

Parks and Recreation Plans: Balancing the Wish List

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Recreation planning is becoming more complex and contentious, and will likely only become more so in the future. Parks, trails and open space are vital assets to every community and have been lauded for protecting and preserving a community's natural features, promoting social and mental health and generally bolstering a community's quality of life. In an era of long commutes and electronic media, the public is now, more than ever, attempting to reconnect with nature. As residents increasingly demand new and enhanced recreational opportunities, communities face the challenge of weighing the wishes of their residents against financial realities.

The recreating public continues to grow and change in number and diversity as new technologies and choices of how to enjoy the outdoors expand. Conversely, recreation budgets are limited and are in competition with the increasing demand for non-recreational goods and services. Community leaders must strike a balance between the "wants" and the "needs" of residents so that projects on the wish list can be prioritized and matched to available funding sources.

Parks and recreation master plans are a valuable tool available to

communities to help them face this challenge. Through the development of a parks and recreation master plan, demand for recreational resources can be gauged, projects can be prioritized, and funding streams can be identified.

Balancing "Wants" and "Needs" Through the Planning Process

Public recreation planning and

needs when evaluating potential recreation projects. A community's recreational wants are the subjective desires of residents for additional or improved recreational resources. In effect, they form a community's recreation wish list. Alternatively, a community's recreational needs are determined objectively through technical evaluation methods. The planning process allows community leaders to evaluate wants and needs separately and then strategically meld them together to form recommendations.

Recreational "Wants"

Recreational wants can be ascertained by opening dialog with residents about park system deficiencies and opportunities.

Through the public participation process, residents can provide invaluable insights on the strengths and weaknesses of a community's recreational resources. Involving the public early and often in the planning process can also help to garner the public support necessary for the plan to succeed. Public feedback can be obtained through a number of methods, including public workshops, community surveys and stakeholder interviews.

Public workshops and community surveys provide an opportunity for

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management requires recreation resource allocation decisions. No public official has the time or money to do everything, nor can officials provide everything that the public desires. Budgets, personnel, programs, facilities, and public lands all have competing interests. Difficult recreation decisions need to be made.

The planning process provides many opportunities to assess community recreational demand. It is important for communities to differentiate between wants and

residents to communicate directly with community officials about their vision for the future of the parks and recreation system. Workshops and surveys are instrumental for consensus building and prioritizing potential projects. Stakeholder interviews provide another mechanism for obtaining public feedback. A stakeholder is any group or individual that has a stake in or may be impacted by the outcome of the planning process. Parks and recreation stakeholders can include represented representatives of civic organizations, outdoor groups, athletic and sports leagues, and recreation groups. Stakeholders are often the best barometer for determining the strengths and weaknesses of a community's recreation system because they are the most familiar with the recreational resources used by their respective organizations. Stakeholders can offer important information regarding facility utilization, conditions and needs.

The utilization of a wide variety of public outreach tools helps to ensure that a diverse cross section of the community is reached. The feedback obtained through public outreach efforts often forms the basis for the final recommendations of a parks and recreation master plan.

Recreational "Needs"

Recreation needs are determined objectively through analysis of demographic trends, park conditions assessments, utilization rates and comparisons with state and national standards. Conveying a community's recreational needs through a parks and recreation master plan is an important factor in obtaining project funding.

A community's population trends can demonstrate the need for funding future recreational resources. United States Census data can be utilized to show trends in total population, age, household

income, race, education attainment and much more. Population growth rates can be used to show which areas of the community are growing and retracting. This data can help determine the types of new recreational facilities needed. Age statistics can be used by communities to target growing cohorts of the population. Growth in the 0-10 cohort may indicate a need for more playgrounds. A growing senior population could indicate that more passive recreation opportunities are needed locally.

A conditions assessment of a community's parks and recreation facilities takes into account factors such as safety, accessibility and ADA compliance. The conditions assessment can be useful for pinpointing problems with older parks that were not designed to meet today's standards or parks that require general upgrades. The

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assessment can also demonstrate a need for funding assistance.

The utilization rates of parks and recreation facilities can also suggest recreational need. Demand for recreational facilities that exceeds the current capacity indicates that new or expanded facilities may be needed. Utilization can be determined through observation, interviews with league presidents, and scheduling.

The State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) provides a standardized system for evaluating recreational need statewide. The SCORP's objective assessment of need provides a common metric for comparing diverse projects. The SCORP is used to develop the rating systems for most funding programs. Because the SCORP is the foundation for the allocation of state and federal funds for parks and recreation projects, a SCORP analysis is an important component of any parks and recreation master plan. SCORP guidelines provide suggested requirements for the approximate number of acres needed to support the recreational opportunity, the maximum travel time of a potential user and the appropriate means of accessing the resource. Most of the requirements are based on the population per thousand. The SCORP assessment can be utilized to show deficiencies in a community's parks and recreation system. A community can reference these deficiencies to demonstrate need when applying for a grant. Through the grant application process, a community can also demonstrate how deficiencies will be addressed through a specific funding program.

Funding Recreation Projects

Town officials are acutely aware

of the complexity of growth in recreation demand and, with the renewed emphasis on accountability in government, are also acutely concerned with balancing expenditures on outdoor recreation. Recreational projects are often left up to decision makers to balance the needs of the community against those of competing projects and make the "right" decision. Prioritizing parks and recreation projects during the planning process will assist Town officials with these tough decisions. Funding streams must be identified and matched with projects to ensure a community's readiness to respond when funding is announced.

