

# **Encouraging Spaces for Latino Community Participation: Creating Welcoming and Inclusive Parks and Community Centers in Eugene, Oregon**

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## **Introduction: Project Overview**

In the spring of 2015, the City of Eugene initiated a public engagement effort—consisting of a series of community workshops and outreach events held in May—oriented toward the city’s Latino community. This outreach effort was organized and led by a team that included the City of Eugene’s Office of Human Rights & Neighborhood Involvement, coordinated by Lorna Flormoe, employees from the City of Eugene’s Parks and Open Space and Recreation Departments, students from the University of Oregon’s “Public Participation in Diverse Communities” class,<sup>1</sup> Prof. Gerardo Sandoval from the Latino Civic Participation Project (sponsored by the University of Oregon Center for Latino/a & Latin American Studies), and James Rojas, a trained city planner and public engagement specialist. Together, this outreach team interacted with more than 350 people about what they like about the city’s parks and community centers and what they would change. The goal of these workshops and outreach

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<sup>1</sup> This course was offered through the Department of Planning, Public Policy and Management, and the students who enrolled were a mix of graduate students and advanced undergraduates from multiple academic disciplines. The class focused on strategies and tools for encouraging public participation in underserved and underrepresented communities. Before participating in the outreach events, students examined key theories of public participation, systemic barriers that impede public participation and prevent marginalized groups from participating in decision-making processes, as well as theories and strategies for building community engagement, such as facilitating community storytelling and creating opportunities for placemaking. Students conducted original research on the history of parks planning in Eugene, best practices for improving parks access among marginalized communities, and on the unique needs and assets of the local Latino community. Finally, students coordinated a panel discussion with key Latino/a leaders and activists in Eugene, including Jim Garcia, Lane Community College Chicano/ Latino Student Program Coordinator; Guadalupe Quinn, Immigrants Rights Activist; David Saez, Executive Director of Centro Latino Americano; and Patricia Toledo, anti-racial profiling Committee, League of United Latin American Citizens of Lane County. Students’ work in the course provided important context for the planning and execution of the workshops and outreach events, and served as a foundation for their analysis of the responses they received from community members. The course was taught by Dr. Dan Platt.

events was to produce a needs assessment and recommendations as to how the City of Eugene might make parks and community centers more welcoming and inclusive for the Latino community. Project findings will be incorporated in the 2015 update of Eugene Parks and Recreation Systems Plan (PRSP). The project also included a training for City staff—which was facilitated by Prof. Sandoval and James Rojas in May 2015—aimed at building in-house capacity for future outreach efforts to the Latino community and other under-represented communities in Eugene.

Increasing outreach to the Latino community and making parks and community centers more welcoming to underserved populations is an important part of the mission of Eugene’s Parks and Recreation Departments. Among the thirteen key goals from the “Parks, Recreation and Open Space Comprehensive Plan” developed between 2002 and 2006 were to:

- Identify underserved populations and provide outreach to engage diverse community members;
- Distribute parks open space and recreation services equitably throughout the community;
- Promote human understanding and a sense of community through cultural opportunities

The work of achieving these goals is both essential and ongoing. Community research was conducted by Prof. Sandoval and Roanel Herrera in 2012 as part of Livability Lane’s “Latino Public Participation and Community Indicators Project”, funded by the US Housing and Urban Development Department. This research indicates that there is still much work to be done to make Eugene’s parks and public spaces inclusive to the Latino community. Sandoval and Hererra’s report states that Latinos in Lane County “may have a particular concern about access to public spaces” “and that “Latinos often experience discrimination from white residents when they visit parks or other public spaces” (7). The urgency and importance of creating parks and public spaces that are accessible and welcoming to Latinos is also underscored by the recent

demographic history of Lane County. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, Lane County's Latino population increased 79.9 percent between 2000 and 2010; currently, there are roughly 26,167 Latinos representing about 7.4 percent of Lane County's population (Sandoval & Herrera 1).<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, our outreach efforts suggest that, while there is much work still to be done to engage Latinos in decision-making about parks and public spaces, encouraging public participation from the Latino community is vital to realizing the mission of Eugene's Parks and Recreation Departments.

