

# Pocket Park Design Considerations

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### Introduction

Pocket parks in New England are small, neighborhood-specific green spaces designed to fit relatively small lots. Because each park is unique, there is no set design or cost. The final cost depends on the specific design features, location, and local labor and material costs. However, some general principles and estimates can be used for planning. New England pocket park designs often emphasize place-making and community benefit over extensive features.

#### Common design elements

- **Green infrastructure:** Rain gardens or permeable pavements can manage stormwater runoff, a key consideration for New England's variable climate.
- **Seating:** Integrated seating, picnic tables, and benches provide gathering places for residents.
- **Recreation:** Play areas for children or small, interactive installations offer recreational opportunities.
- **Plantings:** Native, resilient, and low-maintenance plants are ideal for New England's climate. Trees provide shade in the summer and colorful foliage in the fall.
- **Hardscape:** Paths, patios, and surfaces built with durable materials like pavers or gravel improve accessibility and define use areas.
- **Lighting:** Well-placed lighting can extend park hours and increase safety.
- **Public art:** Murals, sculptures, or decorative gateways can add character and a sense of purpose.

- Safety and security: Fencing and strategic sightlines can improve safety, with the option to install lockable gates for security.
- Paving and surfacing:
  - Porous surfaces: Using porous pavers or gravel allows for water drainage, reducing runoff and managing stormwater.
  - Accessible pathways: Ensure that a portion of the park is accessible to people with disabilities by using stable, firm, and slip-resistant surfaces.
- Gathering spaces:
  - Flexible lawns: An open lawn can be used for events, picnics, or informal play.
  - Small plazas: Paved areas can host small performances, markets, or other public events.
- Public art: Murals, sculptures, and interactive art can increase engagement and create a unique sense of place.
- Play areas: For parks serving families, a small, engaging play area can be included. Given safety codes, playground equipment can be one of the most expensive aspects of a park.
- Fencing: While often used for security, decorative fencing can also define the space and contribute to the park's visual appeal.

New England pocket parks often balance varied user needs within a restricted space and must be designed with the local community's input. Key design elements often include:

- Site analysis: Designers first evaluate the feasibility of a location by identifying its opportunities and constraints. Locations may be vacant lots, underused public land, or a small space within an existing park.
- Community visioning: The park's mission and goals are defined in collaboration with the community to ensure it meets local needs. This step often includes public meetings to identify desired features.

- **Programming:** A variety of functions can be incorporated to serve different users throughout the day. These may include small event spaces, children's play areas, quiet seating for relaxation, picnic spots, and exercise zones.
- **Aesthetics:** Murals, interactive art installations, unique bench designs, and decorative gateways can enhance the space and give it a distinct identity.
- **Shade and comfort:** Designs often incorporate a mix of sun and shade to maximize comfort for users, with trees and pergolas providing relief during hot weather.
- **Vegetation:** Landscaping can serve multiple purposes, such as complementing the green network, reducing storm runoff, and mitigating urban heat. Native plants are a natural choice for New England parks to ensure hardiness and low maintenance.
- **Site amenities:** High-quality amenities like benches, paths, and playground equipment are standard features. In New England, materials that can withstand harsh winters are crucial.
- **Safety and security:** Designs can incorporate features like fencing to manage hours of operation and increase safety.

### Community-Driven Design

A pocket park project should include community engagement to ensure the design meets local needs. The process often includes:

- **Feasibility studies:** Identifying optimal locations based on community needs and potential benefits.
- **Community meetings:** Gathering input to define the park's mission and intended use.
- **Prioritizing improvements:** Scaling initial designs to focus on small, doable improvements that offer immediate benefits. A pocket park's final design should be based on community engagement and an understanding of local needs. Potential uses include:
  - Children's play areas



## Securing Public Feedback

When proposing a new pocket park, implementing a robust and inclusive public input strategy is crucial for success. The most effective approaches combine multiple methods—both in-person and digital—to ensure the design meets the community's needs and fosters a sense of ownership.

### Phase 1: Initial outreach and needs assessment

The first stage focuses on informing the public and gathering initial feedback to guide the project.

