

Learning from park users committees (or Friends of the Park) in the township and in the suburbs: The cases of Thokoza Park and Zoo Lake, Johannesburg

Sizakhele Hadebe & Claire Bénit-Gbaffou

Why compare Friends of the Park in Thokoza and Zoo Lake Parks?

Since its establishment in 2011, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) is interested in establishing, sustaining and formalising partnership with park users committees (or Friends of the Park, FoP), to assist with the management and development of the park – in particular in the context of scarce public funding.

Many observe the contrast between former white and middle class suburbs, where park users committees seem numerous, resourced and relatively functional; and the scarcity of park users committees in lower income townships.

This difference does not come as a surprise due to the contrasted histories of the two parts of Johannesburg, still marked by its strong apartheid legacy.

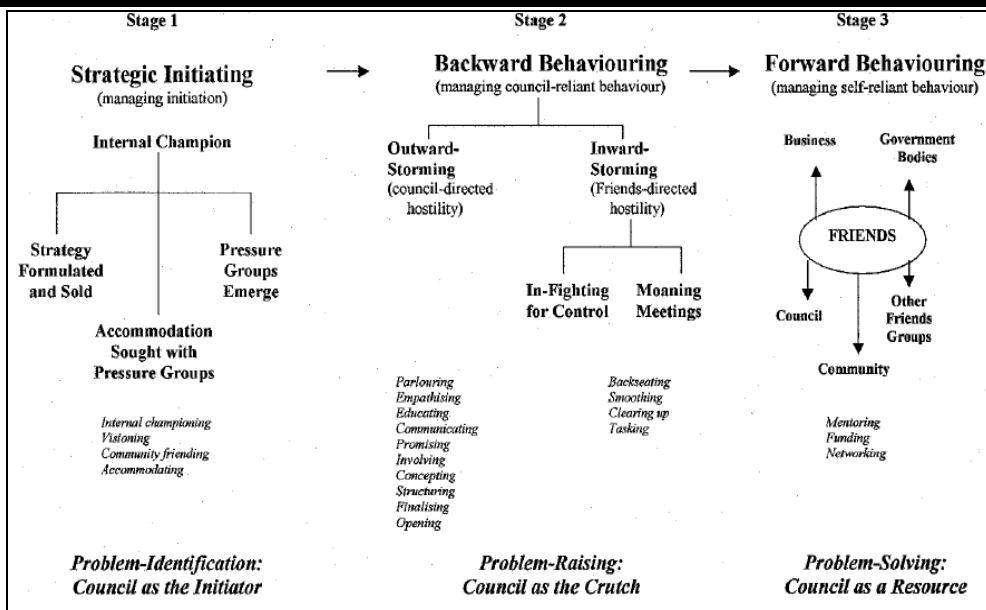
A multiplicity of parks have been developed for 50 years in what is still being called ‘the leafy suburbs’. In contrast, greening initiatives and parks development have only started recently in black townships, where open spaces were either used as buffer zones or occupied by informal settlements, hosting a few informal social and economic activities (cow grazing, payer, initiation).

Friends of the Park are still few in former townships, but it is interesting to observe how they work, and compare and contrast them with Friends of the Park in the northern suburbs – and how they are supported or not by JCPZ drive towards community partnerships for the management of urban parks.

This study has chosen Thokoza Park (Soweto) and Zoo Lake (Parkview), both flagship parks for JCPZ, and managed with the participation of strong park users committees.

Managing parks with Friends of the Park – a useful template

Jones (2010) provides a useful template analysing the role that City parks officials should play, if they want to develop partnerships with Friends of the Park (or park users committees). He argues officials’ role is to facilitate communities movement towards self-leadership, in various phases of their consolidation and relationship with the municipality. There are five management roles that state officials play in this process: Managing initiation; managing council-reliant behaviour; managing official-directed and intra-FOP hostility; managing self-reliant behaviour; and managing potential threats to the process.