### **Description of the Public Engagement Process**

During the month of May 2015, students and staff conducted five different public engagement events: at the monthly "Latino Family Fun Night" in Bethel, at the annual "Festival Latino" in Springfield (sponsored by Huerto de la Familia), at the entrance to Plaza Latina Supermarket on a busy Saturday afternoon, at Ganas, an afterschool program for Latino Kelly Middle School students, and at Pilas!, a Latino family literacy program run by the nonprofit organization Downtown Languages. Instead of hosting the events in city administrative buildings, which may feel unfamiliar or unwelcoming to participants, we chose venues that we believed would feel safe and inviting to the Latino community, such as Latino-owned businesses and schools that host programs for Latino youth and their families. Our workshops and outreach events used a public participation model developed by artist and urban planner James Rojas. Mr. Rojas describes his method as one "that uses model-building workshops and on-site interactive models to help engage the public in the planning and design process." The goal of the method is to "translate conceptual planning ideas into physical forms, and learn about the value of planning and design in shaping how we live" (placeit.org). In practice, this "participation through play"

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed demographic analysis of Lane County's Latino Community, see Sandoval and Herrera's "Latino Public Participation and Community Indicators Project: Developing a Bottom-Up Understanding of Inclusion and Livability in Lane County, Oregon" (2012).

method inspires participants to think about the places where they live, work, and play, and how those spaces affect their daily lives. The method also encourages participants to tell stories about their lived experience of city parks and public spaces. Unlike other methods, such as community surveys, which produce a limited set of possible responses, this open-ended, informal approach is likely to generate more surprising—and, perhaps, more honest—community feedback.

Moreover, because the engagement strategies don't rely on representative maps or on the specialized language of city planning, Rojas's method invites all community members to share their ideas and experiences, including children.

At the smaller community outreach workshops—at the Ganas and Pilas! Programs, and at Latino Family Fun Night in Bethel—we asked participants to design their ideal park or community center using construction paper and a collection of repurposed, colorful objects—things like pipe cleaners, plastic animals, and little toy houses.



At the larger and more open outreach events—at Festival Latino and at Plaza Latina—we presented passersby with a table-length model of a park and community center and encouraged them to use the objects spread out across the model to illustrate their vision for the city’s parks and community centers. In both settings, the outreach team engaged community members with a conversational approach and with open-ended questions (as opposed to the closed-ended questions common in survey methods of public outreach). Some examples of questions we used to initiate conversation were: “What’s your favorite park in Eugene, and what do you like about it?” Or, “What would you change about the city’s parks if you could?” Students kept track of each person we spoke to, and wrote down each of their responses and recommendations as close to word-for-word as possible on a giant notepad. Because this event was designed as an informal survey of the Latino community, we didn’t track participants’ ages, genders, or ethnicities. However, the vast majority of people we spoke to were Latinos. Participants constituted a range of ages. After the workshops, we collated all the responses, organized them into different categories, and made note of when participants offered similar comments or suggestions.

After collating our data and debriefing the results of our outreach, we identified two key ways that Eugene’s parks could grow and adapt to become more welcoming to Latinos. First, many of the participants in the workshops expressed a desire for parks that feel culturally inclusive, and where their desired uses for park space—for example, as a place to host large family gatherings—are actively encouraged through park design and management, rather than tacitly discouraged. Second, many Latinos would prefer more “informal” structures for managing park use. By allowing greater flexibility in park rules and regulations, the city can encourage imaginative and communal uses of parks that might otherwise be seen as unwelcome violations of the “officially sanctioned” park usage. Below is a more detailed description of these

two recommendation sets, along with some more specific and tangible suggestions for incorporating these ideas into the updated Parks and Recreation Systems Plan.

### **Recommendation Set One: Creating an Atmosphere of Cultural Inclusion**

One of the most consistent and persuasive messages we received from participants in our workshops was that a sense of cultural recognition and inclusion is vital to creating positive experiences in parks and public spaces among Latinos. A culturally-inclusive community is one that helps to create:

- **A Sense of Belonging:** The sense that the entire community recognizes and welcomes one's culture.
- **Cultural Visibility:** The feeling that one's culture—including language, music, and food, but also stories and experiences—can be expressed publicly, without fear or discomfort.
- **Cultural Empowerment:** Building opportunities for public participation, and working to ensure that the culture's needs are addressed in the community.

Unfortunately, Eugene's parks and public spaces still sometimes feel unwelcoming to many Latinos. Some participants in our workshops noted that there are few visible signs of Latinos' history and culture in the city. Others described a sense of discomfort in parks and public space. Many of the conversations that the outreach team had during the public participation workshops confirmed the idea that the city could do more through its parks and recreation services to create a welcoming, inclusive environment for Latinos. In some cases, workshop participants were explicit about their desire for greater representation of Latinos in Eugene's cultural landscapes. For example, one participant suggested that she'd like to see a mural representing Latino history or culture in one of the city's parks. Responses like these suggest that some Latinos in Eugene perceive, on a conscious level, that their culture is not adequately represented or welcomed in the city parks, and feel strongly that they deserve greater representation. Other participants spoke to

the issue by discussing a general feeling of racial tension, or an atmosphere of discrimination in parks. When asked about her ideal park, one woman suggested a place where “people don’t look at me like I’m weird.” Parks and public spaces that don’t seem to be welcoming to one’s culture can contribute to a feeling of what Gerardo Sandoval and Marta Maria Maldonado refer to as “hyper-visibility,” “a sense of ‘standing out’” in public spaces (13).

