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## Park Equity in Action: Envisioning, Utilizing, and Writing Outdoor Spaces with New Mainer Girls

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# **Park Equity in Action: Envisioning, Utilizing, and Writing Outdoor Spaces with New Mainer Girls**

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Completed in partnership with Maine Community Integration

Department of Environmental Studies, Bates College

April 23, 2022

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As it is deeply rooted in young immigrant women's experiences in nature in the Lewiston area, this project centers around underprivileged voices and strives for equity within public parks in their home city. In Lewiston, and throughout cities across the entire nation, public parks are extremely valuable for the children growing up around them. In urban environments, green spaces are few and far between, and the accessibility to public parks for Black, Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous communities is noticeably lower than it is for White communities.

In working closely with Maine Community Integration, our project aimed at rewriting the typical script that follows public park access in America. In collaboration with the 'New Mainer Girls'—a group of immigrant high school women of color in the Lewiston public school system—our group set out to archive experiences the girls have had within Lewiston parks in written blogs. After meeting with the New Mainer Girls and discussing a brief overview of our project, we crafted specific prompts for them to answer on their own. These prompts were constantly manipulated as we learned more about what the parks meant to our participants. As our project continued, and as we narrowed our prompts down, we chose to focus heavily on Kennedy Park, which is located near Lisbon Street and is widely known as Lewiston's most popular park. Switching our focus to Kennedy Park in particular allowed our group to zone in and study the park's infrastructure.

As the project continued, our group was met with unforeseen challenges. Before we were able to distribute prompts to the New Mainer Girls, Ramadan had begun. Because of the holiday's importance and strict rules, the New Mainer Girls program was suspended until the end of Ramadan. Instead of suspending our project entirely, we switched our plans and created a framework for future engagement. Accompanying our prompts, we constructed a Wordpress site in which blog posts can be made, with the options to also upload pictures, videos, and audio recordings. Along with the Wordpress site, our group created a brief overview of park equity and its importance which can be handed out to participants. All of these components fell in line with a timeline that ends with distributing the archived blog posts to the Lewiston City Council, and, hopefully, earning a seat for the New Mainer Girls at the table that discusses upcoming implementations and action plans for Kennedy Park. This project is scheduled to continue in the summer of 2022, underneath the framework we have prepared and with a Bates student working alongside the New Mainer Girls. The student will be paid by a work-action grant and will work closely with Maine Community Integration to distribute prompts, discuss responses, and receive input from participants to constantly edit the Wordpress site.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Lewiston, Maine, local communities are acutely tuned into the various, potential social equity projects that may abound. At the center of downtown Lewiston is Kennedy Park, whose presence and cultural connotation in the community has changed quite dramatically over the last 20 years. As public spaces, parks are uniquely situated to facilitate relationship building within communities— a sentiment that has taken on new life as the concept of park equity has proliferated. Parks are gathering and meeting spaces for people of all ages, and contain the unique opportunity to “generate neighborhood pride and [operate as] a safe place to be physically active and enjoy community green space.” (Trust for Public Land, 2021)

In considering the role of parks in the Lewiston community, it is crucial to center the concept of Park Equity. Park equity is defined by the National Recreation and Park association as “The just and fair quantity, proximity and connections to quality parks, green spaces and recreation facilities, as well as programming that are safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming to everyone.” Park equity, though, is more than a concept, it must be complemented by the proper maintenance, staffing, and funding of parks— and to execute that well, understanding the priorities of each community is paramount.

So how can we, as active residents of Lewiston, increase park equity? The answer is utilizing our resources to establish programming and events which serve to create space in parks for marginalized groups. In efforts to establish a blueprint and lay the groundwork for future park equity activism, we conducted a semester-long inquiry into park equity in Lewiston, Maine. This project was conducted in partnership with Maine Community Integration, a local organization whose mission is to empower and integrate new Muslim Mainer girls into their new home, while simultaneously celebrating their diverse cultural backgrounds and values.