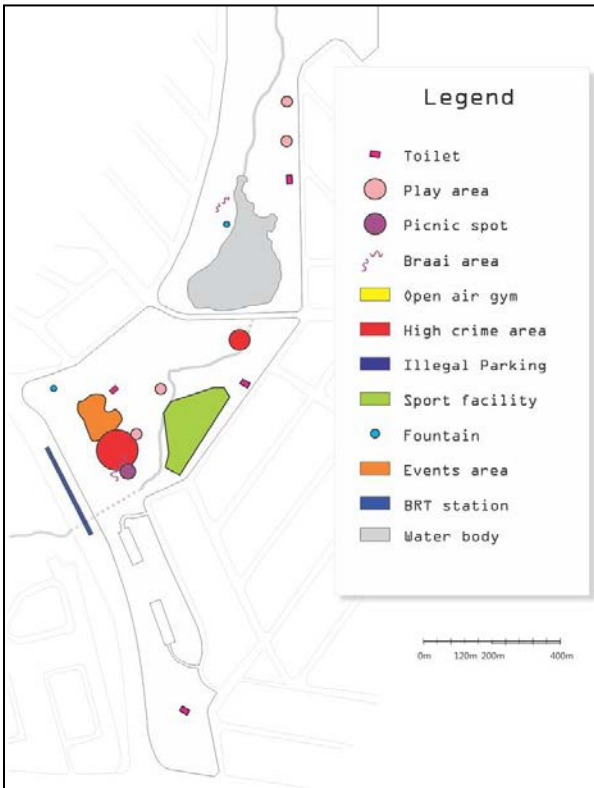


Source: Jones, R. (2010) Partnerships in action: strategies for the development of voluntary community groups in urban parks, *Leisure studies*, 21 (3-4), 305-325.

This sketch is useful to provide guidance to officials so as to cycles Friends of the Park might go through- including tension and conflict with City Parks, and forms of self-reliance that lead to autonomy and disconnect from the municipality. It also stresses the fact that joint management of parks with civil society do not require less city officials’ involvement – but a continuous one, with specific facilitation skills. What this sketch does not show, and that might be crucial - especially in a city like Johannesburg- is the role of party politics and the role of money and resources in these dynamics.

Thokoza Park Committee

Thokoza Park, located in Soweto, covers an area of 4.5 hectares. It includes a water body, Moroka Dam, and a river crossed by a bridge. It offers play areas for children, picnic spots for families, sport facilities for the youth. It is easily accessible thanks to a nearby BRT station, and hosts many activities and events throughout the year. It is extremely well used throughout the year.



“The model that was applied here in terms of dealing with crime is now being used all over the city to deal with crime in parks . We use Thokoza Park as a case study through my influence” (Clr Phamodi)

Establishing park users committees to manage Thokoza Park – from money making to safety issues

► JCPZ initiated a Friends of the Park committee during the development of Thokoza Park in 2001, to help sustain the management of the park in the medium and long term. Many people showed interest in the park but only a few stayed interested beyond the launch of the park, who were provided training by JCPZ Stakeholders Liaison Officer in charge of the region. The structure FoP was registered, but was soon discredited as it became a private profit making venture for its members, rather than a structure aimed at finding resources for the management and maintenance of the park.

► A second structure, the Park Committee, was then formed (2008), aligned with JCPZ mandate, vision and procedures. It was led by the ward councillor and an enthusiastic park user, Mzwakhe Nhlapho, who became ward committee member in charge of parks and the environment. The Park Committee had an important security component, with JCPZ ranger manager, JMPD manager and SAPS sector manager participating; but it also consisted of relevant municipal entities such as Johannesburg Roads Agency and Joburg Water.

► Because safety concerns were rising in the park (murder and rape), a safety committee was established in 2014 to specifically set up a safety strategy, together with the Community Policing Forum. The committee and all the members came up with a strategy to be stationed in the park before big events, prior and during the festive season, to prevent incidents rather than to come in and react to the after they had taken place.

A state-driven Parks committee, aimed at overcoming government fragmentation to solve ad hoc and periodic issues

The Park committee and the Safety committees are both predominantly driven by Mzwakhe Nhlapho and the local ward Councillor. Community is only involved by raising issues in public meetings, but Mzwakhe has no substantial team of community members who are part of the committee and help him in solving issues. A second specificity of the park users committees for Thokoza Park, is their heavy presence of the state -

mostly around issues of security, but also to integrate municipal entities relevant to the management of the park (JRA and Joburg Water). Mzwakhe is also there not solely as a member of the community but also as part of the state as he is a ward committee member. Assumptions that communities in the townships can not support a Friends of the Park structure are to some degree proven to be true - for this committee to work, there has to be very strong state presence and involvement.



Mzwakhe Nhlapho, Driving force of FOP in Thokoza Park

30-40, Chairperson of the Park Committee, Environmental Activist (NGO Ukhamba), ANC member & ward committee member(parks and agriculture)

Mzwakhe works closely with the councillor Phamodi, together they are driving community participation in the management of Thokoza Park. He has been involved in parks committee in its three different forms, and is the person to go to for the community to raise park management issues. He won several awards for his involvement in community environmental projects (City Parks, City of Johannesburg).