#### Diversified communication channels

- **Flyers and mailers:** Distribute informational materials in multiple languages to homes and businesses near the proposed park site.
- **Partnerships with local groups:** Work with neighborhood associations, community centers, schools, and cultural groups to disseminate information to diverse audiences.
- **Social media campaign:** Use targeted ads, polls, and posts on platforms like Facebook and Nextdoor to reach residents with updates and interactive questions.
- **Dedicated project webpage:** Create a website with project information, a timeline, a blog for updates, and links to online surveys.

#### On-site activities

- **Walk-and-talk tours:** Invite residents to tour the site with planners, discussing its potential and identifying existing issues.
- **Pop-up events:** Set up a table or a temporary art installation at a nearby park or community event. Use interactive displays, photos, and models to start conversations and collect feedback.
- **Suggestion boxes:** Place anonymous comment boxes at accessible, high-traffic locations like the library or a local coffee shop.

## Digital tools

- Interactive mapping: Use a digital tool like MetroQuest or Social Pinpoint to let residents drop virtual pins on the site map and add specific comments or ideas for certain areas.
- Online surveys: Distribute surveys via email and the project website to collect structured feedback on feature preferences, desired park uses, and demographic information.

## Phase 2: Design and concept feedback

Once initial concepts are developed, this phase refines the design based on community collaboration.

### Interactive workshops and design charrettes

- Host hands-on sessions where residents can sketch ideas, build physical or digital models, and vote on design options.
- Workshops can be themed, such as "Children's Play Area" or "Community Garden Design," to facilitate more focused conversations.

### Community advisory board

- Form a committee of diverse residents to provide sustained input throughout the project.
- An advisory board can serve as a communication bridge, bringing resident voices to planners and reporting progress back to the community.

### Participatory budgeting

- If feasible, provide residents with a set budget and a list of potential amenities. They can then prioritize or "purchase" the park features they value most.

### Visual feedback mechanisms

- Photo preference surveys: Show residents different design styles or material options and ask them to choose their favorites.
- Renderings and virtual walk-throughs: Present high-quality digital renderings or virtual reality tours of the proposed park design to help people visualize the space.

## Phase 3: Closing the Feedback Loop

After collecting input, it is vital to show the community how their feedback was used and how the final design reflects their priorities.

### Regular progress updates

- Send out regular newsletters or social media posts explaining how public comments were integrated into the design.
- Maintain transparency about any constraints, such as budget or site limitations, that influenced decisions.

### Final public presentation

- Host a final meeting or online webinar to showcase the completed design. Present the original feedback and explain how the design was adjusted in response.

### Recognition of contributions

- Publicly thank and recognize the efforts of volunteers, advisory board members, and local partners.

## Project Design and Cost Estimates

Design and cost estimates for pocket parks in New England vary significantly based on project scope, location, and features, but a typical, small-scale park can range from \$250,000 to over \$500,000. A significant portion of the cost is often associated with infrastructure, site preparation, and amenities. For example, a 2017 pocket park project in Hartford, Vermont, was capped at \$350,000.

Pocket park costs are highly variable, but expenses generally fall into the following categories.

Category	Description	Cost Factors
Land Acquisition	The cost of the land itself. This may be donated, leased, or purchased.	Varies by location and land value. Using an existing or vacant public lot can eliminate or reduce this expense.

Site Preparation	Clearing the site and preparing the ground for construction.	Factors: Removing existing structures, soil remediation, grading, and utility work. Can be a major expense if significant work is required.
Hardscaping	Creating permanent, non-living features.	Includes: Paving, walkways, retaining walls, seating areas, and decorative surfaces.
Landscaping	Creating living elements within the park.	Includes: Planting trees, shrubs, gardens, and sod.
Amenities	Purchasing and installing park features.	Includes: Benches, playground equipment, lighting, and any art installations.
Professional Services	Fees paid to architects, engineers, and project managers.	Varies: These costs are typically a percentage of the total construction cost.
Contingency	A fund to cover unexpected costs during construction.	A standard percentage of the total project budget, typically 10% to 15%.

