

Positioning Recreation and Parks Systems as an Essential Community Service

Background & Issues

Communities where parks, greenways, trails, and recreational services play a vital role in the lives of their residents are invigorated places to live. These facilities and programs constitute a recreation and parks system that is considered an essential community service by those residents. By having this service provided, the community is more likely to experience continual regeneration of its physical, cultural, and historical aspects, which in turn leads to greater social opportunities. Such invigorated living contributes to a broad range of documented physical, mental, social, and spiritual benefits. This supports the concept of wellness defined by the National Wellness Institute as “an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices towards, a more successful existence.”

Pennsylvania residents understand this concept. Nearly two-thirds of them believe it is very or extremely important to build more greenways/trails and pedestrian and cycling paths between places of work, schools, and shopping areas. More than 80 percent feel that trails and greenways increase the value of nearby properties and nearly all believe that parks and natural areas exert a similar influence on property values. A majority view the state’s landscapes, particularly near their homes, as vulnerable to undesirable change. Nearly 75 percent have rated environmental, conservation, and other recreation programs at parks and recreation areas as very or extremely important. (*Pennsylvania Outdoors: The Keystone for Healthy Living 2009-2013 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.*)

Although it is clear that Pennsylvania residents want the benefits associated with this essential community service, it is not being reflected in the operating budgets of recreation and parks systems. According to the 2010 National Economic Survey conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association of its professional members, almost 54 percent of the responding agencies have had their budgets reduced, with another 41 percent holding steady. Over half of the respondents expect additional reductions in fiscal year 2011. Finally, almost 60 percent reduced part-time staff resources for 2010 and almost 35 percent will experience full-time staff cuts.

These numbers show that there is a disconnect between what our residents want and what they are being offered. Our representatives in government are elected to solve problems and improve the public good. Yet there exists a common misconception among many elected officials at all levels of government that the tangible values provided by recreation and parks systems are nonessential amenities that the public can do without in times of economic distress. Many officials hold to the erroneous belief that most or all of the benefits of a recreation and park system accrue to only those who use such services and that there are few, if any, spin-off benefits for society in general. This contrasts with their views about the merits of other social services, such as transportation, health, and police and fire protection. For these services, those same officials acknowledge large benefits to society beyond the direct users of those services. (*Concepts and Uses of the Benefits Approach to Leisure*, Driver & Bruns; *Leisure Studies: Prospects for the Twenty-first Century*, 1999.)

These officials are also turning their backs on the historical significance of recreation and park systems’ roles in solving societal problems. As early as the 18th century in Pennsylvania, recreation and parks systems were organized to address issues that sprouted from the booming industrial revolution, such as lack of natural environments in urban settings, lack of play areas for youth, and lack of acceptable recreation pursuits for adults. Governmental providers, including municipal recreation departments, created solutions to these issues, thereby establishing themselves as an essential community service.

However, over time, this service began to be perceived as only marginal to our daily lives and less attention has been paid to the benefits provided by recreation and park systems.

Reestablishing recreation and parks systems as an essential community service requires building political and community support. Because the profession's contributions are not commonly recognized as indispensable, building that support requires leadership from recreation and parks professionals at the state, county, and local levels. A focus on educating both the public and its politically active members about the community benefits of a recreation and parks system needs to be a priority. These benefits also address the same essential issues that are facing today's 21st century communities and that public officials are elected to solve—1) Developing Economic Prosperity, 2) Promoting Social Stability, and 3) Enabling Environmental Sustainability.

