

Introduction

Municipal parks and recreation agencies produce a number of benefits for their communities. The social, personal, economic and environmental benefits associated with parks and recreation services are numerous. These benefits are realized at the individual level for all ages certainly but also on a grander scale as municipal parks and recreation contributes to overall community development.

Social Benefits

From a social perspective, leisure opportunities contribute to positive youth development as well as help build strong families. Engagement in well-designed, outcome-based recreation activities, as well as access to park space, have been shown to reduce juvenile delinquency as well as enhance the developmental process of children and youth helping build self-esteem, resiliency, and leadership characteristics. In addition, these same opportunities provide families with the chance to enjoy activities as a unit which can enhance communication and the family structure. Parks and recreation also contributes to growth in social capital. Social capital is defined as the collective value of all social networks (who people know) and the interactions that result from those networks and the things people do for one another as a result of those relationships (DeGraaf & Jordan, 2003). Related to social connectedness, perceived happiness, increased health, community solidarity, lower crime rates, higher educational attainment, and economic growth, social capital provides a community with the social solidarity necessary for a thriving community. With a wide array of recreation programs designed to facilitate social interaction as well as parks designed to enhance communities, municipal parks and recreation is a catalyst for the development of social capital.

Personal Benefits

The personal benefits associated with parks and recreation are also great. While recognized at the individual level, the cumulative benefit to an entire community can also be seen. These personal benefits are often health related at numerous levels including relaxation, stress reduction, increased satisfaction, increased self-esteem and overall greater general health. These personal benefits produce citizens who tend to be more productive, happier, and more highly engaged within their communities.

Economic Benefits

Many communities are very interested in the economic benefits that municipal parks and recreation can provide, particularly given the fact that tax dollars are spent on providing the services. A huge benefit is the fact that parks and recreation services and facilities have been shown to help in the recruitment of new business as owners and employees look for communities with a wide variety of leisure opportunities a they recognize leisure's contribution to quality of life. Park space and trails can also have a direct impact on property values which obviously can be of benefit to the municipality as with increased property values come increased tax revenues. However, this can also serve as a benefit to individual property owners who see their property values increase as a result of parks development. As mentioned earlier, the related personal benefits of an active lifestyle also have economic implications as healthcare costs are reduced for those who more often get out and move – whether it be in a park or in a recreation program. Reductions in crime, money spent on recreation equipment, and tourism brought about through parks and recreation services also contribute to the economic health of a community. However, the economic impact of large events produced by community parks and recreation may be one of the most telling economic benefits. A large youth sports tournament as well as festivals and other special events can bring in tens of thousands of dollars in external monies to a community through the participants' support of local businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and retail shops.

Environmental Benefits

It should seem obvious that there are environmental benefits to retaining greenspace in a community. As mentioned above, greenspace can have a positive impact on property values due to the value that individuals give to open space as well as the beautification that often results from the preservation of the space. The simple presence of park space can also instill a strong environmental ethic in young and old alike which can have a carryover effect on other environmentally related projects and efforts within the community.

American Planning Association

The American Planning Association has published a number of briefing papers that outline how communities use parks. The list includes community revitalization, community engagement, economic development, creating safer neighborhoods, green infrastructure, helping children learn, improving public health, providing arts and cultural programs, promoting tourism, smart growth, and climate change management. Some key points include the following:

- Parks that serve as central walking, resting, and meeting places can revive failing or threatened commercial areas.
- Community residents and the city, working together on a neighborhood park project, can turn around a distressed residential area.
- Parks are one of the quickest and most effective ways to build a sense of community and improve quality of life.
- Parks have a positive effect on real property values, increase municipal revenues, attract and retain affluent retirees, attract knowledge workers and talent to relocate to an area, and attract homebuyers.
- Green residential spaces are gathering places where neighbors form social ties that produce stronger, safer neighborhoods.
- Creating an interconnected system of parks and open space is manifestly more beneficial than creating parks in isolation.
- City parks offer children a sense of place, self-identity, and belonging as an antidote to social alienation, vandalism, and violence.
- City parks engage children in informal, experiential learning through play and shared experiences with peers, laying the foundation for effective formal education and provide valuable resources for closing the educational gap in communities.
- Parks provide people with contact with nature, known to confer certain health benefits and enhance well-being and provide physical activity opportunities that help to increase fitness and reduce obesity.
- Cities need to provide all types of parks to provide their various citizen groups with a range of health benefits.
- Parks provide sites for special events, festivals, and sports tournaments that can attract tourists and be sources of economic benefits for smaller cities.
- Parks have voter support to direct public funds toward growth management strategies and can enhance mixed development and redevelopment strategies.

Conclusion

Municipal parks and recreation has a great deal to contribute to both individual and community development. The experiences that tax dollars that are used to support reap rewards far greater than those that are monetary. While the economics of parks and recreation, both the costs as well as the economic rewards, will always be recognized as an important part of the cost-benefit equation, research has consistently identified an array of additional benefits, both tangible and intangible that parks and recreation agencies can contribute to their communities, often at a far lesser cost than the private sector recreation providers.

Information Gathering and Research

Project Approach/Tasks Completed

- Series of meetings with Recreation Director, Ann Cunningham
- Meeting with City Manager, Ed Driggers
- Meeting with City Planner, Justin Glenn
- Reviewed previous city planning efforts
- Tour of city-owned recreation facilities and amenities
- Conducted five input sessions
 1. Greer Recreation Department Program Staff
 2. Greer Recreation Department Facilities Staff
 3. Greer Recreation Association - open to public
 4. Public Input Session I - November 6, 2008
 5. Public Input Session II - November 18, 2008
- Conducted needs assessment survey - online and paper versions were distributed
- Developed report

Vision, Mission, and Goals

Description

It is recommended that the City of Greer Parks and Recreation Department adopt and implement the South Carolina Vision Plan for Parks and Recreation. The South Carolina Recreation and Parks Association adapted this plan based on the California VIP Plan and research conducted in South Carolina.

This plan is intended to act as a management and marketing model for public recreation agencies in the state. Agencies should use the vision statement, values, and mission areas as the foundation for decision making and couch all evaluation efforts within the context of the plan's principles. In addition, the plan includes core competencies that agencies should work to develop among staff, strategies to assist in implementing and supporting the plan, and performance measures as the base of the plan.

The next page is the graphic illustration of the plan which is followed by a more detailed description of the plan and its principles. The plan and any of its components can and may be adapted or changed to fit the needs of the City of Greer.