Our blueprint begins with contextualizing the problem of park equity within your local community. Understanding nation-wide statistics, though, is an important place to begin. Unfortunately, in the United States, histories of segregation and inequity still inform much of the park infrastructure which still exists today. The Trust for Public Land reports that in 2021, “100 million people, including 28 million children, do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of home.” Further, “In the 100 most populated cities, neighborhoods where most residents identify as Black, Hispanic and Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native or Asian American and Pacific Islander have access to an average of 44 percent less park acreage than predominantly white neighborhoods.” (Trust for Public Land, 2021)

With this in mind, we must understand the historical legacy of parks as spaces that have displaced black communities – such as Central Park and Seneca Village – and have been historically unequal and inequitable due to “separate but equal” Jim Crow policies (Vox, 2020). As such, we must acknowledge that although parks are, in theory, marketed as places “for all,” in practice, they have instead served as a vehicle which perpetuates racism. Park equity is

defined by the National Recreation and Park association as “[t]he just and fair quantity, proximity and connections to quality parks, green spaces and recreation facilities, as well as programming that are safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming to everyone.” Park equity is more than a concept, it must be complemented by the proper maintenance, staffing, and funding of parks— and to execute that well, understanding the priorities of each community is paramount.

To contextualize this data, we can begin to look inward at Lewiston. While 16% of Lewiston’s population is made up of first generation immigrants, their presence is often diminished and erased (Sun Journal). The lack of resources afforded to refugee families upon their arrival in Lewiston may indicate the root of this issue. After receiving a stipend for less than \$1000, families are expected to find and put a down payment on an apartment in less than a month (Sun Journal). Given a recently approved proposal from the Biden administration which would increase the number of refugee families allowed to immigrate annually, Lewiston may see large increases in the number of New Mainers residing in our community. Ensuring that as they arrive, they feel comfortable and welcome in public spaces is an intrinsic element of strong community integration.

The development and dissemination of prompts regarding sense of place and belonging in Lewiston is at the core of this project. Through the development of a Wordpress Blog website, we have created a central location for the New Mainer Girls to reflect on what park equity means to them, in theory and in practice. The website is designed to house multimedia projects, including artwork, photography, video journalism, and blog-post style writing.

Through these prompts, the girls will unpack the history and connotations of Kennedy Park, and ultimately reflect on their experiences with the outdoor environment, and imagine ways to make parks more equitable and accessible for all. Since the scope of this project was ultimately to lay the groundwork for the park equity program at Maine Community Integration, our goal is to see the fruits of this project develop, through both future ENVR 417 projects, as well as collaborations with the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships. Ideally, once the blog is filled with the wishes, demands, opinions, and hopes for park equity, the New Mainer Girls’ posts about Kennedy Park will be shared with the Lewiston Town Council, Lewiston Parks and Recreation, and other relevant community, environment, and government bodies. We hope that this project will foster a sense of place with an appreciation for urban green spaces, as well as build a sense of community among New Mainer Girls.

## **Research Aim, Objectives, and Deliverables**

### *Aim:*

Lay the groundwork for developing a park equity education and advocacy framework for girls, to be rolled out by Maine Community Integration and future collaborators to elevate and empower New Mainer girls in implementing equitable changes to outdoor spaces in Lewiston.

### *Objectives:*

1. Enable New Mainer Girls to articulate their ideas and reflections through the experimentation with written and audiovisual forms of media.
2. Challenge New Mainer Girls to define what park equity means to them in theory and practice
3. Empower the young women to deeply reflect on the changes they would like to see in Kennedy Park
4. Publish and distribute the work completed by New Mainer Girls, in an effort to elevate and amplify their voices and involvement within the community.