### Projected Cost Ranges (approximate)

- Small, Basic Park (< 0.25 acres): A simple design with benches, landscaping, and paved access. ~\$250,000–\$400,000+.
- Medium, Feature-Rich Park (0.25–1 acre): Includes elements like a small play area, public art, extensive landscaping, and potentially advanced features like stormwater management. ~\$400,000–\$750,000+.
- Urban, Complex Park: Located in a dense urban area, this could include extensive infrastructure work, special paving, and high-end amenities. \$750,000–\$1M+.

Specific costs for New England pocket parks vary, but typical estimates range from \$1 million or more for a single, complex pocket park to smaller amounts for simpler designs. Designs are highly site-specific and generally involve converting small, underutilized urban spaces into functional and appealing green areas.

The cost of a pocket park is influenced by many factors, including land acquisition, design complexity, amenities, construction, and ongoing maintenance.

Cost factors

- Location: Densely populated, high-cost-of-living areas like parts of Boston or Cambridge will have significantly higher costs than more rural parts of New England.
- Existing infrastructure: Costs can increase substantially if the site requires extensive utility work, environmental remediation, or demolition of existing structures.
- Amenities: The inclusion of complex, custom, or high-end features like custom play structures, water features, or permanent art installations will drive up the price. Basic amenities like benches and simple landscaping are much more affordable.
- Permitting: Navigating local and state regulations can add to the timeline and overall cost.
- Ongoing maintenance: This long-term cost should be factored into the overall budget, as it ensures the park remains a safe and attractive community asset.

#### Cost Range Example:

- Low-end (\$10,000–\$100,000+): A simple, temporary "tactical urbanism" project might involve minor landscaping, a few benches, and basic paving. These projects are often low-cost and can be implemented quickly.
- Mid-range (\$100,000–\$500,000+): A standard pocket park on a small vacant lot could feature moderate landscaping, high-quality seating, improved paths, and a simple play area.
- High-end (\$1 million+): An ambitious, complex pocket park could include extensive site remediation, custom-designed equipment, and complex features like interactive art or high-tech lighting. A study from the National Institutes of Health cites three pocket parks in Los Angeles costing \$1 million each.

#### Factors Influencing Cost

- Property acquisition: In dense urban areas, the cost of purchasing land can be a significant portion of the total project budget.

- Site preparation: Costs may include demolition, grading, and environmental remediation of a previously vacant or contaminated lot.
- Permitting: Regulations and permitting fees can add to the total cost.
- Infrastructure: The inclusion of utilities, drainage systems, and pathways will increase the budget.
- Features: Specialized equipment for playgrounds, public art, or custom installations will affect costs.
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- Size: A park's size is a primary driver of cost. A larger area requires more materials for surfacing, planting, and amenities.
- Site conditions:
  - Topography: Sloped sites or those requiring extensive excavation will increase costs.
  - Subsurface: Contamination or unforeseen conditions below the surface can be expensive to mitigate.
- Amenities: The type and quality of amenities, such as public art, custom-built seating, and playground equipment, will significantly impact the budget.

- **Materials:** Using durable, high-quality materials to withstand the elements may have a higher upfront cost but can reduce long-term maintenance expenses.

### Example cost breakdown (sample)

A simple, basic pocket park could be built for a few hundred thousand dollars, while a more complex project could exceed one million dollars.

Cost category	Estimated cost
Basic elements	
Site preparation (minor)	\$20,000–\$50,000+
Basic landscaping and planting	\$10,000–\$35,000
Hardscape (paths, paving)	\$25,000–\$75,000
Site amenities (benches, tables, trash cans)	\$15,000–\$40,000
Lighting	\$10,000–\$30,000
Optional and complex elements	
Play equipment (standard)	\$30,000–\$100,000+
Public art (mural, sculpture)	\$10,000–\$50,000+
Rain garden/green infrastructure	\$15,000–\$45,000+
Custom-designed features	Highly variable
Soft costs	
Design and engineering	10%–20% of construction cost
Project management	5%–15% of construction cost
Contingency	10%–15% of total cost

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### Project Cost Management

Cost management is crucial and can be achieved through careful planning, volunteer involvement, and the use of durable, high-quality materials.