In parks and community centers in particular, that feeling of hyper-visibility is heightened when one uses the space in ways that don't seem to be culturally sanctioned. Based on participants’ responses in our workshops and outreach events, many Latinos in Eugene want to use parks in ways that don’t seem to fit with the dominant cultural values embodied in the place, or which aren’t supported or encouraged by the parks’ design. This is consistent with what other studies of differing cultural perceptions of parks have concluded. For example, a study of Los Angeles parks found that Latinos were among the most frequent visitors of parks, but also that Latinos used parks differently: “Latinos at parks were involved in sociable activities including parties, picnics, and celebrations” while Anglos used parks primarily for “mobile, solitary activities such as jogging, walking, bicycling, or dog walking” (Mendez 37). In city parks where the solitary pursuit of leisure and exercise seem to be the normative ideals, attempts to use the space for communal celebration will be marked as hyper-visible.

One way to alleviate those feelings of discomfort and hyper-visibility is by making city parks places for positive cultural representation of marginalized or underrepresented groups. One suggestion for fostering a sense of cultural belonging and inclusion would be to name a park or community center for someone with cultural significance to local Latinos. As one young participant observed during the Ganas Program Workshop: “If you really want to build more inclusive parks for Latinos, name one after a Latino leader.” There is local precedent for the city

to rename a public space to highlight the importance and presence of the Latino community in Eugene: The Cesar Chavez Elementary School has now been in existence for eleven years, spurred by a similar suggestion from a previous Ganas student. Parks could also be places for public art—such as murals, mosaic walkways, or sculpture—that represents the Latino/a presence in Eugene. Eugene’s parks and community centers could also be places to facilitate cross-cultural education. For example, parks could incorporate educational and interpretive signage that speaks to the history and culture of communities of color in the City of Eugene. Another suggestion that emerged from our workshops was to use community centers to host classes and meetings that encourage cross-cultural exchange, like salsa dancing lessons or conversation groups for people who would like to learn a second language. Finally, many people spoke to the importance of Spanish bilingual signage and resources as first, essential steps toward creating a welcoming environment for Latinos.

One other important way that Eugene’s parks and community centers can become more culturally inclusive is by facilitating gathering places for Latino families, particularly those with young children. There is a significant population of young Latinos in Eugene. According to the 2010 census, 37% of Latinos were under the age of 18, compared to 18% of non-Latinos. Many of the people who participated in our workshops and outreach events spoke of the need for parks where they can recreate with the entire family. Many participants mentioned Petersen Barn park as their favorite park because it offers activities for children throughout the summer. Other parks that were cited as exemplary by multiple participants were Maurie Jacobs Park, Emerald Park, Armitage County Park, and Orchard Point County Park. Indeed, the Lane County Parks system seems to be a model for inclusive design, with bilingual signage that creates a welcoming



environment, portable soccer goals that encourage informal “pick-up” games, and barbecue grills and picnic areas to accommodate larger gatherings.<sup>3</sup>



However, to find parks and community centers that have these amenities and meet the community’s needs, some families have to travel beyond walking distance from their homes. In order to support inclusion for Latinos, we recommend new investment in park infrastructure that will welcome family gatherings. It’s particularly important that the city’s update of the Parks and Recreation Systems Plan reaches beyond the “nuclear” family of 4-6 people with amenities that can meet the needs of *extended* families (of 10 to 20 people). This would mean including things like picnic shelters that would invite larger gatherings, barbecue grills, accessible bathrooms, and water fountains. It would also include play structures to engage kids of all ages: playground

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<sup>3</sup> During the analysis and recommendations stage of this project, Lorna Flormoe spoke with the Lane County Planner, Dave Stockdale, who agreed to serve as a resource for the city’s efforts to create inclusive parks. We recommend that the city consult with him as the PRSP moves forward.

structures, “spray-and-play,” interactive public art, and comfortable places for parents to watch over their children.