### *Deliverables*

1. Create a list of prompts that encourage New Mainer Girls to explore and unpack park equity, their definitions of nature, their experiences with park spaces in Lewiston, and specifically what forms of changes they would like to see in Kennedy Park
2. Set up a WordPress site as a central platform for New Mainer Girls to publish their writings and photo/video projects, in an effort to gather, display, and distribute the work they've produced
3. Provide a "Park Equity in Action" toolkit for future development and implementation of the program

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

We employed the following methods to achieve our aim and objectives. We began the project by conducting background research to gain a deeper understanding about park equity and to source environmental justice education materials to assist with creating and facilitating our program.

We created a WordPress website to provide an online platform for the girls to respond to prompts sent to the girls by email. We compiled and organized their responses according to themes on different tabs/pages within the WordPress website, and put them in conversation with literature to write our results and recommendations. We presented our findings to Fowsia Musse of Maine Community Integration, Assistant Director of Community-Engaged Learning at the Harvard Center, Sam Boss, Darby K. Ray, the Director, Harvard Center for Community Partnerships, Professor Carissa Aoki, and peer & previous Maine Community Integration Ronan Goulden, in person at the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships on April 22, 2022.

### **Preliminary work**

Before gathering our data for the project, we decided to meet with our community partner in person. During our introductory trip to Maine Community Integration, we handed out our project proposal to the New Mainer Girls and discussed the framework of the project over dinner. Getting to know the names and personalities of our partners before jumping into the project gave us a better idea of what to expect.

### **Adapt our questions**

As mentioned in the latter part of *Discuss our approaches & skills*, our group had to manipulate our project after getting to know our partners. Shifting our framework took form in us editing our prompts. After our first meeting with the New Mainer Girls, we adjusted our prompts to focus them specifically on Kennedy Park. Going into the meeting, we had plans to discuss park equity and public access as it related to the Bartlett Street Center; however, our questions on the space were not received with much conversation, and so we cut its presence from our prompts.

Due to the practice of fasting for Ramadan, Maine Community Integration has suspended their in-person program for the New Mainer Girls from the beginning of April until May 7th. As such, to accommodate these obligations, we have had to pivot to remote forms of engagement, including changing the distribution of our prompts via email.

### **Data storage & management**

Our group chose Wordpress to store our data because of the site's beginner-level design format paired with easy overseeing for the head editor. WordPress can be publicly and privately shared—a detail that allows our group to create and distribute the website link in a private



manner, and also gives us the flexibility to share it with the public. We organized published materials by theme. A description of WordPress site, its features, and the anticipated published materials will be discussed in greater detail under the results portion of this report.

### **Reflect**

After conducting the bulk of our research, we will review our proposed framework, recommendations, and guidelines for future continuation of the program and collaboration, as well as the feasibility of these recommendations

A synthesis of background information and findings from the girls is organized into broader themes - park equity, situated within the realm of environmental justice education, as well as park equity in Lewiston and its intersectional issues. This will be described in detail in the latter part of our results. We then organized the logistics and broader themes that should be explored in future partnerships, which forms the bulk of the results section.

These recommendations for park equity education and advocacy within Lewiston is then summarized, as per consultation with participants of the pilot program. These are based on both education materials and the experiences and feedback of participants.

### **Using the Bates Harward Center**

Throughout our project, we have talked with Sam Boss and Ronan Golden on intricacies of the future of our project.

Ronan, being a senior at Bates involved with the Harward Center, gave us perspective on what to expect for our project after this semester elapses. Discussing our project's intentions with him gave us a better understanding of what to expect in the future (i.e our project being passed into other hands for continuation). Such communication was conducted in person.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this project have been uncertain from its inception. After creating our wordpress site, we had a platform to organize the pieces that the New Mainer Girls would be giving us. As displayed in Figure 2, blogs are organized in a manner that allows an observer to see a collapsed form of a post. The format also gives the observer the option to open the post and see the whole piece.

Because the majority of the girls were fasting for Ramadan, Maine Community Integration suspended the New Mainer Girls program for the entire month of April and for the first week of May. This roadblock resulted in an alteration of approach in regards to how we would be gathering our data and the timeline of when we could be presenting our results. Shifting from meeting with the New Mainer Girls in person to online (via email) made for an added layer in between us—a partition that depersonalized our prompts with ourselves. It should also be noted how results can be affected by the Ramadan holiday.