The most common way parks and recreation projects are funded is through local community dollars or bonds. Parks and recreation projects are added as a budget item and funded through the community tax base. However, not every community has the financial resources at their disposal to bond projects year after year. Parkland can also be donated to

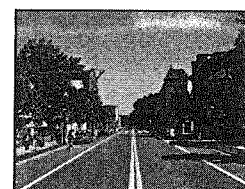
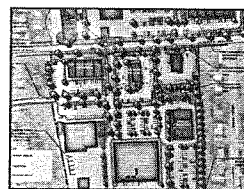
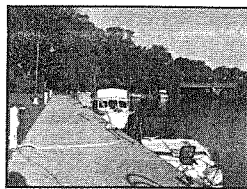
a community as an active or passive recreational space, but communities may have little say in the quality of the donated land.

Alternatively, many parks and recreation projects are funded by developers through recreation fees or in-lieu-of fees. This mechanism requires developers to contribute money or land towards the development of parks and recreation projects to mitigate negative effects of development. One of the challenges associated with collecting fees, is that it often takes many years to accumulate enough money to fully implement a project of any size. Tax payers may not want to wait to reap the recreational benefits when feeling the pains of growth and development.

Our state and federal governments recognize this difficult balancing act facing localities and have created specific funding programs for parks and recreation to lessen the burden on Town budgets. State and federal agencies are the primary sources of



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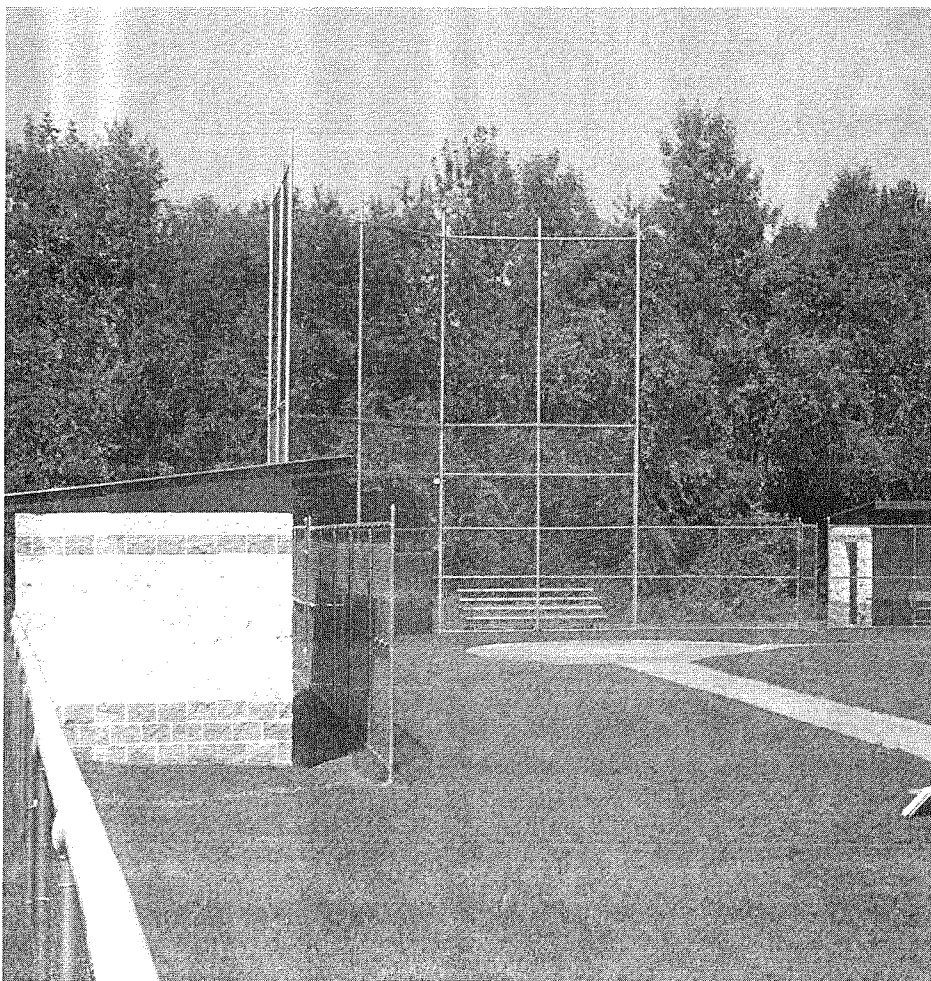
funding for local parks and recreation projects. Funding programs support a range of actions including land acquisition, planning and design, construction, and maintenance. State grants are administered through various funding agencies including the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), the New York State Department of State (NYSDOS), and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYSOPRHP). Most State funding programs stem from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which was established to provide a dedicated source of funding for vital environmental programs. Some parks and recreation programs supported by the EPF include the Parks Program, Acquisition, the Hudson River Estuary Grant Program, and the Local Waterfront Revitalization Program.

Federal grants are generally available through the National Parks Service, the Federal Highway Administration, the Department of Education, and National Resource Conservation Services. A few funding programs include the Land and Water Conservation Fund, SAFETEA-LU, and the Special Recreation Program. Federal funds are commonly administered by the State to the localities.

However, these state and federal grants are extremely competitive and can be difficult to secure without a Parks and Recreation Master Plan in place. Project eligibility, the supported action, and project elements vary depending on the grant program. If the project meets eligibility requirements, a community must then ensure that the project is aligned with the funding source's priorities and ranking criteria. Funding priorities are established each year and are

based on a point system. Most grant cycles are announced on an annual basis and the opportunity to apply ranges from several weeks to several months. Towns must keep abreast of available funding opportunities and be cognizant of application

deadlines. Parks and Recreation Master Plans should be examined regularly to ensure the Plan is not only aligned with the community's wants and needs, but with the state and federal criterion necessary to successfully secure grant funding.



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