Essential Community Issues

1. **Developing Economic Prosperity.** Many civic leaders are learning that there is a direct connection between the local economy and an active parks and recreation system. One main revenue generator is the tourism and recreation services industry. Preserving our natural environment stimulates a healthy economy and enhances the quality of life. When our economy thrives, it expands the tax base, whose additional resources can be invested toward meeting our most pressing problems.
 - **Promoting Tourism and Providing Recreation Services.** People pay to play! Dollars follow tourists; tourists follow attractions. The main attractions are often dominated by the local natural assets, the recreation services industry, and its nonprofit partners in providing year-round indoor and outdoor recreational opportunities—along with such enticing features as parks, lakes, beaches, trails, ski slopes, waterparks, festivals, tournaments, and cultural events.
 - **Enhancing Business Viability.** Businesses depend on attracting and retaining qualified and committed employees, who want a vibrant community with a “high quality of life.” However that is defined, the availability of recreational services, parks, and open space is always a major component.
 - **Enhancing Property Values.** Home buyers are often willing to spend a little extra for close proximity to parks and natural areas. Such enhanced property values contribute their share of higher taxes to the municipalities, which in turn can be used to offset the costs of acquiring or developing the natural area or park. Creating or rehabilitating parks can also spur an increase in the value of nearby commercial properties, as well as attract additional businesses and residents. (*Conservation: An Investment That Pays, The Trust for Public Land, Gies, 2009*)
 - **Contributing to Lower Taxes.** An urban myth holds that perpetual development keeps taxes low. However, recent research 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. Preserving open space helps keep taxes lower. (*Evolution and implications of a paradigm shift in the marketing of leisure services in the USA, Crompton; Leisure Studies, 27:2, 2008*)
2. **Promoting Social Stability.** A failure to invest in resources that pre-empt potential social problems only results in serious problems later at a much greater cost to society. Recreation and parks systems are uniquely poised to curtail the early signs of social ills by providing connections to daily living.
 - **Fostering Healthy Child Development and Providing Therapeutic Relief.** According to accumulating research, time spent in green outdoor spaces by children fosters creative play and relieves attention deficit disorders. Among adults, the rejuvenation derived from

such outdoor pursuits as trailing a tiny ball through the byways of a golf course—or the hours teasing trout with an artificial fly—are well known. Aerobic activities of jogging, walking, and swimming contribute directly to our physical health. Surprisingly, studies show the amazing therapeutic benefit of the outdoors extends even to those with a mere view of green plants and vistas by reducing frustration and stress. (*Nearby Nature: A Buffer of Life Stress Among Rural Children*, Wells and Evans, *Environment and Behavior*, Vol. 35:3, 2003.)

- **Promoting Healthier Lifestyles.** Community recreation programs combat the obesity epidemic and many weight-related health problems, like diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. Hiking and biking trails encourage people to walk and ride to destinations, while reducing traffic congestion and contributing to healthier lifestyles. A healthier population, in turn, helps reduce the nation’s \$2 trillion annual health care costs.
 - **Investing in Community Regeneration.** Communities where recreation and park systems play a vital role in the lives of their residents are invigorated places to live, and are more likely to experience continual regeneration of their physical, cultural, and historic resources, which leads to greater social opportunities.
 - **Engaging At-Risk Populations and Promoting Character Development.** Recreation programs help at-risk youth from engaging in deviant behavior and help raise levels of education and employability. The return on such services, especially when compared to the costs of incarceration, is phenomenal.
 - **Providing Employment.** Many recreation and parks systems and leisure services providers are also employers for meaningful program, maintenance, construction, renovation, and repair projects. Conservation and parks work provides entry level jobs for unskilled laborers, who can develop vocational skills and future employability.
3. **Enabling Environmental Sustainability.** Responsible stewardship of the natural, altered, human, and historic environment guides patterns of development on the land to avoid loss or damage to important natural and cultural resources.
- **Protecting Land and Water Quality.** Preserving watersheds and protecting stream corridors with vegetative buffers filters pollutants at a much lower expense than if the typical required equipment and manpower were used. Such buffers also mitigate flooding and protect our drinking water sources.
 - **Protecting Air Quality.** One acre of green growing trees produces enough oxygen for 22 people. Vegetated open space improves air quality by removing gaseous pollutants, toxic chemicals, particulate matter, and carbon dioxide. The shade and evapotranspiration also lessens the heat island effect of urban areas and reduces energy costs for mechanical air conditioning.
 - **Preserving Habitat Quality and Promoting Biodiversity.** Green corridors and large parcels of protected natural areas help preserve habitats and maintain crucial biodiversity. The greater variety of plants and animals in an area, the more ecologically stable and sustainable it is. On a broader scale, biodiversity directly benefits human dietary, physical, social, and psychological health; nutritional security; medical science; and industrial, technological, and medicinal resources. It also reduces risks of disease vectors, epidemics, and natural disasters.

Statewide Implementation Steps

1. **Develop and implement a statewide branding campaign for uniform positioning of recreation and parks systems as an essential community service.**
 - The Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society (PRPS) and the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), with input from its members and staff,

should jointly develop a unified vision and series of mission statements for the profession, based on the above community issues and the benefits provided through an active recreation and parks system. A “toolkit” of practical resources for adaptation and use by local agencies should also be developed.