Meeting with our participants as key, in which the discussions had allowed us to gauge the level of understanding of park equity, as well as answer questions like: what do they already know? How will the girls help drive the direction of the program? After meeting with our participants, the New Mainer Girls, we established a few of their priorities and core focuses. Much of park equity, to them, revolved around better park infrastructure. Recreational spaces and the culture that surrounds them was consistently reported as a problem for the girls, when pushed to discuss their levels of comfortability in the park. The girls highlighted both the skate park and basketball courts as places dominated by teenage boys and men. Further, they noted that various spaces in the park were segregated by gender, age, and socioeconomic status. Many older women tend to gather by the downward sloping face of the park, with toddlers and families dominating sitting areas, homeless folks by the gazebo, and teenage boys & men occupying the recreational facilities.

The goal of this project is to empower New Mainer girls in “building environmental awareness, appreciation, understanding, and action.” Ideally, through both the reflection prompted by their writing, and adequate and consistent programming, we would be able to develop these qualities with the girls. Ensuring that the girls are given a space in the park, say every Monday from 4:30-5:30 & Saturday from 10-11:30 to play basketball, they may begin to feel comfortable in the space, and pursue these activities beyond the programming. Having set hours in which the courts are “theirs” could be helpful in developing a sense of place and purpose within the park.

Moving forward, ironing out the logistical and incremental steps in which the girls can bring their ideas and hopes to various members of the Parks and Recreation department will be a crucial next step. Many of the girls have already met with key players in the department because of their participation in MCI’s other various programs, and their “foot in the door,” so

to speak, could be an advantage when advocating for how they would like to see park funding used. Further, partnering with other relevant organizations such as Healthy Neighborhoods to build political momentum could be particularly useful in establishing a rapport with local politicians.

The ultimate goal of bringing the New Mainer Girls' work to Lewiston's local politicians must be done incrementally. Through various partnerships, such as those with the Harward Center and Healthy Neighborhoods, a bit of political clout can grab the attention of city councilmen and women who could have vested interests in developing Lewiston's green spaces, and making them more inviting for young women like the New Mainer Girls. Eventually conducting a town hall in which the future of places like Kennedy Park is discussed would be the culmination of our work, and from there, finding methods to follow through and continually link MCI with those making park-equity based decisions will be paramount to the success of Lewiston's social equity work.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR NEXT STEPS**

Even though our initial plans and anticipated progress changed dramatically compared to the inception of this project, these challenges do not negate our work and efforts to creating this program. As seen above, our interactions with the girls, albeit limited, were incredibly fruitful and helped point us in the direction of creating a framework for park equity in Lewiston. After reviewing suggestions from our course instructor, participants of the Maine Community Integration's park equity program, and Fowsia, we have compiled a set of prompts for the girls to spark conversations that engage them in deep reflection and ongoing learning about park equity. To envision and ensure longevity of the program, we have compiled a set of recommendations and suggestions for Maine Community Integration, future ENVR 417 groups, and other Bates students involved in the program:

### **Consistency and Structure**

Bates College students, either through ENVR 417, the Harward Center, and/or students of other community-engaged courses, such as those under the education department, serve as worthwhile opportunities to ensure long term enforcement and development of the program. With the existing compiled literature, research, and prompts created from this project, students can utilize these materials to facilitate weekly or bi-weekly sessions.

Based on our interactions with the participants of the pilot program, it is evident that the girls are highly knowledgeable about park equity through their experiences - or lack thereof - with urban outdoor spaces in Lewiston. They also possess a great amount of energy and passion regarding park equity and adjacent social justice issues, such as mental health and gender equity. The central purpose of this program is to provide a framework to guide and organize their thoughts, as a foundation for tangible action. As mentioned, through WordPress, participants will be able to explore complex environmental and social justice issues in a wide range of written, audio, and visual texts, allowing them not only to gain valuable knowledge but learning how to integrate knowledge and writing with digital literacy.

