

Parks, Livability, and the Triple Bottom Line

by Tim Herd, CPRE

One episode of the popular *Mythbusters* TV show balanced a sleek limousine on the edge of a rocky 300-foot cliff in an effort to prove or debunk the myth that a mere bird landing on such a precariously perched hood can pitch the car to its doom at the bottom of the ravine.

To pull off such a stunt took quite a bit of thoughtful planning to be able to plunk the car on the precipice without compromising its stability. It was a very interesting episode.

But that dramatic image—of a posh vehicle perfectly balanced over the brink of disaster—lingers in my mind as an apt portrait of the public sector’s predicament. How can we meet our immediate needs without compromising the same essentials in our future?

To be vibrantly attractive, a community must find that sustainable sweet spot that balances the health of its economy, environment, and society by wisely investing its fiscal, natural, physical, and human capital.

Investments that bond profitable commerce with environmental sustainability and social equity build strong, livable communities. Such comprehensive and balanced approaches align all three vital obligations into a holistic measure of success, producing what’s known as the triple bottom line.

Triple bottom line results reward dividends for all “stockholders” in the community: businesses, institutions and governments; clients, customers, residents and visitors; natural and built living spaces; and all living and nonliving resources.

A noble ideal. But how, exactly, can we prove or debunk that theory?

Lifestyle magazine *Monocle* publishes an annual list of the most “livable” cities in the world, which are ranked by such criteria as safety/crime, public transportation, urban design, tolerance, business conditions, medical care, connectivity, environmental issues and access to nature. Each one of these benchmarks is impacted by the essential community services of parks, open space and recreation.

No longer regarded as mere purveyors of leisure activities, park and recreation services are a proven and comprehensive system of economic stimulators, environmental stewards, and societal enrichers: all the components of the responsible triple bottom line and the most highly desired livability standards.

With political willpower, enabling policies, stakeholder input and thoughtful planning, the Stroud Region is actively increasing its livability through intentional public and private investments in its park, open space and recreation systems.

Economic Success

Measuring the economic impact is the easiest to analyze of the livability triplets: simply sort the debits from the credits and you’ve arrived at the fiscal bottom line, expressed in dollars. However, when linking economic prosperity with the health and welfare of the people and the land, it’s important to consider a

few more criteria in the economic development plan: Does enabling legislation support innovative, sustainable and diversified business ventures? Are the plans relevant to local development strategies and do they contribute to a more efficient infrastructure? Do they produce or offer employment training and livable wages? Do they support or enhance sustainable practices for existing businesses and green technology jobs?

A recent study by the Political Economy Research Institute documents that building bike lanes doesn't cater only to bicyclists, but also benefits the entire community by creating safer routes, increased accessibility, improved health outcomes, better air quality, reduced traffic congestion, and increased revenues and jobs for local businesses. The study further verified that for each \$1 million invested in the construction of bicycling infrastructure, the projects create 11.4 sustainable jobs. Even pedestrian-only projects create an average of 10 jobs per \$1 million invested.

The Stroud Region's "Bike to Nature" project is a great start to realizing those same benefits locally by connecting people to the land and resources while increasing tourism, regional partnerships, and sustainable business development. The 23-mile pilot loop will map the connection to nature from historic downtown Stroudsburg to the Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge area, with directional and interpretive signage and mobile web access of the route's originations, destinations and linkages. Similarly, improvements, extensions and connections to the multi-use Levee Loop Trail encircling the picturesque Brodhead Creek and the core of the Stroud Greenway promises multiple pathways to prosperity.

Larger trail systems with multiple connections between many attractions are a proven lure for netting tourists who deposit development dollars directly into the local economy. In the Pocono Mountains, the tourism and hospitality industry is a \$2.1 billion apparatus, generating some 22,000 jobs in its four-county area, which hosted more than 10 million visitations this past year. Fiscal year 2012 collected a record-setting \$4.6 million in hotel room taxes, which is reinvested into the local economy.

