also starting to redesign or reconfigure aspects of the Park to better serve all community members.

**Local Stories, Regional Impact**—The research that informs this document found compelling connections between permanent land protection and positive impacts on local economies throughout New England, and this series was developed to show what these findings look like in individual towns. For more information about how conservation affects local economies across New England, see the full study at <https://bit.ly/CSConFi>.

Highstead is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the New England landscape and achieving the Wildlands and Woodlands Vision. Mailing address: PO Box 1097, Redding, CT 06875. 203.938.8809 [www.highstead.net](http://www.highstead.net)