### **Recommendation Set Two: Shifting to More “Informal” Park Regulation**

For many people, the word “informal” means “jeans and a t-shirt.” But informality can also mean relaxing official rules and regulations. Rethinking—and relaxing—park regulations can make parks more accessible and inclusive. Informal parks can help build a sense of community empowerment and create opportunities for imaginative use of public space. Some examples of “informal” parks:

- **Regulations:** Ceding control over things like party permits to members of the community can lead to more spontaneous communal events.
- **Sports:** Some organizers, like the “United Nations” soccer club recently featured in *Eugene Weekly*, are helping people play sports without paying to join a league.
- **Vendors:** Cities like Medford have eased permitting requirements for street vendors or created special “vendor zones” in parks.

For many workshop participants, park rules and regulations were a source of uncertainty and anxiety. People had questions about how to reserve park facilities and what kinds of activities are permitted. When asked about Eugene’s community centers, many participants were unaware of their location or unsure about what they could be used for. Feelings of uncertainty about what activities are “sanctioned” in parks and community centers make them less inviting to potential visitors, and conflicts around park rules and regulations contribute to a sense of not feeling welcomed. For example, one workshop participant described an experience of being asked about the status of his facilities reservation while holding a family birthday party at a park pavilion.

We believe that the Parks and Recreation Departments could safely relax regulations and permits as a way to make public spaces more accessible and inviting to Latinos. For example, the city could make it easier to use picnic pavilions and community centers for family parties and

celebrations. In addition, the Parks and Recreation Departments could help to increase Latinos' access to parks by actively educating the community about existing parks and community centers and by ensuring that existing regulations are easily accessible to all community members in both Spanish and English. By relaxing regulations, parks can also facilitate informal communal events, such as “pick up” soccer, or for public performances of music, dancing, and theater. One participant in the Festival Latino Workshop remarked: “I used to play with a Latino team in a soccer league, but that just got too expensive.” These sorts of informal opportunities for people to play and socialize together can help to eliminate barriers—like league fees—that might prevent community members from enjoying the benefits of recreational spaces. In contrast to the dominant view, in which parks are primarily for solitary exercise and quiet appreciation of nature, many Latino participants saw parks as places for communal celebration and socialization. One workshop participant described the presence of food trucks in her ideal park, a vision that fits with the perception of parks as places of social gathering rather than the individual pursuit of exercise or solitude. The city could help to create more festive and communal park environments—environments that may be more welcoming to Latino park users—by making it easier for such vendors to operate.

While many people we spoke to in our outreach efforts mentioned the potential benefits of loosening of regulations, some workshop participants also emphasized the importance of safety and security in creating a welcoming park. Some people said there should be more public safety officers in parks and public spaces. Several workshop participants said they would feel more comfortable using parks at night if they were more well-lit. Others expressed a desire for more enforcement of nuisance regulations, such as prohibitions on smoking and unleashed dogs. Any conversation about revisions to park regulations should build from a bedrock goal of

ensuring the safety and wellbeing of *all* park visitors. However, creating more informal regulatory structures shouldn't require Eugene's parks to sacrifice safety; instead, the goals of safety and accessibility can reinforce one another. Issues of safety and security should always involve community participation. Community policing models can be a good alternative to rigid formal regulations for creating a sense of safety and security in parks. Eugene's parks and community centers can also be a place to create positive interactions with police, particularly for youth. In fact, we included the participation of a Eugene police officer in three of the outreach sessions and his presence was well received.



By ceding some control over rules and regulations to members of the community, the City can help to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility for the safety and well-being of public space. For example, Latino workshop participants pointed to Petersen Barn as a positive example

of a community center where they felt both safe and welcomed, partly because it was also a place where they felt their cultural experiences are being recognized and their voices are being heard.

### **Conclusion: Building A More Inclusive Parks and Recreation System**

With the 2015 update of Eugene Parks and Recreation Systems Plan (PRSP), the City of Eugene has a unique opportunity to make parks and public spaces more welcoming and accessible to the city's growing Latino population. We believe that the city can take meaningful steps toward that goal by creating new avenues for the cultural representation of Latinos in Eugene's parks and by encouraging creative and communal uses of public spaces through a shift to a more "informal" park regulation system. However, any changes in policy or design must also be accompanied by an ongoing process of public engagement, in which city staff seek to empower those members of the community whose voices are often left out of public decision-making processes. The Latino community in Eugene is vast, and complex, and diverse. It can't be reduced to a simple and static set of perspectives and preferences. Social equity and the inclusion of diverse voices are both fundamental to the mission of Eugene's Parks and Open Space and Recreation Departments. Our hope is that this inclusive outreach process will help guide city staff as they reach toward those goals.

## Works Cited

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