About half of all Americans participated in outdoor recreation in 2011, according to a study by the Outdoor Foundation: a wonderfully ripe and spacious market opportunity for private enterprise. In Pennsylvania, annual recreation-related spending of more than \$4 billion supports over 84,000 jobs and generates some \$770 million in taxes. Bringing some of that home, on Stroudsburg's Main Street, Ready Set Run is a new specialty running store offering shoes and apparel for both men and women as well as a full line of nutritional and sports medicine products. Sky's the Limit Skydiving Center takes off from the Stroudsburg-Pocono Airpark year-round for high free-falling thrills. Opening late this year, the Pocono Dome is a multi-sports and total wellness complex with nearly 90,000 square feet under roof, hosting family-oriented sports activities and fitness facilities. And close at hand are all sorts of other attractions for skiing, mountain biking, horseback riding, paintballing, camping, kayaking and many other sporting adventures nestled among the enticing features of our parks, lakes, beaches, trails, and other natural, cultural and historic assets.

But commercial recreation and tourism are not the only economic avenues to building livable cities, of course. Many public works projects, properly conceived, offer solid traction for further growth.

Stroudsburg's \$1.14 million congested corridor improvement project is streamlining the efficiency of traffic flow through computerized networking of traffic lights, and constructing traffic-calming curb bump-outs and improved lighting, crosswalks and sidewalks. East Stroudsburg Borough has also recently invested \$662,000 in streetscape lighting and pedestrian safety improvements in its downtown area.

While such capital improvements to the downtown areas clearly enhance the lure and sustainability of Main Street businesses, their tremendous environmental and social values extend to a cleaner and more attractive community, the promotion of healthier lifestyles, and the prevention of lives lost or injured due to increased commuter safety.

With the construction of Smithfield Township's new \$1.25 million Franklin Hill sewer line, several more livable community-healthy possibilities are enabled. Its first is a re-alignment of the intersection at Route 447 and Franklin Hill Road with a traffic light and crosswalk permitting safe pedestrian passage from the Terra Greens Golf Course and East Stroudsburg Elementary School to the other side of the busy street to sidewalks included in the proposed Westfield Hospital complex. From there, the sewer line's route westward will be topped with a stone-dust trail surface allowing (for the first time from that area) pedestrian access leading to Zacharias Pond Park, Third Street, and the adjacent residential neighborhoods.

The \$5.3 million replacement of the 55-year-old Mill Creek Bridge, expected in 2014, began with an environmental impact assessment, public input meetings, and a design intended to provide solutions for the next hundred years. The new structure will add non-motorized passageways (where none currently exist) of two bike lanes, a sidewalk, and a marked crosswalk to permit the critically-needed connections between the trails to the immediate north, south, west and east of the span: truly a development that connects the triple-bottom-line ideals.

Environmental Health

In the concept of triple bottom line reporting, environmental benefits can be assigned dollar values and measured by straightforward cash accounting like economic developments. But here too we have a set of criteria to guide investments in our natural, built and historic environments to help meet the goals of a favorable return on our socioeconomic prosperity: Do policies, permitting and plans promote responsible environmental stewardship and "smart growth" that avoids urban sprawl and creates walkable urban centers? Do projects mitigate pollution, increase energy efficiency, preserve or restore critical habitats and watersheds, promote biodiversity, reduce waste, incorporate green technologies, or utilize local resources and products? Do they connect people to nature? Will ongoing operations and maintenance be economically sustainable?

Many progressive municipalities have developed an "Official Map" based on solid zoning and subdivision ordinances and a comprehensive plan to help guide that kind of smart growth. Stroud Township's official map, developed by its Planning Commission and other authorities, helps focus its limited financial resources on projects that meet and advance the township's goals. It maps out future connections and improvements to its streets, sewers, sidewalks and intersections, protects important natural areas, and delineates appropriate possibilities for business and housing developments, green space, recreation facilities, trails, and other public services.

By far, the most cost-effective contributors to our environmental health are provided by our public parks and greenways. Parks improve air and water quality, protect groundwater, prevent flooding and provide vegetative buffers for physical development and wildlife habitat. Some 75,000 tons of air pollutants are removed annually by urban park trees in the U.S. by their mere existence. Ridding ourselves of the same pollution by mechanical means would cost an estimated \$500 million each year.

