



PROMOTING PARKS AND RECREATION'S ROLE IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



NRPA National Recreation
and Park Association
Because everyone deserves a great park

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PREPARED FOR: NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION

PREPARED BY: THE GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR REGIONAL ANALYSIS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parks and recreation supports environmental stewardship and promotes health and wellness in communities across the United States. Less appreciated are these agencies' many contributions to economic prosperity. Park and recreation agencies employ hundreds of thousands of people while their operations and capital spending generate significant economic activity. Moreover, local parks shape perceptions of and enhance the quality of life in communities.

This study builds on previous NRPA research on the economic importance of local park and recreation agencies by exploring the role that quality park amenities play in 21st century regional economic development. It reviews the impact that a community's quality of life has on its ability to attract and retain business and a talented workforce. This report also identifies opportunities where local parks officials can better engage with their communities' economic development entities.

Key findings of this report include:

- Parks and recreation is an engine of substantial economic activity in communities.
 - Park and recreation departments are significant employers in cities and towns. Their operations and capital spending generate positive impacts that ripple through local economies.
 - Local parks shape perceptions of a community and its overall quality of life that help build a sense of place.
 - Investments in improving a community's quality of life can create a virtuous cycle: high quality-of-life locations attract workers, which attract employers, which in turn attract even more investment and jobs.
- Quality-of-life considerations (including those made possible by high-quality parks and recreation) play a supporting role in site-location decisions. For some companies, high-quality park amenities can be pivotal in their final location decisions.
 - Quality-of-life factors are most important to firms that prioritize talent attraction and retention.
 - Firms looking to locate office operations (e.g., headquarters, regional shared-service centers or professional and business services) and which recruit employees regionally, nationally or even internationally, are more likely to prioritize quality-of-life factors in site-location decisions.
 - Small- and medium-sized, entrepreneurial or family-owned companies often want to locate in places that reflect their corporate culture or values.
 - This includes companies that emphasize outdoor recreation—either because they specifically produce/sell products for that market or their brand is well aligned with an active outdoor lifestyle.
- Park and recreation agencies contribute to the economic development process through:
 - *Business attraction*: Park and recreation agencies strengthen product development (e.g., building trail infrastructure) and enhance community “curb appeal.”
 - *Business retention and expansion*: Active engagement with companies and workers can influence business expansion decisions and attract new residents to a community.
 - *Talent attraction*: Many business owners are first introduced to places as visitors or tourists; positive recreational experiences can influence both business and talent recruitment.
- Park and recreation leaders—the agency director and senior leadership team—can become more involved in their region's economic development planning and activities by building new alliances to promote the value

of parks and recreation. Key players that offer opportunities for new partnerships include:

- Economic development organizations (EDOs)
- Civic booster organizations like chambers of commerce and convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs)
- Other municipal departments that shape quality of life (e.g., public schools, public libraries and transit agencies)
- Shapers of the built environment (e.g., private sector developers, downtown development organizations, business improvement districts and metropolitan planning organizations)
- Regional and neighboring park and recreation agencies and private nonprofit competitors (e.g., YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs)

■ The business and economic development communities can be powerful advocates for park and recreation departments. But there is also a need for an engaged citizenry.

- Engaged citizens actively work to shape the policy positions of local elected officials, and reliably vote for bond initiatives or the creation of special tax districts.
 - Engaged citizens who understand and promote how park and recreation amenities improve a region's quality of life can raise the profile of a park agency's contributions to economic development.
- Park and recreation departments must provide evidence of their value.
- Park and recreation leaders should identify persuasive metrics that speak to the role and contributions that their agencies make to business attraction and retention (e.g., number of bike commuters, jobs in the community filled by community residents or number of companies that use park and recreation facilities and programs).
 - Compelling anecdotes can further illustrate these impacts and help put a face on the data.





INTRODUCTION

Park and recreation departments support environmental stewardship and promote health and wellness in communities across the United States. Less appreciated, but just as important, are the many contributions that parks make to economic prosperity. Park and recreation agencies employ hundreds of thousands of people, while their operations and capital spending generate significant economic activity. Moreover, local parks shape perceptions of and enhance the quality of life in communities.

Corporate executives often include quality-of-life considerations when making site location decisions. A recent notable example is Amazon, which specifically lists quality of life as a key factor in its search for a second headquarters location.

“We want to invest in a community where our employees will enjoy living, recreational opportunities, educational opportunities, and an overall high quality of life. Tell us what is unique about your community.” [Amazon HQ2 RFP]

Ultimately, a wide array of factors—the availability of skilled talent, interstate highway access, proximity to key markets, for example—determines site location decisions. Places that possess a high quality of life—including a wealth of recreational amenities—are more likely to attract highly skilled, educated and entrepreneurial workers. The presence of these workers, in turn, attracts companies. By better understanding their role in community place making, park and recreation leaders can make stronger arguments about their agencies’ overall contributions to economic development.

This study follows up on previous NRPA research, conducted by the George Mason University Center for Regional Analysis, on the economic importance of local parks and the role that

these assets play in regional economic development in the 21st century. The current study identifies how local parks officials can better engage with those in the economic development community who can become important external allies by helping park and recreation leaders defend budgets, promote new initiatives and create more engaged constituencies.