### **Implementation Timeline**

Ideally, the program should be rolled out over the Summer of 2022. Participants will be able to immerse themselves in the program during summer break, with the Maine Community Integration center planning on hosting full-time programs for participants. Further, the summer season is ideal for them to explore these urban park spaces. A work-study opportunity with the Harward Center would enable this program to start over this summer, as there are currently remaining work-study funds available. We have contacted Sam Boss, the assistant director of the Harward Center, to follow up on summer opportunities with Maine Community Integration.

If not over the summer, we hope that Maine Community Integration continues this partnership with the Harvard Center and ENVR 417 students. We envision two ENVR 417 groups working with Maine Community Integration for the Fall 2022 semester. One group would work with the girls on park equity through the prompts and facilitating these sessions, while the second would work on the policy advocacy aspects, which is discussed below.

**Policy advocacy:**

Future groups should tackle and assess the political feasibility of ideas and suggestions of the girls, as well as identify the relevant agencies capable of making political change. Cross-organizational and cross-sector collaboration is crucial in implementing actionable steps. They create and strengthen healthy communities; advance collaboration among those working at the intersections of culture, public health, community development, and environmental justice; and foster transformative change that advances the health and wellbeing of Lewiston residents.

A challenge future groups may come across would be how to frame park equity and particular proposals within park equity to different decision makers, e.g. framing park equity to seek financial support and approval.

Creating equitable and just community systems is complex and often takes a long time. We acknowledge that this project is simply a small portion of a larger discussion that the Lewiston-Auburn community may already be holding - or may need to begin - in order to address a variety of issues. Our hope is that this project serves as a springboard for greater action.

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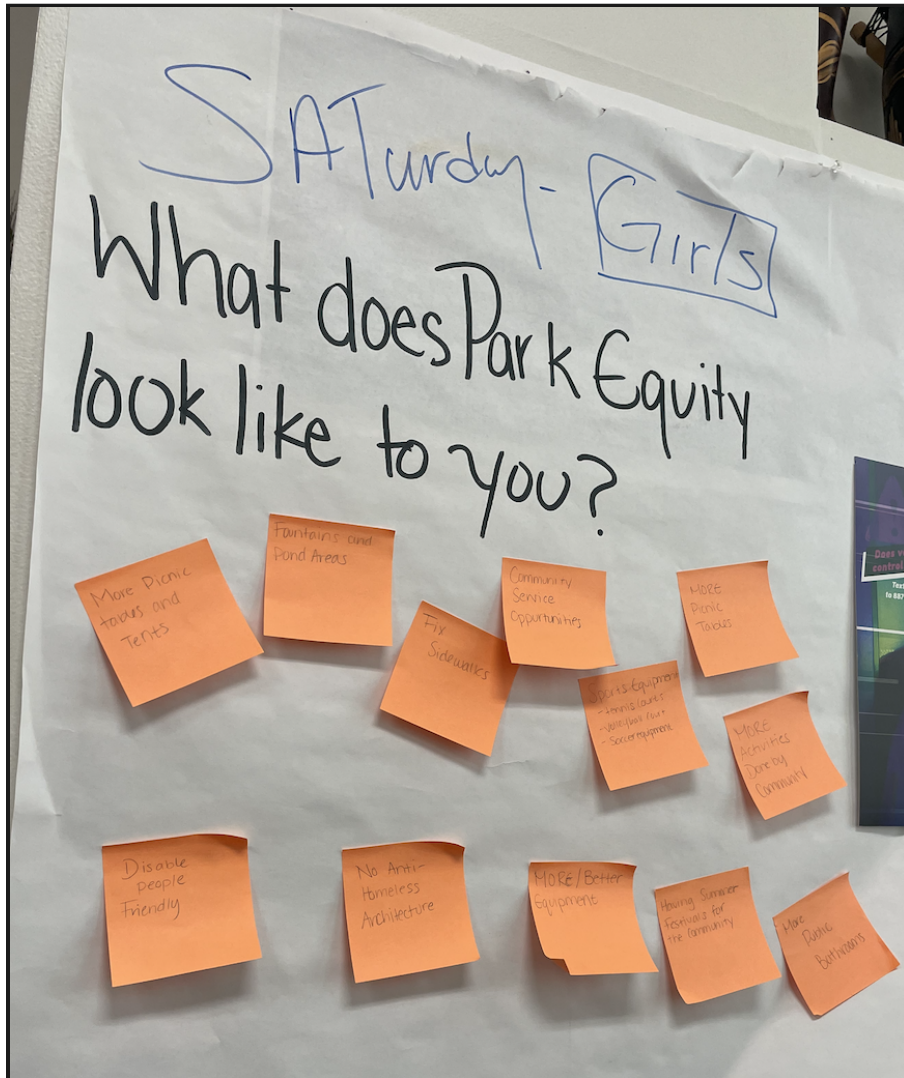
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Park equity brainstorm