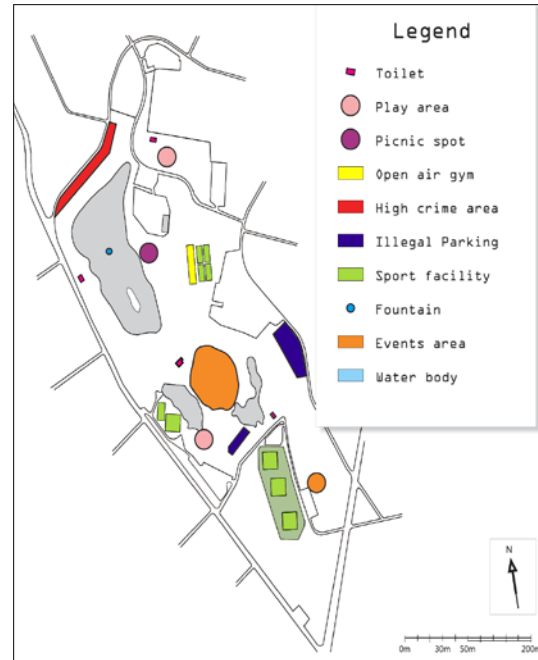
Zoo Lake Users Committee (ZLUC)

Zoo Lake covers an area of 46.6 hectares. The park has a large pond that covers roughly 8% of the park and it has many trees, many of which are mature. The pond usually has waste material floating in it but the park grounds are generally well kept. The park has the following facilities within it: the Moyo's restaurant, Utilities Building, toilets, a basketball court, a soccer pitch, a children's play area, the Bowling Club, the Boat Club and the Zoo Lake Sports Club.

Zoo Lake Park Users Committee – From autonomy to rebuilding a relationship with the State

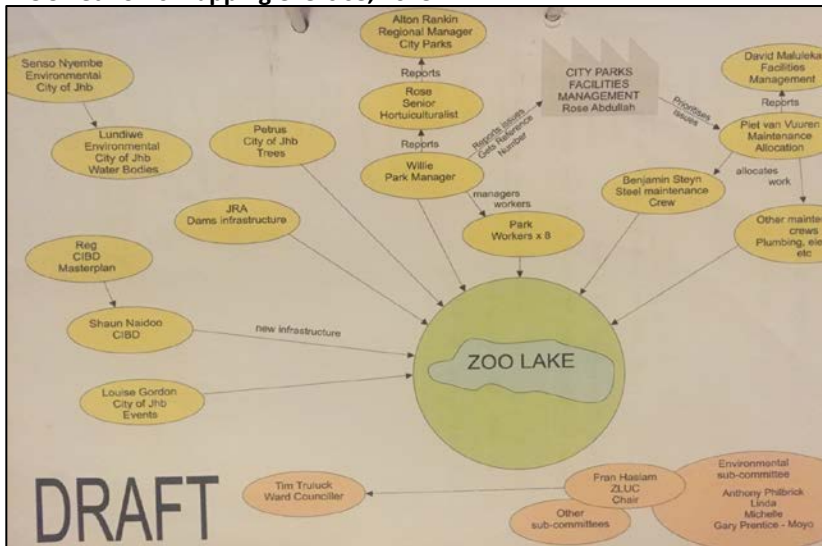
► Zoo Lake Users Committee (ZLUC) was established in 1996 as an initiative of the state to work together with communities living around the park. The community at Zoo Lake was vibrant and enthusiastic getting involved. ZLUC was officially recognised by the City when City Parks was established in 2001. ZLUC had a community liaisons officer from JCPZ come in and facilitate the relationship between the state and the community. The committee was chaired by the local (DA) councillor until 2009, had a well running fundraising section, and they were able to conduct some physical upgrades to the park (for instance the sports club) that the state could not afford.

► ZLUC's autonomy and ability to decide on upgrades using the funding it had raised has however been curtailed since 2011, with JCPZ reinstating the municipal entity's mandate to manage parks. This has coincided with a crisis in ZLUC, which became dormant until 2015 where Fran Haslam, the current chairperson, was elected. This trajectory however means that significant knowledge, experience, networks in and out of the state were lost, that the current ZLUC is attempting to reconstitute. ZLUC is also working to re-establishing a relationship with JCPZ, as there is no active JCPZ representative to guide them in this respect.



"If you attend a meeting and the ward councillor starts demanding things in front of the community, it makes things difficult and the officials will keep quiet and not say anything. They will say they can only report back to the City, the councillors then were notified that it's not their responsibility to do that, they can't go demanding things." (City Parks official)

ZLUC networks mapping exercise, 2015



Building networks, using committee members' skills and resources

ZLUC involves many community members, the local councillor, a few businesses and some institutions. It is structured in several portfolios, where fundraising, communication and marketing, events management and security have a large team. Unlike Thokoza Park, ZLUC struggles however to get City Parks and City officials to participate or appear in its meetings. However, the network mapping exercise that was undertaken by ZLUC (2015) shows a number of key officials in JCPZ and other municipal entities, although represented with a degree of confusion reflecting the complexity of Johannesburg local government.

