

# The Detroit News

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## DETROIT

# Just Parks: Locals discuss how to make Detroit's outdoor spaces more accessible to people of color



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Detroit residents met with local activists and experts to discuss how systemic racism impacts people of color's experiences in parks and how to make Michigan's outdoor spaces more accessible, Saturday afternoon at the New Center Park.

People of color's attitudes toward the outdoors are shaped by how they're treated in outdoor spaces, prior recreational experiences, or lack thereof, and the history of segregation in parks of all sizes from local to national, said Pulitzer Prize winning author Desiree Cooper.

"The national park system did desegregate in 1945 ... but they still abided by local ordinances. So the Black section of the national parks, of course, was always inferior," Cooper said. "The woods is not romantic to us, it's a dangerous place ... because we were locked out of the parks system we don't have those childhood memories of going to the park fishing or going to the parks for camping."

The panelists represented several local organizations and gave presentations on racial equity in outdoor spaces before participating in an open discussion with the public.

The discussion was hosted by the Detroit Parks Coalition and New Detroit. The panel was part of the Detroit Parks Coalition's Freedom Arts Festival as well as a precursor for New Detroit's Just Lead conference on advancing racial equity.

Ian Solomon, the founder of Amplify Outside, an organization focused on the representation of Black Michigianians in Michigan's outdoor spaces, recently surveyed Black Michigianians about their experiences outdoors. Eighty-five percent of respondents said that racism does affect their willingness to go outside.

"We cannot solve racism but what we can do is empower our community," Solomon said. "The self-esteem, personally and communally, that comes from getting the confidence to ... go on these explorations and go and say, 'I belong here' cannot be discounted."

While only half of the survey respondents felt very connected to nature, a majority were very interested in outdoor recreation and 65% said they felt very comfortable outdoors.

"People really want to get outside, they're just having struggles getting there," Solomon said. "They're not feeling as comfortable as they need to, they don't feel that they have the access and the experience. So again, this work is needed."

Only 11% of respondents had been to five or more of Michigan's 103 state parks, Solomon said. These numbers support the theme of extraction when it comes to the relationship between the Black community and land and space, he added.

"We pay taxes, right, these state parks are supported with our taxes," Solomon said. "So when we are not experiencing them, all that's happening is resources are being extracted from our communities and subsidizing other communities' leisure and recreation."

Black respondents also reported that they didn't feel represented in Pure Michigan advertisements that market the state's parks. Correcting this lack of representation is a good first step toward making Michigan's outdoor spaces equally accessible for the entire population, Solomon said. He personally tries to "demystify the outdoors" by posting his experiences on social media.

"There has been a history of a denial of access, there has a history of a denial of space in this arena," he said. "You have to do that extra work to make sure that you're specifically talking to these communities."

## **Detroit's urban parks**

David Cowan, chief public spaces officer at the Downtown Detroit Partnership, said his organization tries to engage with Detroit residents from the ground up and invite people who use Detroit's parks to help program and plan experiences. The organization manages programming and events in Campus Martius, Cadillac Square, Grand Circus Park, Capital Park, the Woodward Esplanade and Beacon Park.

"When we think about ways that public space can be more equitable, we have to think about who's using that space," Cowan said. "Everyone from those that are unhoused to mentally ill

to young families to those who are maybe Detroit residents who have not been to downtown maybe in 10 to 15 years and are rediscovering it."

Lifelong Detroit resident Dwan Dandridge said he doesn't see the diversity of Detroit reflected in its leadership and this change is necessary to make everyone feel welcome in public spaces.

"Detroit being, you know, close to 80% Black ... but I look at the leadership team in Downtown Detroit Partnership — it's the opposite," the 48-year-old said. "I'm just not sure that we're going to get where we need to go if we don't see some more balance to those spaces."

"One of the things that continues to be a concern or fear is that we're creating spaces that don't really feel welcoming. Think about how much intention it takes to make the space feel like it's inclusive and inviting for Detroiters."

Cowan said that there's a lot of healing to do in downtown spaces where corporate activity is not very diverse, but the Downtown Detroit Partnership is trying to diversify its leadership and has created a committee for diversity, equity and inclusion.

"The perception of 'I'm out walking downtown' is really deep because we've got some healing to do around that," he said.

Alex Allen, a representative from the Chandler Park Conservancy, a nonprofit on the east side of Detroit, said that at baseline, equitable experiences in urban parks are facilitated by cleanliness, safety and a comfortable atmosphere.

"Parks should be places that have an atmosphere for people to have passive recreation — that means sit down with your family, in some cases to have some sort of organized recreation, where there are programs and events, concerts, movies, in the parks and things like that," he said.

While there is no catchall solution to programming and event planning in Detroit's parks, residents like Ayo Thomas think it should reflect the diversity of the populations who use the parks most.

"Thinking about what is on the table for the diverse groups who want to interact with our spaces and then bringing that to the discussion," the 33-year-old said. "A lot of times we say, 'oh, here's a program, everyone is welcome,' not realizing that sometimes they don't even

want that experience ... taking account for what is normal behavior and then planning around that I think opens up the idea of what is welcome and who is welcome in spaces."

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