An introductory brainstorming activity on what park equity looks like to the participants provides insight into the ways in which they understand park equity, and potential ideas in creating a more equitable park system. Central themes and issues include accessibility, accessible infrastructure, and social opportunities for community building.



## Appendix B: Park Equity Information Sheet

### Park Equity in Lewiston

By: Claire Lim, Robby Sheils, and Sophie Stein  
in collaboration with Maine Community  
Integration

#### Park Equity: What is it?

Park equity is defined by the National Recreation and Park Association as “The just and fair quantity, proximity and connections to quality parks, green spaces and recreation facilities, as well as programming that are safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming to everyone.”

#### Goals of Park Equity

Ensure all residents have reasonably **equal access** to quality park space based on the following:

- Proximity
- Quality (well-maintained and programmed) → measures whether parks offer amenities and programming that are responsive to the needs of users.

#### How Can We Develop Park Equity in Lewiston?

Not all communities have access to safe, well-maintained and programmed parks and green spaces.

- This uneven and inequitable distribution of park spaces and programming limits opportunities for physical activity, time in nature, and social connection.

Equitable development in parks is key. Strategies implemented to ensure benefits from the growth and development of parks are realized by existing residents, particularly lower-income residents and communities of color, as well as mitigating negative impacts of development (e.g. displacement and gentrification).

**Programming and events** that make the space more culturally relevant to those who would like to use it is paramount. There is a difference between a space **“being” accessible** and **“feeling” accessible**.

Anti-Homeless Infrastructure is not helpful in furthering goals of equity. The development of better infrastructure like public restrooms, paved walkways, better and larger quantities of equipment relating to sports and leisure activities are all indicators of a stronger, more equitable culture in a given park.



Source: <https://www.tpl.org/parks-and-an-equitable-recovery-parkscore-report>

#### Ultimately:

There is growing evidence that identifies the **positive linkage** between **park systems** and **physical and mental health, youth**



**development, social well-being, and economic vitality.** Urban parks and green spaces provide significant tangible and intangible benefits for cities and their residents. Quality parks support mental and physical health, serve critical green infrastructure functions, host cultural and social activities, and help give communities a sense of place.

What is less certain is how **accessible and welcoming** Lewiston's park, recreation, and green spaces are to community members of different **abilities, ages, gender, race, and socioeconomic status**. With the constraints of COVID-19 pushing people outside, a greater need for parks and green spaces has been evident since March 2020.

Through this project, we hope to push the Lewiston Parks and Recreation department to play a greater role in helping coalitions focused on **creating healthy, vibrant, and equitable communities**.

It is important for local park and recreation professionals to create opportunities within the L/A community for people to explore when, where and how their parks and recreation systems and facilities may be

less accessible to different members of the community.

- Through thoughtful qualitative analysis from proactive community engagement, we assess community needs and interests, and use that assessment to design, improve, and program existing parks.
- Engaging communities in the planning and decision process is particularly important to ensure existing and future residents benefit from these parks.
- After changes are made, needs and interests are assessed again via the Wordpress site.