Fran Haslam, Active Driver of Zoo Lake Users Committee

59, retired professional in Finance, DA member.

Chair Person of ZLUC since 2015, she was an active member of Saxonwold and Parkview Residential Association, and former chair of the Community Policing Forum in Parkview. In ZLUC she is currently working on getting more stakeholders from the state to attend the committees meetings to assist them on solutions on park management issues. She has initiated a visioning exercise for her committee, where members were asked to map their networks and frame their vision for Zoo Lake.



Comparing the Friends of the Parks' activities, focus and structures



Issues discussed at ZLUC meeting 18 September 2015

- JCPZ has no money to fix anything, only for trimming and cutting grass
- There is no one monitoring the recyclers, the rubbish is lying around the bins. There are not enough bins
- The kids from surrounding crèches come to play, and leave the place dirty.
- Alcohol abuse and noise from events
- Breaking of Park by-laws and absence of a by-law enforcement structure
- Master plan was done without the consultation of the community (when ZLUC was dormant) – time to engage with it.
- Lack of engagement of the state even after multiple invitations
- Need to consolidate a security strategy by liaising with Parkview police and the CPF.

The presence of the ward councillor (DA) at the meeting was useful but also provided a bias: rather than encouraging pragmatic solution, he was interested in consolidating complaints and promising better service delivery “when the DA is ruling Johannesburg”.

Differences and similarities

Zoo Lake users Committee	Thokoza Park Committee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Structured in a variety of portfolio reflecting a wide but specific range of interests: communication, fundraising, environment and safety. - Committee members have professional skills and resources to offer (cf ZLUC website). Many have been involved in community affairs and in the park for long (experience) - Difficulty in engaging with JCPZ and other municipal entities. With JCPZ, the relationship focuses on physical maintenance and events management. - Strong presence of the DA councillor (also shadow MMC – Parks), a degree of politicisation of issues sometimes problem solving, sometimes detrimental to pragmatic solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No portfolios, role of coordinating various state entities to solve ad hoc issues, and address one main concern : crime. - A single person committee, with an activist driving the Park committee as an NGO strongly integrated with state institutions. He can use his various local networks / political skill to solve issues. - Community only mobilised on an ad hoc basis (campaigns, events), with stipend for participation. Education campaigns aim at changing behaviours in the park. - Park Committee is mostly state-run: ward councillor and ward committee member as drivers, SAPS-JMPD-rangers strong presence, but also JRA and Joburg Water. - Strong involvement of the ANC councillor, able to mobilise his networks in the party and the state to solve issues.

“In Thokoza Park we run campaigns. We had an educational campaign, we don’t want people drinking at Thokoza Park. So on the 4th December 2014, we had a community prayer, then on the 5th Dec that’s when we were stationed here in the park, SAPS and the JMPD, we had 5 meetings and some people did not participate. Some of the residents living immediately adjacent to the park drink so at first they did not want to be involved because it meant they also couldn’t drink in the park. But after a few days of the campaign running they came around and started supporting the campaign because they noticed the difference. The park was safer. We want to organise this again before December.

We also organised the Save my park campaign: we go to the schools assembly and teach the children how to use the park equipment, how to be safe in the park, storm water drain pipe, the children go in there.” (Nhlapo 2015)

As a way of conclusion

► The two parks committee are driven by genuine passion and commitment to the park, by one or a group of local activists using their professional, practical and political expertise to participate in the management of the park. However, this passion does not seem to be matched by an equally committed and identifiable City Parks official. **The Stakeholder Liaison Officers possibly have too many parks to cover to be able to genuinely facilitate, accompany and partner with these local activists.**

► Therefore, one cannot talk in either of these cases of a ‘partnership’ between communities and JCPZ. Thokoza Parks committee is largely a state structure, with limited involvement of the community – it is useful to overcome institutional fragmentation on an ad hoc basis, and Mzwakhe plays almost the role of a Community Liaison Officer (mobilising and informing communities). ZLUC is working in quasi autonomy, with less freedom than before, and struggles to navigate the state. In both cases, **an exercise of joint visioning (e.g. through a Master Plan) could be used to explore constraints and opportunities and build the relationship.**

► Both FoPs are politicised - meaning access to state networks, or power to raise issues (watchdog or blockage role). **These politics can be problem-solving and foster responsiveness and accountability in the short term, but they do not replace a longer-lasting partnership with City Parks authorities, which could lead to more practical and innovative management solutions.**

For more details:

Hadebe, S (2015). *Learning from communities' involvement in the management of urban parks. The cases of Thokoza Park and Zoo Lake, Johannesburg*. Thesis submitted for the Bachelor of Science in Urban and Regional Planning (Honours), Johannesburg: Wits University.