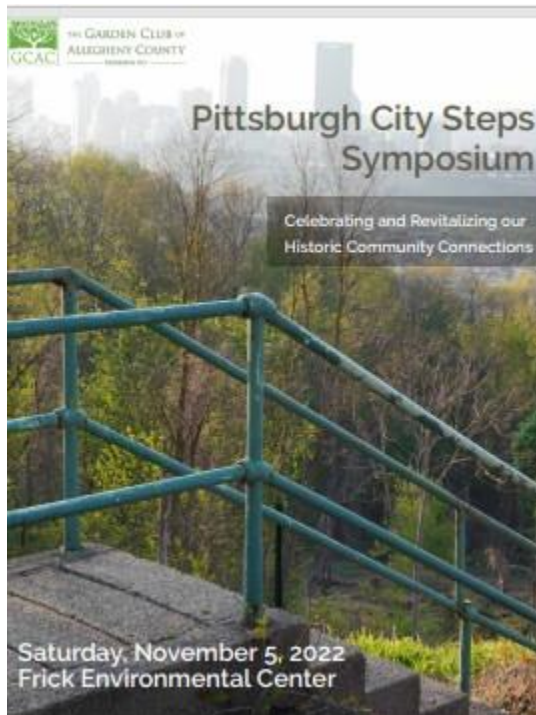


Pittsburgh City Steps Symposium Summary



On November 5, 2022, the Garden Club of Allegheny County hosted a Symposium to explore the creation of a green pedestrian network incorporating Pittsburgh’s iconic collection of more than 700 sets of public steps to connect neighborhoods, green spaces, and riverfront amenities. The Symposium brought together 56 participants representing a broad cross-section of stakeholders: City employees and elected officials; nonprofits with an interest in the environment, neighborhood development, outdoor recreation and fitness, history and education, urban tourism, and parks; funders; and city residents.

In the morning, Angie Martinez from the Department of Mobility and Infrastructure (DOMI) provided an overview of the steps and DOMI’s strategy for maintaining them. She was followed by Tim Beatley of the Biophilic Cities Network, who talked about the

steps as an integral component of Pittsburgh’s commitment to being a biophilic city, one that integrates and provides access to nature in its policies, planning, and projects. He described the city as an adventure for discovery and cited the benefits that biophilic cities enjoy in terms of better mental health, lower crime, and even generosity. Lisa Schroeder of the Pittsburgh Foundation recounted her experiences with Riverlife in Pittsburgh and the Parks and People Foundation in Baltimore to demonstrate how to structure a public-private partnership and provide equitable access to a city’s infrastructure assets. She noted the importance of community engagement and championing a broad, long-term vision while implementing short-term projects that keep the momentum going. Our consultant, Damon Weiss of Ethos Collaborative, closed the morning with an explanation of systems design, urban walksheds, and how we might think of the steps as a citywide network.

During lunch, participants toured the photo exhibition in the FEC gallery, “Pittsburgh: Stupendous Steps.” The exhibition will remain on display at the FEC for at least the winter months and will then travel to other venues. In addition, students from the Carnegie Mellon University School of Architecture showcased their work from a design studio in Spring 2022 that focused solely on the steps.

In the afternoon, participants worked in small groups to address eight different issues related to the proposed citywide steps network. Each group reported back with some key observations, questions, and suggestions, highlighted below:



Equitable Access and Community Public Health

- Some steps are used regardless of condition because they provide essential access.
- How do we consider the range of different user groups: bikers, hikers, kids, older adults, etc.?
- Continued, equitable distribution of salt boxes is important for maintaining access during snowy weather. Do we need more “snow angels”?
- How can the City ensure that all the steps are tended to, not just those with the most vocal advocates?
- The Parks Conservancy has created equity scores for the parks. Could the steps be included?
- We should try to engage hospital networks, sporting goods companies, and local sports teams as champions for the steps.
- We should try to connect the steps with existing trails and greenways, with associated signage, including distances and destinations.
- Lighting may need to be selectively improved for security without imposing light pollution on our neighborhoods.
- How can the steps be integrated into public marketing of the city, including maps?

Neighborhood Economic Development and Community Vitality

- The steps provide essential mobility connections for marginalized neighborhoods.
- There are different ways of measuring the value of the steps, many of which the city considered when it developed its existing “ranking” of each set of steps.
- Savings in \$/person afforded by the steps for residents who don’t have cars is measurable.
- Does attracting new investment inevitably lead to gentrification and displacement? Does it have to?
- Affordable homeownership along the steps corridors should be a key goal.