Researchers from the Center reached their key findings based on conversations with more than 70 park and recreation leaders and economic development practitioners across the United States. These conversations focused on how park and recreation leaders currently promote their agencies’ economic contributions, the nature and extent of the relationship between parks leaders and economic developers, how both groups see these relationships evolving over time, and details regarding relevant department initiatives. The researchers also spoke to site-selection consultants to better understand the role that quality of life (and parks and recreation) plays in site-location decisions.

The first section of this research report briefly reviews some key academic findings regarding the economic value of local parks. Following that is a discussion of the role that quality-of-life factors play in corporate site-location decisions. We then examine ways park and recreation agencies can engage with the economic development community and thereby enhance their contributions to local economic growth. Interspersed throughout this section are specific examples that demonstrate the effectiveness of such collaborations. The report concludes with highlights of several key findings.

This study is based on conversations with more than 70 park and recreation leaders, economic development practitioners and site-selection consultants.

LOCAL PARKS MAKE A VARIETY OF ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

More than ever, park and recreation departments currently face significant funding pressures. Pitas, Barrett and Mowen find that the Great Recession had a negative impact on the budgets of park and recreation agencies as compared to the budgets of other public services (e.g., public safety or hospitals).¹ Further, park and recreation budgets have not yet fully recovered to their pre-recession levels. Indeed, the “new normal” (in terms of budget) is characterized by fewer resources, smaller workforces and new methods for service delivery (e.g., outsourcing and private-sector partners).

The slow recovery of these budgets reflects local government officials’ placing the value of parks and recreation at only a moderate level of importance. The 2017 NRPA report, [*Local Government Officials’ Perceptions of Parks and Recreation*](#), does reveal that local public officials see parks and recreation as a critical solution provider for many of their top concerns, including preventing youth crime and enhancing quality of life. At the same time, however, while most local government officials agree that such amenities are well worth the dollars spent on them, they concede that no other local-government-provided service takes a larger funding hit than does their park and recreation agency when the local government cuts back on spending.

The report also shows that local officials do not perceive park and recreation agencies as important contributors to their biggest day-to-day concern: economic development. Indeed, there is a gap in public officials’ perceptions about the economic benefits of public parks, even though park and recreation agencies generate significant positive economic impacts for communities and the nation. Narrowing this gap can have a significant positive impact on agencies’ funding.

Most notably, local park and recreation agencies contribute to local economies through significant direct employment—nearly 371,000 people nationwide, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.² The impact goes beyond just the numbers. Park and recreation agencies are often the first work experiences for many young adults who gain a sense of responsibility and self-confidence, and learn critical workplace skills that enhance the overall talent pool for companies and other employers.

The economic impacts of parks and recreation also extend beyond the benefits derived from direct employment, as agencies’ operations and capital expenditures ripple throughout national, regional and local economies. According to an NRPA-commissioned study conducted by the George Mason University Center for Regional Analysis,³ America’s local park and recreation agencies’ operations and capital expenditures generated \$154 billion in national economic activity and supported more than 1.1 million jobs in 2015 alone.

Other economic benefits from parks and recreation include:

- On-site business activity (e.g., concessions) and tourism-related spending when parks host out-of-town visitors for concerts, festivals, sports tournaments or other events⁴
- Increased property values that result from proximity to well-maintained parks, which in turn enhance local tax revenues
- Increased physical activity through parks and recreation programs that improves the physical and mental health of residents and lowers health care expenses
- Through effective land management methods and green

¹ Pitas, N., Barrett, A., Mowen, A. and Roth, K. (2018): “The Great Recession’s Profound Impact on Parks and Recreation.” *Parks and Recreation Magazine*. Ashburn, VA: National Recreation and Park Association.

² US Census Bureau, *2015 Census of State and Local Government Finance and Employment*, <https://www.census.gov/govs/local/>

³ The National Recreation and Park Association and the George Mason University Center for Regional Analysis (2018): *The Economic Impact of Local Parks*. Ashburn VA: National Recreation and Park Association.



infrastructure investments, parks and recreation makes communities more resilient to natural disasters, reducing disaster recovery and insurance costs.

IN ADDITION, THERE IS A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW QUALITY-OF-LIFE CHARACTERISTICS (INCLUDING THOSE ATTRIBUTED TO PARKS AND RECREATION) MAKE A COMMUNITY ATTRACTIVE TO POTENTIAL BUSINESSES AND THEIR WORKERS.

- According to Reilly and Renski, investments in improving a community's quality of life can create a virtuous cycle: high-quality places attract workers, which attract employers, which in turn attract more investments and jobs.⁵ These factors are particularly important for smaller and more rural communities that lack large markets, talent pools or well-developed identities.
- McGranahan, Wojan and Lambert find that places with landscape (e.g., woods, water), climate (e.g., sunshine) and recreational appeal (e.g., tourist attractions) are more likely to grow through creative and entrepreneurial industries.⁶

The influence of quality-of-life considerations on site-location decisions can vary by firm and industry characteristics.

