



**Pittsburgh
Parks
Conservancy**

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**PITTSBURGH CONTROLLER'S OFFICE ISSUES 24-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE AUDIT
OF PITTSBURGH PARKS CONSERVANCY CONTRACTS AND AGREEMENTS**

Audit highlights Conservancy's Positive Financial Impact, Park Stewardship and Relationship with City

PITTSBURGH –AUGUST 6, 2020 – The City of Pittsburgh today issued a retrospective audit of more than 55 agreements and contracts it has made with the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy since their public interest partnership began in 1998. The report yielded a positive conclusion: that the Parks Conservancy has become a trusted and reliable champion of city parks over the past 24 years and has contributed immensely to their development and preservation through its own fundraising and responsible management of city-provided funds.

Catherine Qureshi, acting chief operating officer, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, thanked City Controller Michael Lamb for completing the audit, which was requested by Pittsburgh City Council earlier this year 'to evaluate the cooperation and communication that exists with the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and other entities.'

Last November, Pittsburgh voters approved a slight increase in the city's property tax, which was championed by the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, to equitably fund maintenance and capital improvements in the City's 165 park sites. The tax has not yet been implemented. The audit was requested to inform City Council deliberations about how and when to implement the tax, and where to direct its revenues.

"The audit confirms that the relationship between the City of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy has been both productive and efficient, resulting in enhanced park experiences through ongoing capital improvements, maintenance and programming," Qureshi said. "As this was the first audit performed since the City and the Conservancy entered into the agreement more than two decades years ago, it speaks well of both parties that the review was so positive. It also provides added reassurance to our donors that the tens of millions of dollars they have contributed to the parks on our behalf have been thoughtfully and effectively managed." In total, the Conservancy has raised nearly \$130 million over the past 24 years, all of which has been devoted to the cause of park restoration and improvement. The Conservancy works

seamlessly and, as the audit confirmed, efficiently with numerous City departments and authorities to enhance the City's work.

In a press conference announcing the audit findings, City Controller Lamb highlighted the strong transparency and accountability of the Parks Conservancy and thanked the organization for its support of the audit. Lamb expressed gratitude with the Conservancy's management of agreements and contracts, noting that the majority of documents reviewed and audited were supplied by the Conservancy.

"We were pleased to provide documentation crucial to the proper execution of the audit that the Controller's office could not find elsewhere," Qureshi said. According to the audit, 48 of 58 contracts and agreements reviewed were supplied by the Parks Conservancy.

Controller Lamb also referenced Schenley Plaza revenues during the press conference. Per the agreement between the City and Conservancy, the Conservancy manages and operates this beloved space. The Conservancy is responsible for all costs and expenses associated with the maintenance and operation of Schenley Plaza. Schenley Plaza has historically run at a loss. Any shortfall is covered by Conservancy general operating funds. The Conservancy, as part of a community partnership, raised \$13 million to construct the Plaza. The Conservancy works annually to generate enough revenue for Schenley Plaza to become financially self-sufficient.

As evidence of the effectiveness of the City/Conservancy partnership, the audit report cited the development of the \$19 million Frick Environmental Center in Frick Park, the largest capital investment managed by the two parties to date. According to the auditor's report, the project demonstrated 'very good communication ... between the contractors, architects, the City and Parks Conservancy throughout the design and construction of the [building].' The report also stated that auditors 'conducted a telephone interview with the City's senior project architect who confirmed that ongoing strong communication and frequent status reports occurred during this project with all parties involved.'

The result of this City/Conservancy collaboration is a world-class education center that accommodates thousands of students and visitors every year and a Certified Living Building that has been recognized globally for its environmental sustainability.

To execute the audit, the City Controller completed an exhaustive analysis of nearly 60 agreements and contracts signed between the City of Pittsburgh and the Parks Conservancy since 1998 and found that all were faithfully executed according to established terms. Notable findings and comments in the auditor's report included the following:

- *'There is a misconception that any tax increase would go directly to the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. Any tax increase would be collected by the City and directed into a separate parks trust fund only to be used for park restoration in underserved neighborhoods. The City is under no obligation to use these tax dollars as payment to outside organizations, though*

the resolution that was passed asks that the home rule charter be changed to include 'secure matching funds and services from a charitable city parks conservancy; and assure citizen participation and full public disclosure of spending.' '

- *'The Parks Conservancy can be a valuable asset to the City because it can provide funding for projects as well as raise additional funds when needed ... If during the renovations there is a shortage of funds (for example, because of cost overruns), DPW will ask the Parks Conservancy to raise more money for the project and the Parks Conservancy will seek funding to complete the work.'*

Nevertheless, the auditors provided nine specific recommendations. Proposed suggestions included:

- The appointment of a liaison between the Department of Public Works (DPW) to organize regular meetings and communication with all City departments and outside organizations that operate within city parks. The liaison would ensure that all signed contracts with the Parks Conservancy are forwarded to the City Controller's office for proper storage and inclusion in OpenBook Pittsburgh.
- That the Mayor of the City of Pittsburgh should nominate and work with City Council to approve the five board members that the City is entitled to appoint as part of the Cooperation Agreement with the Parks Conservancy.
- That the DPW administration should work with the Parks Conservancy to decide and publish one complete and definitive list of city parks.

The Parks Conservancy supports the recommendations and agrees with the auditors' statement that revenues raised by the new parks tax should be directed to underserved communities, as was stipulated in the ballot initiative presented to City voters last fall.

To read or download a full copy of the auditor's report click [here](#) or to learn more about the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and its facilities, programming, maintenance and capital investment plans, visit pittsburghparks.org.

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About Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy:

The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy was founded in December 1996 by a group of citizens concerned with the deteriorating conditions of Pittsburgh's historic city parks. A non-profit organization, the Parks Conservancy works closely with the City of Pittsburgh under an official public-private partnership agreement to restore and improve the city's park system to its full potential. To date, the Parks Conservancy has raised nearly \$130 million and completed 22 major park improvement projects. The Parks Conservancy works with thousands of volunteers, hosts hundreds of events, and provides programming for more than 7,500 children annually.