- Secure funding: Grants from federal, state, and local sources are available for community greening projects. Non-profits, private donations, and partnerships with local businesses can also provide funding.
- Engage the community: Involving community members in the design and construction process can reduce costs through volunteer labor and in-kind donations of supplies.
- Plan for the long term: Designing for durability from the outset will result in a lower maintenance budget over time. Choose materials and plants that can withstand heavy use and the New England climate.
- Start small: Implementing a pocket park in phases, starting with small, high-impact improvements, can make the project more financially manageable.

## Funding

Funding for pocket parks in New England often involves a blend of public, private, and non-profit contributions.

- Public funding: Municipal budgets, state grants, and federal programs can provide capital for park development.
  - Private funding: Individual contributions, philanthropic organizations, and corporate sponsorships are often used, especially in more affluent areas.
  - Non-profits: Organizations like the Trust for Public Land assist communities in securing both public and private funding.
  - Community fundraising: Local crowdfunding efforts can be used to purchase specific amenities or cover startup costs.
  - Grants: Organizations like the Trust for Public Land and various state and regional foundations offer grants for park development.
  - Crowdfunding: Local fundraising through individual contributions can support start-up and equipment costs.
  - Philanthropy: Private foundations and large individual donors can be approached
- A pocket park in New England can range in cost from \$100,000 to over \$1

million, with final expenses depending on the complexity of the design and the amenities included

Local and state funding are common, but federal grants and private donations can help offset costs. In New England, pocket parks are often developed by municipalities, community groups, or non-profits.

## Successful New England Pocket Parks: Examples

In New England, successful pocket parks are often those that creatively use small, neglected urban spaces and become a cherished community asset

### Massachusetts

#### Straw Hat Park, Medfield

- Design: This park, designed by a collaborative team of town agencies and citizen volunteers, is a sustainable neighborhood space on a former manufacturing site.
- Key features: The design incorporates a central paver patio, game tables, a hillside garden, and low-maintenance native plants.
- Success factors: By naming the park after a local industry, it created a strong sense of place and integrated the site into the community's history.

#### [Franklin Street Park, Cambridge](#)

- Design: Renovated in 2003, this once-unused space was transformed into a mini-urban sanctuary in the densely populated Riverside neighborhood.
- Key features: The park includes a granite entrance gate by a Boston sculptor, lush plantings, and designated areas for children.
- Success factors: Recognized with an "Editor's Choice" award by *Landscape Architecture* magazine, it became a beloved local spot by prioritizing safety and creating a serene escape from city life.

#### DeWitt Playground and P.L.AY., Boston

- Design: This project combines a permanent public art installation by Marlon Forrester with new playground design to create a thoughtful and engaging space.

- Key features: The project uses art to consider themes of colonialism, labor, and community, moving beyond standard recreational uses.
- Success factors: The collaborative public art and architecture approach gives the park a deep cultural significance while offering a new space for play.

## Vermont

### [Guertin Pocket Park, Montpelier](#)

- Design: This small downtown park became a vital community asset during the 2023 Montpelier flood.
- Key features: While small in size, its function as a central gathering point proved its worth.
- Success factors: In a moment of crisis, town officials and local associations used the space as a main staging area for volunteer efforts, donations, and a first-aid area, demonstrating its flexibility and value to the community.

### [Strafford Edible Pocket Park, South Strafford](#)

- Design: Located behind a recreation field, this park features fruit trees, nut and berry bushes, and river access.
- Key features: It includes picnic tables and benches for community use.
- Success factors: This volunteer-led project provides a unique and functional resource for the entire community, offering both recreation and food.

## How These Examples Inform Future Projects

The success of these parks offers valuable lessons for those looking to develop their own:

- Involve the community
- Show how local collaboration can lead to spaces that truly reflect neighborhood needs.
- Use creative placemaking:
- Prove that incorporating meaningful art and strong design can turn a simple plot into a significant landmark.
- Design for resilience

- Embrace low-maintenance sustainability: Sustainable designs with native plants, like at
- Reduce ongoing maintenance costs while increasing ecological benefits.