- Reilly and Renski also find that research and development (R&D) facilities, technology companies and corporate headquarters are more likely to prioritize quality-of-life and cultural amenities when making site-location decisions. In contrast, manufacturers are more likely to prioritize traditional factors such as wage rates, transportation costs and proximity to markets over quality-of-life factors.
- Salvesen and Renski report that the competition for talent makes technology firms more likely to locate in amenity-rich communities.⁷ They also find that quality-of-life factors matter more in the decisions of where a firm's employees live than to the company's actual site location. This means that quality-of-life factors are most significant in selecting a city or region than selecting a specific work site.



⁴ More, T. A., Stevens, T. and Allen, P. (1988): "Valuation of urban parks." *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 15(1-2), 139-152.

⁵ Reilly, C. J. and Renski, H. (2008): "Place and Prosperity: Quality of Place as an Economic Driver." *Maine Policy Review* 17(1), 12 -25

⁶ McGranahan, D. A., Wojan, T. R. and Lambert, D. M. (2010): "The rural growth trifecta: Outdoor amenities, creative class and entrepreneurial context." *Journal of Economic Geography*, 11(3), 529-557.

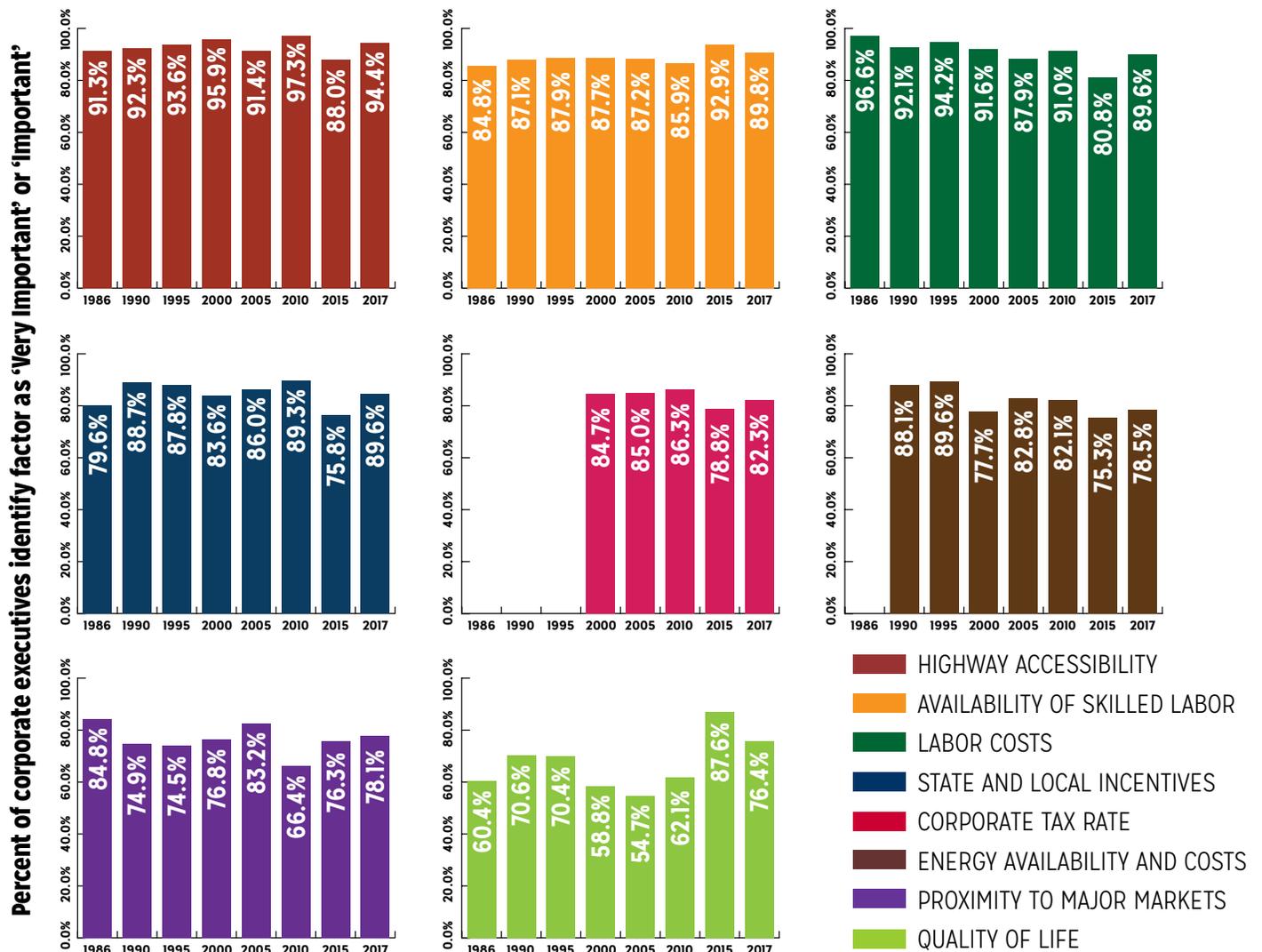
⁷ Salvesen, D. and Renski, H. (2003): *The Importance of Quality-of-life in the Location Decisions of New Economy Firms*. <https://curs.unc.edu/publication/the-importance-of-quality-of-life-in-the-location-decisions-of-new-economy-firms/>