Community Connections and Youth Engagement

- The steps provide an opportunity to promote a sense of ownership in neighborhoods.
- Vertical parties, art projects, and clean-up initiatives are good vehicles for neighborhood engagement.
- We should consider social media as a learning opportunity and as a tip-in for engagement, such as sending posts to social media before and after step events.
- Schools could use step clean-up/painting/improvement projects as service opportunities.
- Venture Outdoors has held step hikes with adults, but could also focus on youth.
- There's a network of schools, churches, community groups, scouting and others with potential to support the steps. There could be project-specific go-fund-me campaigns.
- Use the steps as a setting! They add context and history to events.
- Plan additional step challenges!
- Metrics for measurement of step usage might include numbers of participants; volunteer time; pounds [of trash collected]; numbers/miles of steps cleaned; number of plantings added; age demographics of participants, etc.
- Who else should be at the table?

Environmental Health and Landscape Enhancement

- The steps offer an opportunity for environmental education.
- A robust knowledge base already exists with stakeholders such as Scenic Pittsburgh, Allegheny Cleanways, and the City Sustainability Planner.
- We should work toward increasing the quantity of native plants along the steps.
- The Ten Million Trees for Pennsylvania initiative could be a source for future trees along the steps.
- The US Department of Agriculture would be a good resource for this work.
- Given the adjacency to the city forest, could carbon credits be an option? Is there a link to the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative?

Marketing, Interpretation, and the Visitor Experience

- The steps network as a unique urban asset has the potential to become a citywide destination—a GAP trail for the city—while also retaining individual neighborhood identities.
- Along with being a “green destination,” they’re a visual, historic, cultural and environmental one.
- We should consider a program for neighborhoods or organizations to adopt staircases, building rapport and stewardship.

- We should also connect the initiative and build rapport with relevant organizations such as the Heinz History Center.
- There could be a Season of Steps, with a StepTrek-type event every weekend, April to November, incorporating existing walks in various neighborhoods, which could be marketed locally and nationwide.
- The City should consider establishing a Steps Commission similar to the Shade Tree Commission.
- We could use signage to encourage use by providing history as well as data on length, stories climbed, calories burned, etc.
- The steps should be utilized as storytelling opportunities to promote the city's history and unique story, perhaps a Story Corps for the Steps.
- Celebrating the steps' history, we should take the photo exhibition on tour to various venues, including the airport.

Planning and Prioritization of Step Projects

- The City has created a system of prioritization, although updates will likely be needed.
- Advocacy has been and can continue to be effective in prioritizing projects.
- Dumping is a problem, as are invasive plants.
- Equity is important; the distribution of steps across most neighborhoods should reinforce equity considerations.

Public and Private Funding Options

- Many sources of funding are available. Perhaps Pittsburgh needs a “funding czar” to research and coordinate efforts to tap into those sources. Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) could be useful tools in that work.
- Federal funding is available, including the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure package and the CMAQ (Congestion Management/ Air Quality), which funds projects and programs that help meet the requirements of the Clean Air Act by reducing mobile source emissions and regional congestion on transportation networks.
- Local public sources are also available: RAD, One Pittsburgh, and the Micro Benefit Fund.
- State or regional art grants could support enhancements.
- Private foundations are interested in the project.
- Additional revenue sources might include library, real estate transfer, billboard, and parks taxes.
- Given the steps' adjacency to the city forest, could carbon credits be an option? Is there a link to the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI)?



- Outside advocacy is essential, but so is support by the Mayor.
- Other partners might include neighborhood CDCs.

Design and Maintenance: Innovation and Challenges

- The step treads are pre-cast and fabricated remotely. Are there other options for more sustainable and affordable replacements?
- Utilities are wrapped around the steps, and utility projects sometimes remove the steps and replace in kind. Could we prevail upon the utilities to improve the steps as they replace them?

Many of the symposium participants expressed a desire for a clear plan delineating the roles and responsibilities for relevant partners who would address various issues such as basic upkeep, safety, and public health benefits of using the steps.

Biophilic Cities Resources

The same weekend as the Symposium, Tim Beatley and his videographer filmed the steps and some of their advocates. They have produced a seven-minute [video](#) and an accompanying [article](#) that make a compelling case for the steps as an urban asset with enormous potential.

Next Steps

A clear plan delineating roles and responsibilities is needed. We have also initiated planning for a Design Charette later in 2023 to consider how the citywide pedestrian network might take shape. We will be seeking foundation support for this event, which we expect to culminate in a master plan for developing and promoting the network. Once that master plan is developed and approved, we hope to produce a Hikers' Guide to the City Steps.

As we summarized at the end of the Symposium, the short-term achievable next steps will likely come from the various diverse stakeholders for this project. We encourage all to think about how they and their organizations intersect with the steps and might help move this initiative forward. Those small steps can serve as the catalyst and support for our larger vision, which will require a robust public-private partnership to achieve.

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