Through the publication and dissemination of the finalized Wordpress site, we can actively elevate the voices, opinions and wishes of local stakeholders, like the New Mainer Girls participating in this project. The elevation of young Black women's voices is crucial to furthering equity projects of any sort in the Lewiston community.

Further development of the project with the Harvard Center, as well as future Community Engaged Research projects will ensure that a published website comes to fruition will serve an important "next step" in pushing Park Equity movements forward.



**Maine Community Integration**  
Strengthening the fabric of our community

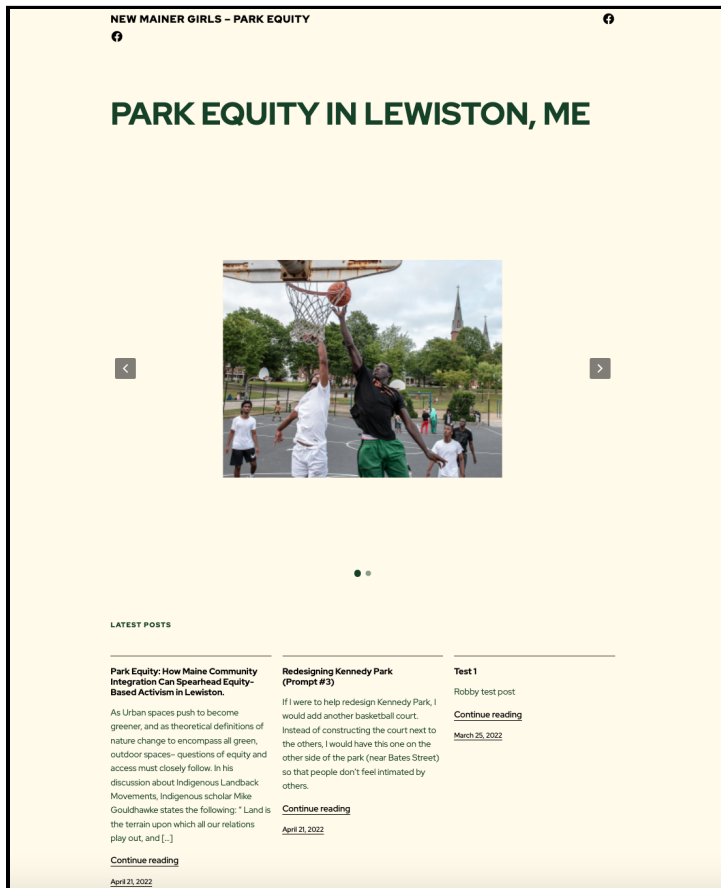
### **Appendix C: Complete list of prompts**

The prompts below fall under two main themes – placing oneself within park spaces, and in relation to others. While the girls are to go through each of these prompts and publish their responses to each prompt on WordPress, the relatively broad nature of these questions provide a degree of freedom for girls to explore issues within and related to park equity they're particularly interested and/or passionate about.

1. When you think about the time you spend outdoors in Lewiston, what scenes, words, emotions, feelings come to mind? Do these have negative or positive associations? How would you change them, if you could?
2. How does your identity inform your experiences at Kennedy Park? Do you feel as though the park can be re-designed to better accommodate the needs and wants of teenage girls regarding park equity?
3. What are the best parts of living in Lewiston? If you could make changes to Kennedy Park, how could those alterations potentially enhance what is already great about Lewiston? If you were designing a new park in Lewiston, what elements would you want it to have? For example: Wide open field space, playgrounds, lots of trees, a greenhouse, a community garden, etc?
4. If you have lived in places other than Lewiston, how do you see them as different or similar? What did spending time outdoors there look like in comparison to what it looks like here?

## Appendix E: WordPress site

Main page of park equity wordpress, and what a sample blog response to a prompt



## Appendix D: Framework for the future flow chart