QUALITY OF LIFE INFORMS—BUT DOES NOT DRIVE—SITE-LOCATION DECISIONS

Many factors drive corporate site-location decisions, but quality-of-life factors (e.g., school quality, access to amenities, cultural opportunities) increasingly have become critical ones (see Figure 1). According to *Area Development* magazine's annual survey of corporate executives, 76 percent of corporate executives identify quality-of-life factors as "Very important" or "Important" in their site location decisions—up from 55 percent in 2005.⁸

76% OF CORPORATE EXECUTIVES SAY QUALITY-OF-LIFE FACTORS ARE "VERY IMPORTANT" OR "IMPORTANT" IN THEIR SITE-LOCATION DECISIONS

FIGURE 1: IMPORTANCE OF SELECT SITE LOCATION FACTORS (1986-2017)



Source: *Area Development Magazine*

⁸ <http://www.areadevelopment.com/Corporate-Consultants-Survey-Results/Q1-2016/corporate-executive-site-selection-facility-plans-441729.shtml>

Interviews with several site-selection consultants reaffirm that talent attraction and retention considerations determine how companies prioritize quality of life. Firms that hire primarily from a local labor force (e.g., manufacturing, distribution, call centers) are less likely to prioritize quality of life; they assume that current residents—the existing potential workforce—are satisfied with the current quality of life in their communities. In contrast, companies looking to locate office operations (e.g., headquarters, technology-driven firms, regional shared-service centers or professional and business services) often recruit regionally, nationally, or even internationally. These companies want their offices and facilities in locales where their future employees want to live.

Site selectors also emphasize the short- and long-term influence of quality of life. In the short term, quality-of-life factors are important to firms relocating their headquarters or significant numbers of skilled and educated workers. To retain these workers, however, companies must consider factors ranging from school quality to cultural and recreational amenities.

Small- and medium-sized, entrepreneurial or family-owned companies are even more likely to put emphasis on the availability of these factors, as they want the communities in which they locate to reflect their corporate culture or values. For example, companies that emphasize outdoor recreation—whether because they specifically produce/sell products for this market or their brand is well aligned with an active outdoor lifestyle—tend to prefer places with extensive outdoor recreational opportunities. Over the longer term, companies need locations that will not only make their current workers happy, but what will make their locations attractive to future workers.

COMPANIES LOOKING TO LOCATE OFFICE OPERATIONS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PRIORITIZE QUALITY-OF-LIFE FACTORS IN THEIR LOCATION DECISIONS.

SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED, ENTREPRENEURIAL OR FAMILY-OWNED COMPANIES ARE MORE LIKELY TO WANT TO LOCATE IN COMMUNITIES THAT REFLECT THEIR CORPORATE CULTURE OR VALUES

COMPANIES WANT THEIR LOCATION TO BE ATTRACTIVE TO FUTURE SKILLED WORKERS

THE SITE-SELECTION PROCESS

The site-selection process can be viewed more as process of elimination process rather than a process of selection. Figure 2 shows that companies and site-location consultants examine different types of information throughout the process: each stage of the process is described in greater detail below.

1. Identifying Candidate Cities

At the beginning of the site-location process, site selectors examine broad factors including labor costs and availability, taxation and regulation, and access to markets and transportation. This initial screening is a data-driven exercise to find a manageable number of potential locations that meet a company's baseline needs. Quality-of-life factors are not always top of mind at this stage; when they are, the analysis focuses on factors such as crime data, school quality, cost of living, or housing costs and availability.



CASE STUDY

Measuring "Attraction"

One site selector uses net domestic migration trends—the difference in the number of people moving into and out of a given city, county, metro area or state, but where the origin and destination are both within the United States—as a proxy for determining the attractiveness of a metropolitan area. One would expect desirable metropolitan areas to have more people moving into the region than going out.

FIGURE 2: QUALITY-OF-LIFE CONSIDERATIONS THROUGHOUT THE SITE LOCATION PROCESS



2. Reputation and Marketing Helps Narrow the List

After identifying a set of potential locations, site selectors conduct more detailed examinations to find locations that best fit a company's needs. During this process, how the community presents itself plays a greater role in narrowing the list. This is the phase in which companies that prioritize lifestyle considerations pay closer attention to quality-of-life factors. For instance, firms that view outdoor recreation as

a key part of their corporate culture may be drawn to places such as Asheville NC, Chattanooga TN or Boulder CO—areas with an established reputation as an “outdoor town.” Those locations with a known reputation possess a competitive advantage over less prominent cities because they are perceived as less risky. This step of the process then leads to a shorter list of potential locations around which to plan site visits.

CASE STUDY

Asheville, NC—Becoming a Destination

It is only in the past quarter century that Asheville, NC has truly established itself as an attractive destination to both live and visit. Once a destination for the country's wealthy elite, Asheville's economy struggled and many of the Art Deco buildings in its downtown remained vacant throughout most of the 20th Century. Several events during the 1980s, however, changed Asheville's economic trajectory, including local residents rejecting efforts that would have razed downtown to build a mall. Instead, local leaders took several steps to revitalize the downtown area, including allowing sidewalk dining and liquor by the drink (a controversial step for the once-dry town) and organizing a summer festival to draw visitors.

