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Unlocking Redevelopment Opportunities in DC Parks: Three Pathways for Private Sector Engagement

The District of Columbia’s park system is one of the best in the country, but nearly 90% of its 8,000 acres are managed not by the District but by the National Park Service (NPS). Due to DC’s unique status as a self-governing city operating within a federally controlled district, the local government has limited authority to invest directly in or develop most of its own parkland. That unusual governance structure, combined with decades of deferred maintenance and chronic underfunding of the NPS, has made it a challenge to revitalize and sustain DC’s parks.

In recent years, however, new legal authorities and creative deal structures have begun to create new possibilities. Private-sector partners now have viable pathways to invest in, operate, or redevelop key park assets across the District. Three emerging structures have already begun to attract private capital and enhance public parks in DC.

1. Cooperative Management Agreements

In 2019, the NPS gained legal authority to enter into cooperative management agreements with the District of Columbia, enabling the joint funding and oversight of NPS park improvements.

A leading example is the \$21 million renovation of Franklin Park in downtown Washington, DC. Improvements funded by the District included a new central fountain, winding paths, a children’s play area, additional tree cover and seating areas, improved stormwater management, and a new pavilion. Today, the park is managed by the Downtown DC Business Improvement District, a

quasi-public entity. These types of agreements allow private entities to collaborate with both federal and local governments, streamlining project delivery and maximizing impact.

2. Long-Term Leases

Long-term leases are another powerful tool for attracting private capital to public assets by offering operators a stable structure for investment and revenue generation.

In 2014, the Golf Course Preservation and Modernization Act paved the way for a 50-year lease between NPS and the National Links Trust, enabling substantial investment in the Langston, Rock Creek, and East Potomac NPS golf courses. The first project under this arrangement is a \$25 million investment in the Rock Creek Golf course, which will include a nine-hole regulation course, a shorter nine-hole par-3 course, and a driving range with new clubhouse and support facilities, expected to be completed in the fall of 2026. Unlike concession agreements—whose terms are more restrictive and subject to different statutory requirements—long-term leases offer the flexibility needed for modernization, historic preservation, and affordable public access, while also ensuring financial sustainability for both the operator and the community.

3. Disposal and Administrative Transfer of Property

Strategic disposal and administrative transfer of NPS land to the District of Columbia or private developers can unlock new opportunities for redevelopment, especially for underutilized public land.

In 2011, NPS administratively transferred 15 acres of federal parkland to support construction of the Nationals Youth Baseball Academy in Fort Dupont Park. Under the arrangement, NPS transferred control of several acres to the District, the District provided \$10.2 million in construction funds, and the Washington Nationals donated \$3.5 million for construction and operating costs and agreed to manage the academy year-round. This type of transfer enables local authorities and private-sector partners to develop community-serving facilities on formerly federal land, with clear lines of responsibility and access to local funding channels.

Opportunities Ahead

While these and other public-private partnerships have revitalized key park assets, many prominent parcels of NPS land in Washington, DC, remain in dire need of investment and creative stewardship. Notable examples include:

Rock Creek Tennis Center: Home to the prestigious Mubadala Citi Open tennis tournament, this facility has significant potential for modernization. Upgrades could enhance visitor experience,

expand community programming, and ensure the venue remains a premier destination for local residents and international events.

Carter Barron Amphitheater: Once a vibrant hub for cultural performances, the amphitheater has been closed for several years due to structural issues. Redevelopment could restore its role as a community gathering place, support local arts, and attract new audiences while preserving its historic character.

Meridian Hill Park (Malcolm X Park): Known for its iconic cascading fountain and rich history, this park faces ongoing maintenance and accessibility challenges. Thoughtful investment could address deferred maintenance, improve safety and accessibility, and enhance the park's role as a cultural and recreational anchor for nearby neighborhoods.

Each of these sites presents unique challenges—ranging from substantial infrastructure needs to historic preservation requirements—but also offers substantial opportunities for public benefit and private sector engagement when supported by the right legal and financial frameworks.

Conclusion

If your organization is considering investment or redevelopment opportunities on National Park Service land in the District of Columbia, I invite you to connect and explore how we can unlock value together. All the deals discussed involve intricate legislative and administrative frameworks. Professionals who understand the relevant statutes, legal precedents, and agency processes—and who have practical experience navigating the complexities of federal real estate transactions—can help secure successful outcomes for all parties involved.