- Statewide toolkit resources should include prepackaged, branded educational materials easily adaptable for local application for all manner of professional development and public education, including, but not limited to: PowerPoint programs; fact sheets; sample media releases; weekly radio and TV public service announcements and newspaper features; podcasts and video clips; online resources; and social networking content and promotion.

2. Develop, implement, and vigorously promote ongoing professional training and leadership development.

- Specific leadership training and professional development workshops should be provided annually to all professionals, volunteer recreation board and committee members, and other community leaders on the uniform vision, missions, and local application of the various resources and toolkits to position recreation and parks systems as an essential community service.
- Accredited colleges and universities offering degree programs in recreation and parks should incorporate courses on public leadership and political involvement into the curricula.

3. Research, develop, and analyze a profile of Pennsylvania’s county and municipal recreation and parks systems, their services, and their citizens’ values on what is delivered at the local level.

- DCNR and PRPS should compile information on the number and percentage of Pennsylvania counties and local governmental entities that have a recreation and parks system, and, if so, its means of financial support. This should include advisory parks and recreation boards (those communities that have only a board, and no staff) and intergovernmental agencies. This profile would not include budgets or salaries, but it is recommended that this component be added to future budget and salary surveys so a comprehensive fiscal picture of the state’s recreation and parks systems can be produced.
- Research Pennsylvanians’ opinions on what should be prioritized, or most valued, and which services are, and are not, delivered at the local level. Such local municipal information would augment the updated State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.
- The research could be conducted through in-depth interviews, which would then be used to develop an online survey. The survey should ask both program and park users to rate the priority and current delivery of parks and recreation programs. The survey results should be used to actively promote what the public values about parks and recreation.

4. Invest in an aggressive, professional lobbying presence at the state level.

- PRPS and its partners should develop the funding to hire a professional staff member whose duties would include assisting in the formulation of public recreation and park policies and positions, their active promotion among legislators, and the motivation and mobilization of the professional membership and practitioners for local, same-message support.

Local Implementation Steps

1. **Promote cooperation and partnerships in the positioning of recreation and parks systems as an essential community service.**
 - Work closely with, and solicit broad support from, local civic organizations and elected officials through intermunicipal agreements; regional commissions; local park and recreation boards; joint authorities; Environmental Advisory Councils; cooperative business planning ventures; and shared equipment, services, facilities, etc. Go to work every day assuming you need to prove the worth of your mission and the mutual benefits of collaboration.
2. **Enlist all available resources to position recreation and parks systems as critical contributions to a vibrant and healthy community.**
 - Discover and use all the local, statewide, and national tools and resources available: natural, human, physical, materiel, financial, institutional, cultural, historical, technical, informational, educational, and motivational. Use scientific research methods of polling, surveying, and public meetings to establish the data to demonstrate public support.
 - With the information from the state's research on county and municipal recreation and park systems, promote how public values are met through existing or planned local programming and how such services are essential to the local community.
3. **Align all recreational, environmental, and cultural programming and park services with one or more of the essential community issues in planning, promotion, and delivery.**
 - Prepare educational objectives for all programming that clearly support at least one of the essential community issues your work provides. Promote it as such. Avoid all appearances of providing merely “fun,” frivolous, or nonessential services or amenities.
 - Engage the public in a comprehensive, year-round program of environmental education and outdoor recreation utilizing parks and greenway features and incorporating all ages, abilities, and interest areas. Connecting people to the land is the most effective strategy for developing direct and personal support for the essential community service the profession provides.
4. **Develop and maintain a continual campaign of positive public education and advocacy on recreation and parks systems as an essential community service.**
 - Keep up a continual flow of locally-adapted versions of the branded, uniform statewide recreation and parks messages to members of the executive and legislative branches so they come to understand the tremendous value associated with an active recreation and parks system. Such actions position you as a trusted authority to the elected officials of reliable information about such issues and on the worthy return of their investments in the community.
 - Learn how to communicate on many different levels and to all types of people. Develop multiple methods, variations, and avenues of getting the uniform message out to reach all the different segments of your audience.

Final Draft: 20 December 2010

Writing Team: Kurt Baker, Debra Hatley, Tim Herd (Team Leader), Sue Landis, Francis Rubert