The Stroud Greenway, centered about the confluence of the Brodhead, McMichael and Pocono Creeks, refers to the holdings of parks, trails and other connective infrastructure managed for conservation and recreation purposes. Its waterways and vegetative borders provide important wildlife habitat, a retreat for our exercise and recreation, a natural filter for airborne and surface contaminants, and a critical buffer for—as we well know!—nature’s frequent largesse with storm and flashflood.

An abundance of parks not only improves the quality of our land, water and air, but also directly enhances the economic base. The most desirable residential properties—as any real estate professional will tell you (*“Location, Location, Location!”*)—are those in close proximity to parks and natural areas, where home buyers are often willing to spend more for the benefits of their location. Such enhanced property values (up to 20 percent more for those adjacent to parklands) contribute their share of higher taxes to the municipalities, benefitting the public good. Creating or rehabilitating parks has also shown to spur an increase in the value of nearby commercial properties, as well as attract additional businesses and residents.

Parks and open space can also keep taxes lower. Recent research by Texas A&M University shows that the cost of providing services and infrastructure to most new residential developments exceeds the tax revenues generated by the development, so the taxes of existing residents must be raised.

But our parks are not merely passive in their assist to the bottom line of profits, people, and the planet. Glen Brook Golf Club and its 224 acres was saved from likely development when it was purchased by Stroud Township in 2005. Like many other older courses, competition for golfers and increasing operating costs had affected its financial stability. Over the past seven years, the Township has invested many thousands of dollars into improving the course and its operations to keep it a viable concern. A better drainage system and buffer areas are being designed and installed throughout the fairway. Pursuing certification as an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary for Golf Courses, Glen Brook is lessening its environmental impact with a few green initiatives, such as reducing fertilizer use and being more selective with better, species-specific pesticides, which help improve the water quality of the McMichael Creek and its native fish populations. The Club’s historic John Stroud House hosts a friendly restaurant and bar operating as Mullally’s Clubhouse Café. A full-service Golf Pro Shop and Golf Bag Storage Area is open year-round, as are overnight accommodations in its picturesque Streamside Guest Suites.

Certainly sound fiscal and environmental management can be practiced simultaneously, as Glen Brook proves. And while the Course caters to golfers, of course, non-golfers are also welcome to hike, jog, bird-watch, fish and cross-country ski on non-fairway areas. Plans for triple-bottom-line strategies in other parks include constructing a pedestrian bridge over the Pocono Creek to link the sidewalk-spare Route 611 commercial corridor with the Stroudsburg Area High School campus and Main Street; hard-surfacing a portion of the Levee Loop Trail for improved access for disabled persons; public-private partnerships in developing a large outdoor concert venue in Glen Park; and enabling intermodal transportation linkages to larger trail systems outside the Stroud Region to connect people, places and purposes in ever-widening opportunities for increased livability in both the private and public sectors.

Social Prosperity

When we measure the social plusses and minuses of a community investment, the bookkeeping is not as straightforward as it is for strict economic investments. While dollar values can be assigned to social programs, developing those assessments require a more subjective approach: Do they meet basic

human needs and ensure public health and safety? Do they address inequities, remove systemic barriers, and offer diverse opportunities and equal access physically, financially and culturally? Do they build capacity to improve personal health, mitigate or solve social problems? And despite the equivocation of attaching dollar values to these issues, who can argue with such very real recreational benefits as those that raise students' physical, mental and social health, increase grade-point averages, while decreasing the social ills of truancy and dropout rates, vandalism, and gang-related violence?

More than 176,000 people live in Monroe County. Despite the pressure of a population that's increased 70 percent in the past 20 years, the region still retains easy access to parks and green spaces, which reduces our overall mortality rate. Recent research on the essential components of a healthy human habitat has shown that in the least green environments, the poorest inhabitants die at two times the rate of the wealthiest individuals.

Regardless of socioeconomic status, being in contact with nature also improves concentration, relieves mental fatigue, boosts health recovery rates and improves psychological health. Neighborhood trees, like those in Miller Park or along Bryant Street, Greenbrier Drive, East Shore Drive or any number of other streets, decrease levels of fear, incivilities, and violence among residents, decrease crime rates in public housing, and improve the life satisfaction of residents.

In the Stroud Region, many residents live within walking distance of at least one of its 26 regional parks. Such simple proximity to parks, greenways, trails, and waterways leads to safer, cleaner, revitalized neighborhoods, personal and corporate volunteerism, environmental stewardship and a stronger community. Personal involvement in the outdoor recreational pursuits that the parks enable helps to combat obesity, boost the immune system, relieve stress and depression, diminish the risk of disease and increase life expectancy.

The popular Stroud Kids summer day camp and its related enrichment programming provide safe, fun, and engaging stimulation for children ages 4-14. Delivered at a price of just \$2.66 per hour, the comprehensive recreational services are cheaper than hiring a nonrelative as a babysitter—and open a world of opportunities in the local playgrounds, pools and facilities. This past summer, more than 700 local children participated in the structured recreational, educational and social playtime.

According to the Journal of Community Health, children who have easy access to playgrounds, like our Stroud Kids campers, are approximately five times more likely to have a healthy weight than children who do not enjoy that same access.

The Stroud Kids program also engages a significant population of campers with special needs and/or medical conditions: approximately 22 percent of the total enrollment this past summer was mainstreamed with accommodations to help meet individual therapeutic needs. Other studies have shown that the natural play and park settings like those in the Stroud Kids program help improve concentration and reduce the severity of symptoms in children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and other autistic spectrum conditions.

And while providing a broad range of audience-appropriate recreational programming does incur costs associated with qualified personnel, equipment, supplies, and upkeep on the parks and facilities, not providing the services, especially to certain at-risk populations, can be more costly. Imprisonment in a Pennsylvania jail costs up to \$35,000 per inmate per year. If each of the 343 local recreation and park agencies in Pennsylvania invested in the difference-making kind of programming that prevents just one

individual from winding up in jail, we'd collectively save more than \$12 million! Similarly, a compelling case can be made for programming that improves individual health, ultimately saving vast sums in health care costs. To these ends, the Stroud Region Open Space and Recreation Commission is partnering, along with many other community organizations and individuals, with the Pocono Health System's Wellness and Behavioral Health Work Groups in developing strategies to improve the capacity and effectiveness of working toward a more livable community for all its inhabitants.

Return on Investment

Remember the *Mythbusters'* car-teetering cliff-balancing experiment? To test the myth that a bird landing on such a precarious car could plunge the vehicle into the canyon, they systematically added weight representing one kori bustard and 26 turkeys to the hood (approximately 700 lbs.!) until destruction was assured—and filmed for the thrill of it all! But we can learn from their extreme example.

Providing for both the immediate and long-term needs of our region is a perilous balancing act for the public sector, requiring purposeful, triple-bottom-line investments in our economic, environmental, and social health and wellbeing. If we shortsightedly tilt too far to favor any one factor over the others, we are in danger of collapsing our entire standard of living. One of the best proven approaches to building these vital pillars of a livable community is in our local parks and recreation system.

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Available images (4) sent separately upon request: herd@srosrc.org

MainStreetStroudsburg.jpg

Caption: Stroudsburg's historic tree-lined Main Street is a thriving commercial district welcoming all visitors with an attractive streetscape of adequate parking, coordinated traffic signals, well-marked crosswalks, pedestrian-inviting curb extensions and accessibility.



Suggested placement: Introduction

Credit: T. Herd

StroudRegionCyclists.jpg

Caption: Building bike trails and lanes benefits the entire community by creating safer routes, increased accessibility, improved health outcomes, better air quality, reduced traffic congestion, and increased revenues and jobs for local businesses.



Suggested placement: Economic Success section

Credit: T. Herd

GlenBrookGolfClub.jpg

Caption: Glen Brook Golf Club is pursuing certification as an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary and has lessened its environmental impact by reducing fertilizer use and being more selective with species-specific pesticides, which help improve the water quality of the McMichael Creek and its native fish populations.

Suggested placement: Environmental Health section

Credit: J. Feick



StroudKids.jpg

Caption: Children who have easy access to playgrounds, like those who participate in the Stroud Kids day camp program, are approximately five times more likely to have a healthy weight than children who do not enjoy that same access.

Suggested placement: Social Prosperity section

Credit: T. Herd