Its quirky downtown combined with its location near the Great Smoky Mountains, Blue Ridge Parkway and other outdoor amenities helped draw visitors to Asheville. The unique character of downtown attracted a number of investments in its restaurants and shops. In turn, these investments drew the attention of developers which also saw opportunities for downtown residential development. By the 1990s, Asheville began to draw significant numbers of visitors, particularly those within a day's drive (from Atlanta and Charlotte). At one point, the Asheville-Buncombe Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan “Anyway You Like It” to emphasize that the city had something to offer people who liked either town-based or outdoor amenities.

Many of the people initially drawn to Asheville were middle- and upper-middle class baby boomers. They had the disposable income necessary to support the restaurants and shops in the downtown area. This created a virtuous cycle of spending and tax revenues to build new amenity infrastructure that, in turn, attracted outdoor outfitters as well as more hospitality and retail businesses. In addition to tourists, the region also attracted second-home buyers and retirees, further bolstering the region's housing market and property tax base. Many of those retirees are “half-backs”—retirees from the north who had initially decided to move to Florida but subsequently decided to move halfway back. Asheville's growth eventually spread to neighboring counties including Henderson, Transylvania and Haywood, due in part to Asheville's rising cost of housing.

Asheville's next chapter is currently being written. Baby boomers remain the primary source of in-migration to Asheville and its surrounding counties. Still, over the past half-decade millennials have become the largest cohort of in-migrants to Buncombe County. The amenities that originally drew baby boomers and retirees to the region are also attractive to millennials. Moreover, the region's amenities are increasingly becoming more tailored to millennials, as demonstrated by a dramatic increase in the number of breweries and distilleries. By offering a diverse set of natural and urban amenities, the Asheville region has been able to draw both tourists and new residents from multiple generations, kick-starting a virtuous cycle of growth.

3. Site Visits and Selecting a Location

Site visits allow company representatives to experience a community, visit potential sites and meet with relevant community officials. Such visits may include meetings with university or community college officials about relevant educational programs, discussions about the region's business climate with the local chamber of commerce, or talking to city planners and government officials about site

development or economic development incentives. These visits also allow a community to make a real impression on the key decision makers at the company, an opportunity when—in the words of one site selector—they are hoping to receive a “love bomb” from the community.

Communities only have one chance to make a positive first impression, and one way that park and recreation

departments can support a community's recruitment efforts in this phase is by contributing to a community's "curb appeal." Park and recreation facilities can be visible proof of a city's built environment. Parks departments might consider coordinating with their respective economic development organizations (EDOs) to ensure that nearby properties or facilities are well maintained (e.g., recently mowed) and nearby amenities well displayed.

Site selectors also emphasize that they and company officials notice if a community's marketing messages do not accurately reflect the community itself. Communities should promote what they are—not what they aspire to be. Site selectors also recognize inconsistencies—anything perceived as a misrepresentation might not only harm a community's image with the company with which it is negotiating, but could also disqualify the location for future corporate location opportunities.

Companies and site selectors also note sustained positive changes in a community. Established or on-going investments, such as upgrades in downtown parks, public spaces or other public facilities can impress company relocation representatives. Such changes work to a community's benefit over the long run.

Quality-of-life considerations (and, more specifically, the quality of parks and recreation) most likely play a supporting role in site-location decisions. But in some cases, quality park amenities can prove

COMMUNITIES ONLY HAVE ONE CHANCE TO MAKE A POSITIVE FIRST IMPRESSION... PARKS AND RECREATION IS A VISIBLE PROOF OF A COMMUNITY'S "CURB APPEAL."

CASE STUDY

Greenville, SC

Two site selectors noted that they have recognized the decades-long investments that Greenville, SC made in its downtown parks and public spaces. Consequently, Greenville has captured increased attention from companies and (and their workers) that previously had not considered the city for relocation.

COMMUNITIES SHOULD PROMOTE WHAT THEY ARE... NOT WHAT THEY ASPIRE TO BE

pivotal in a company's final decision. Community leaders and economic developers with well-established relationships with their park and recreation agencies and leaders can best take advantage of such opportunities when quality-of-life factors play a key role in the final site-selection decision.



EXPANDING THE ROLE OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

ASSESS YOUR PARK'S CURRENT PLACE IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

At the most basic level, park and recreation assets support broader place-promotion efforts of their cities and towns. Community marketing organizations (e.g., the local chamber of commerce) regularly need new and current content that sets their region apart. Park and recreation agencies' amenities and offerings serve this purpose.

Most of the park and recreation leaders interviewed for this research indicate that their community's economic development marketing features images of local parks and

other recreational facilities. However, often the park and recreation agency does not receive credit in these materials and is usually not involved in the creation of these marketing materials or strategies.

A review of economic development marketing materials from 133 different communities of various sizes and geographically distributed across the country⁹ finds that:

- 72 percent of communities use images of urban parks and public spaces, outdoor amenities (e.g., mountains, lakes, trails), OR recreational and cultural facilities (e.g., aquatic facilities, amphitheaters) in their economic development marketing materials.

CASE STUDY

Dallas, TX—"Say Yes to Dallas" Talent Recruitment Campaign

As part of a 2015 strategic planning process, Dallas-based employers identified their ability to attract and retain talent as the region's most significant competitive challenge. Business leaders in the Dallas region determined that they needed to be more proactive and targeted in their talent attraction efforts. The Dallas Regional Chamber had been involved in talent attraction when Toyota relocated its North American headquarters to Plano. While that effort focused on making North Texas attractive to Toyota workers from California, Kentucky and Georgia, the new effort would be focused primarily on attracting talented millennials. The result was the "Say Yes to Dallas" talent recruitment campaign.

Developing this campaign's message was very much a data-driven exercise. Dallas Chamber of Commerce staff sought input from several Dallas-based groups, including young professional organizations, university and college career centers, recently relocated workers, and area companies looking to recruit workers. Importantly, the Dallas Regional Chamber also commissioned a national survey of millennials to better understand their priorities when looking for a place to live. The Chamber specifically targeted millennials, not only because they are soon to be the nation's largest generation but also they are most likely to relocate.

The survey results found that convenient access to parks, green space and hike-and-bike trails was the second most important factor for millennials when deciding where to live and work—ranking only behind the quality of career opportunities. These survey results led the Chamber to display information about parks and recreation amenities more prominently on the "Say Yes to Dallas" website. The website now features information related to parks and trails, golf courses, public dog parks and water bodies, as well as some "hidden gems."

The Dallas Chamber of Commerce continues to highlight park and outdoor assets—as an updated 2017 survey reconfirmed the original survey findings. The campaign's forward-facing marketing and social media campaign emphasizes outdoor activities and amenities and is very much directed toward millennials. The website also includes information about school quality and housing that might appeal more to older millennials and Gen Xers.

The region's park and recreation departments contribute to the Chamber's "Say Yes to Dallas" campaign primarily by providing marketing content—compiling lists of the jurisdiction's park and recreation assets, identifying "hidden gems" and providing updates on new efforts so that the Chamber offers the most current information. Chamber staff is particularly focused on staying current on big developments, such as the Trinity River Corridor Project, Klyde Warren Park, or efforts to connect the region's bike trail systems to create a bike loop around the city. Formalizing this information pipeline is one of the reasons that the Dallas Chamber of Commerce's policy team has a representative on the city's parks and recreation board.

⁹ The original sample was drawn from 150 different park and recreation departments; 133 had a corresponding economic development organization.

- 70 percent of these communities make specific reference to quality-of-life considerations OR present parks-related data and information (e.g., number of parks, acreage of park lands, miles of bike trails or average driving distance to state or national parks).
- 32 percent credit or cite the community's park and recreation department in their marketing materials.

These images and data help economic development organizations (EDOs) appreciate the economic value of park and recreation assets and quality-of-life considerations more broadly. But by failing to work closely with its local park and recreation agency on such efforts, an EDO cannot fully understand the wealth of offerings a local park and recreation agency delivers to its community.

Repairing the disconnect between presenting valuable amenities in marketing collateral and not working closely with the agency that delivers them presents a valuable opportunity for park and recreation departments to raise their profiles. It can also result in allies who will advocate on park agencies' behalf. In addition, closing the gap raises the likelihood that an EDO will successfully utilize the many valuable park and recreation amenities in any future economic development efforts—a win for both parties.

MAKE THE WHOLE GREATER THAN THE SUM OF “THE PARKS”— PROACTIVELY PURSUE PARTNERSHIPS

Cultivating strong partnerships within and outside the community is key to park and recreation departments being able to grow and thrive in the future. Strong partners can promote and advocate for parks and recreation. Partnerships also create new opportunities for park and recreation agencies to demonstrate their value to a community.

Economic development organizations (EDOs)

EDOs are central to attracting, retaining and expanding business activities to and in a community. These organizations also often play a central role in shaping a community's marketing message. But the nature of the

working relationship between an EDO and the local park and recreation agency can vary greatly.

Organizational structure can dictate the extent to which EDOs collaborate with local park and recreation agencies. Close, formal collaborations between EDOs and park and recreation agencies are most common when the EDO is either a part of the same government or has a formal working agreement with the government.

CASE STUDY

Frisco, TX Parks and Recreation Department

The Frisco, TX Parks and Recreation Department regularly interacts with the city's economic development group—the Frisco Economic Development Corporation (EDC)—in part because both are part of the same municipal government. Frisco is a particularly interesting example of such a collaboration because it benefits from support from a local-option sales tax from its EDC that provides resources that can pay for some amenities that fall broadly into the realm of parks and recreation. This creates opportunities for shared promotion, leverage resources and future partnerships.

CASE STUDY

The Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce

The Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce contracts with the city government to do economic development, retail development and run the convention and visitors bureau. It works extensively with multiple municipal city departments, including the local park and recreation agency.

Overall, several factors may influence or enhance partnerships between EDOs and local park and recreation departments, including organizational factors:

- Structure (public, private, nonprofit)
- Size (staff availability)
- Funding and resources
- Leadership (existing relationships and willingness to collaborate)

CASE STUDY

Roanoke, VA—Roanoke Outside

Establishing a community as an outdoor recreation destination is no easy task. Not only must the community possess the right natural amenities, it must also have a culture that prioritizes and promotes an outdoor lifestyle. Through efforts undertaken by its regional economic development organization (EDO), public park and recreation departments and private-sector partners, Roanoke (VA) is building its reputation as an outdoor destination.

Located in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, the Roanoke metro area is home to roughly 315,000 residents, 100,000 of whom live in the City of Roanoke. Unlike other southern Appalachian cities like Asheville (NC), Greenville (SC) or Chattanooga (TN), it does not have an established reputation for attracting retirees, outdoor enthusiasts or high-profile employers (e.g., BMW in Greenville, Volkswagen in Chattanooga). Coming out of the recent recession, Roanoke's challenge was not that it had a bad reputation, but rather no reputation at all. This lack of identity put the area at a competitive disadvantage for attracting companies, entrepreneurs and residents.

With no model to emulate, Roanoke created its own model to market the region externally and internally. Civic leaders realized that their outdoor amenities and scenic views could be more than just wallpaper; rather they could be foundational to the region's economic development strategy. As a result, local leaders launched the *Roanoke Outside* initiative as a vehicle for positioning the area as one of the country's best outdoor communities.¹¹ *Roanoke Outside* seeks to create greater opportunities for its residents to participate in outdoor activities (e.g., running, hiking, biking, paddling, etc.) as a way to demonstrate to visitors and prospective companies alike that the region's lifestyle and culture centers on outdoor activity and environmental stewardship.

The Roanoke Regional Partnership—a multi-jurisdictional EDO—led the initial effort to market and coordinate the region's outdoor amenities, programs and opportunities. This included facilitating greater communication and interaction among the region's public park and recreation departments and private outfitters. Regional stakeholders have subsequently created the Roanoke Outside Foundation as a 501(c)3 organization that organizes a series of high-profile events. For instance, the Roanoke Outside Foundation owns and operates the Foot Levelers Blue Ridge Marathon—known as “America's Toughest Road Marathon”—as it involves over 7,400 feet of elevation change.

The region's showcase event is the Go Outside Festival (GO Fest). GO Fest is a three-day event with a wide array of outdoor recreation-themed activities and entertainment. The event is a collaborative effort between the Roanoke Outside Foundation and the City of Roanoke's Department of Parks and Recreation, and is partly supported by a wide array of corporate sponsors. The festival has grown significantly over the last several years, starting with 3,500 attendees in 2011 and up to 36,000 in 2017. As a result, GO Fest has grown beyond being a local event and now attracts national attention.

These collaborative efforts among the region's economic developers, park and recreation departments and private-sector leaders have helped establish a new brand for the Roanoke region. Nurturing a culture of outdoor recreation helped attract companies like Deschutes Brewery and Humm Kombucha—two companies that were looking to locate East coast operations to a place that shared the outdoor values found in their Bend OR headquarters. It also contributed to the region's successful efforts to attract Backcountry.com's distribution center. Moreover, local employers have used GO Fest as an opportunity to attract talent. For instance, the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and Research Institute used GO Fest as a tool to attract potential medical students because it demonstrated the region's quality of place.

Beyond some of these tangible outcomes, Roanoke Outside has also provided a venue for the entire region's economic development (EDO) and park and recreation departments to meet regularly, enabling greater communication, coordination and collaboration among the different agencies in the region. For instance, the Roanoke Regional Partnership (and EDO) can alert the park and recreation department about potential site visits from companies; the parks department can then ensure that any adjacent parks or trails are freshly groomed. Such efforts contribute to the community's “curb appeal.” Challenges do, however, remain, as the region must continue to raise its profile as a leading outdoor town. Notably, it must continue to pay attention to issues of equity and inclusion so that the entire community is able to participate in these activities.

¹¹ <http://www.roanokeoutside.com/>

Other civic booster organizations

Absent any pre-existing relationship with the local EDO, park and recreation agencies may find it challenging to build such alliances overnight. Rather, a park and recreation agency (and its leadership team) may need to build its brand as a collaborative partner. Park and recreation agency leaders may want to consider engaging with other area stakeholders in the economic development process.

Many park and recreation leaders identify their community's convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs) as natural partners. Both EDOs and CVBs market the community: CVBs specifically market a community's recreational assets, frequently highlighting the amenities that park and recreation departments offer. Closer collaboration with CVBs allows park and recreation departments to better shape their community's promotion efforts.

BOTH EDOS AND CVBS MARKET THE COMMUNITY: CVBS SPECIFICALLY MARKET A COMMUNITY'S RECREATIONAL ASSETS, FREQUENTLY HIGHLIGHTING THE AMENITIES THAT PARK AND RECREATION DEPARTMENTS OFFER

Numerous park and recreation leaders also have found success by engaging with their local chambers of commerce (CoCs). Civically engaged, private-sector leaders understand the importance of building an overall quality of place—for their cities and their own businesses. They are also important constituents in promoting the value of parks and recreation and can be key advocates for advancing significant funding or bond measures.

CASE STUDY

Engagement with local civic boosters has benefits

Parks and recreation leaders in Miami FL and Springfield MO report that participating in their local chamber of commerce's sports commission gave them an entry to chamber activities. In Minneapolis this relationship has evolved further: the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board Superintendent sits on the Board of Meet Minneapolis, the city's convention and visitors organization.

Leadership training programs are another avenue for building networks with both public and private-sector leaders. Examples include Leadership Wichita, Leadership Frisco, and Lead Virginia—all intensive programs (some as long as 9-12 months) that develop leadership skills and increase community involvement. Often organized by nonprofit organizations or chambers of commerce, these programs encourage participants to develop real connections with other local public- and private-sector leaders. Newly installed park and recreation managers may want to explore these kinds of programs for building networks and sharing the parks and recreation story with other community leaders.



Shapers of the built environment

Park and recreation departments often oversee key infrastructure that can enhance private developments and create opportunities for mutual benefit. They have many opportunities to engage with partners that share an interest in the built environment.

Private commercial and residential developers and park and recreation departments share an interest in shaping the built environment. Park and recreation departments have also worked with business development groups on projects to improve the livability of city centers/downtowns by partnering on events, park redevelopment and creating bike-friendly routes through downtowns. These types of projects provide opportunities to create and strengthen partnerships with key constituencies. In finding opportunities for mutual gain, park officials can work with private developers on projects that can reshape the built environment to create more live, work and play opportunities.

CASE STUDY

Tampa, FL—Collaborating with Developers

In Tampa, FL the parks and recreation department partnered with private developers to redevelop the Tampa Heights Neighborhood. As part of this effort, the agency worked with property owners adjacent to Water Works Park to create a connection to the Tampa Riverwalk—a 2.6-mile walking/biking trail that connects major area attractions and includes dining and shopping venues along its scenic pathways. The Riverwalk and the reconstructed Water Works Park were key pieces in marketing commercial and residential properties in this redeveloping neighborhood. Moreover, the city and the private developers worked with the utility companies to share some of the costs associated with the private developments and park renovations.

Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and downtown development groups are another set of potential partners. Businesses in New York City wanted close-by outdoor spaces that their employees could use during lunch breaks: the city's park and recreation department worked with local BIDs to improve the quality of parks near office centers

Colleges and universities can play a vital role in strengthening their communities' quality of place. Such partnerships not

only afford park and recreation departments the opportunity to forge relationships with anchor institutions (which often are among the largest regional employers), but they can also entice students to stay in the area after graduation.

CASE STUDY

Wichita, KS Park and Recreation

Wichita, KS Park and Recreation collaborated with Wichita State University in supporting the 2018 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament by hosting Fan Festivals in its downtown parks. The Bend, OR Parks and Recreation District is working with Oregon State University's local campus to provide recreational facilities and programs for its students.

Competitors as collaborators

Park and recreation agencies can benefit by partnering with their fellow park and recreation agencies in neighboring jurisdictions to present a unified image of a desirable place to live. This is particularly valuable when trying to attract larger corporate relocations in which company employees are likely to reside in several local jurisdictions. By presenting a unified "bigger picture" of accessible multi-community facilities, neighboring park and recreation departments can demonstrate to companies that their locations offer an expanded range of available programs and services as diverse as a potential employer's workforce. Additionally, presentations that reflect regional options—such as transportation networks that connect a variety of communities—make local parks more accessible to a larger population. These kinds of regional or collegial partnerships can enhance a park and recreation agency's network of

**PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES
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supporters and create synergies that boost the broader park system's impact on regional economic development.

In economic development circles, communities sometimes engage in “co-opetition”—they cooperate on key initiatives while competing in other arenas. In many communities, the universe of recreational services and amenities includes public, private and nonprofit providers. The combination of a local park and recreation agency's amenities and offerings with those of nonprofit providers (e.g., local conservancies, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs) creates a compelling picture of the wealth of affordable, high-quality recreation opportunities.

ENGAGE THROUGHOUT THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

There are many ways that park and recreation leaders can engage with economic developers and other key community stakeholders. Below we identify some specific ways park systems can contribute at different points throughout the economic development process.

Place making is a key element of business attraction

As noted earlier, many EDOs regularly use images of park and recreational facilities in their marketing efforts—and not only at agencies with iconic properties such as the San Diego Parks and Recreation Department which includes Balboa Park, the San Diego Zoo, Torrey Pines Golf Course and Mission Bay Park. EDOs in smaller communities also highlight parks properties to market a community's quality of life.

CASE STUDY

Direct access to trail networks can be particularly attractive to companies that value “wellness”

Economic developers in Roanoke, VA discovered that Deschutes Brewery (headquartered in Bend, OR) values outdoor recreation and desired bike accessibility for its employees and visitors. As part of Roanoke's recruitment efforts, Roanoke Parks and Recreation cleared a 100-yard path from its trail network to a potential industrial site in preparation of Deschutes' site visit. This single act was one of several that the city made, resulting in a positive impression on the company and attracting the Oregon-based brewery to invest in Roanoke for future expansion.

Strengthening relationships with civic boosters like EDOs and chambers of commerce increase the likelihood that local civic organizations will recognize and acknowledge the ways parks and recreation shapes a community's image.

Park and recreation leaders can play a critical role in economic development—a core element in attracting business to a community. Sites and buildings are certainly foundational to economic development infrastructure. But park infrastructure can also support economic development.

For instance, communities may consider their trail infrastructure as a critical component of their local transportation network. The Bend (OR) Park and Recreation District's new comprehensive plan envisions its trails as vital transportation corridors that will help relieve traffic congestion as the city becomes more densely developed. