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## Spaces to Breathe

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## Spaces to Breathe

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Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Think back to the last time you were outside under the shade of a tree enjoying the breeze, the chirping birds, and the fresh air. Did your shoulders drop? Did some tension leave your body? Did you feel refreshed?

If you were like me, and many in the Richmond region, you have spent a good amount of time in public parks during last year's pandemic. In the 2020 calendar year, Richmond Parks saw an all-time record attendance proving that our parks are a treasure for the public good. They're free places to experience nature, relax, recharge, meditate, exercise and enjoy the company of friends and neighbors. They're places to just be, spaces to breathe. In an equitable city, green spaces should be accessible to everyone.

A special report from the Trust for Public Land, "[Parks and the Pandemic](#)," highlights just how important access to walkable greenspace is for quality of life. Ready access to parks and green spaces leads to better academic performance, improved cognition, better concentration, reduction in stress hormones, sound sleep, and faster recovery from injury, to name just a few health benefits. Sadly, yet predictably, this report also discusses how inequitably urban green spaces are geographically distributed based on race, with fewer acres of walkable parkland available to Black and Latino residents in comparison to white residents across the country.

The story is no different in Richmond, and this is linked to our racist history. During the 1970s when Richmond [annexed a large postwar residential suburban section of Chesterfield County](#), they weren't doing so to acquire existing public amenities like parks. Instead, annexation was used to increase the number of white residents in Richmond to maintain a white-majority City Council. This strategy resulted in a moratorium on annexation that still applies within Virginia today. White flight took hold, and industrial facilities shut down in these newly annexed areas. Residents with means moved farther into surrounding counties. A decreasing city tax base led to fewer resources for public services, from schools, to infrastructure to parks. This lack of public amenities persists to this day and remains most concentrated in our census tracts inhabited by majority Black and Latino populations, especially neighbors in the South Side. Currently, our 8th and 9th Council districts, which are majority Black and Latino, have the most residents who cannot access a park within a 10-minute walk from their home; over 25,000 people lack this public amenity. That needs to change.

**A racially equitable Richmond looks like every resident having the mental and physical health benefits of green space easily walkable from where they live.** Researchers from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the University of Hong Kong and the City University of Hong Kong [showed how equitably distributed urban green spaces promoted greater resiliency to COVID-19](#) for all races. Green spaces assist in faster recovery from all types of trauma, too. From centuries of not being able to breathe, and the collective trauma faced by our BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) community at the hands (or knees) of institutions, spaces to breathe are a necessity. Lower rates of diabetes, asthma, hypertension, anxiety and depression all correlate with access to green space.

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Achieving a racially equitable Richmond requires us to make parks accessible to all, especially Richmond's Black and brown communities, by focusing funding on the historically marginalized, engaging in community-centered processes, protecting land in perpetuity and enacting policies that protect against green gentrification.

**Racial equity requires focus and dollars in historically marginalized places first.** Budgets are moral documents, and data helps us pinpoint where the most need exists. The '[Climate Equity Index](#)' from our Office of Sustainability overlays more than thirty census tract level data points, and includes historic and current contextual data about institutional racism. We have the ability to see disaggregated data displayed geographically, and act intentionally. We must.

This data was the driving force in the first major park expansion initiative to take place in the City of Richmond since annexation and it pointed us to the city's 8th and 9th council districts. These districts are majority Black and Latino, have higher rates of poverty, less tree canopy, higher summer temperatures, and have seen less intentional investment in public amenity over time since the 1970's. This same data can be used to purchase and protect land for the public benefit and help reach the goal of an equitable Richmond, where every resident can walk to a green space.

Community-led and trusted organizations founded and run by Black and brown people have built their reputations and success on following through for their neighborhoods.

**Racial equity requires community-led park onboarding and transparency of process.** Community-led and trusted organizations founded and run by Black and brown people have built their reputations and success on following through for their neighborhoods. They often do this without equal access to funding and minimal administrative support systems. These organizations should be leaders in the process of building community trust and should be paid to do so. Collaborative grant applications in partnership with the City can help secure these funds, and budgets reflective of the necessity of this work should include line items for engagement.

I've had the great experience of working alongside and learning from our partners at Virginia Community Voice, Southside ReLeaf, and Groundwork RVA as we think about what new green spaces can be for South Richmond. Authentic engagement means building trust, establishing norms, and listening fully to one another. Direct communication, organizing, and developing a shared language of community aspiration for these spaces increases the likelihood of community buy-in, and the formation of a shared vision. City staff can be open and honest about budgets, operational realities and bureaucratic processes, and work alongside residents to develop community maintenance agreements, park names, specific amenities, and dedicated partner groups. Leaning into equity-based engagement in onboarding parks creates more dynamic and culturally relevant spaces.

**Racial equity requires protecting urban land now for perpetuity.** As explicitly stated in the purpose of [Richmond 300](#), "Richmond is 62.5 square miles and is not allowed to annex land." Acquisition of land for green spaces will get more difficult as our population continues to grow. We must act now to buy, receive and or protect open green spaces for the public good. Tools like economic development scorecards and community benefit agreements should be leveraged to incorporate green space as a priority for our

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neighborhoods when new development is proposed. Partnerships with land trusts can be expanded and conservation easements can be utilized to make sure new green spaces can be protected in perpetuity.

**Racial equity requires the acknowledgement of, and policy protections from displacement through 'Green Gentrification.'** [Green gentrification](#) refers to the urban phenomenon of increasing rents, and subsequent financial, cultural, and physical displacement of lower-income and non-white people following the creation or restoration of an environmental amenity, such as a new park. Tools mentioned above, like community benefit agreements, are one potential mechanism neighborhoods and the City of Richmond can use to protect existing residents so their quality of life improves in place, with the addition of a new green space. When plans for development proximate to new green spaces come through public commissions, committees and City Council, questions of affordability and community benefit should be the standard. Other mechanisms like the reduction or freezing of property taxes, rent stabilization vouchers, and incentives for low and middle income housing could also offer protection for existing residents.

**A racially equitable Richmond looks like Black and brown-led onboarding of new parks in neighborhoods and communities where no greenspaces exist within walking distance. Community-led creation of public open space is the inverse of annexation, an anti-racist land use strategy that empowers residents to build and enjoy places for the people.** These spaces are culturally relevant because culture was relevant in their creation. This Richmond has a better quality of life for everyone who lives here today, and spaces for everyone to breathe.

On a recent community walk through a soon to be new greenspace in Southside, I felt joy in the conversation and in the silence. Deep breaths with a view and a breeze, shoulders dropping and imaginations running wild. Exploration, laughter, curiosity, questions and possibility. There's a wholeness and a calm to the amenity of greenspace, and everyone deserves access to it.

#### Ryan C. Rinn

Ryan Rinn is a 21 year resident of Richmond and works for the City. His career has spanned from community organizing to urban planning to his current role with Parks & Recreation. He is a graduate of the University of Richmond and Virginia Commonwealth University and lives with his husband Jason in the Byrd Park neighborhood.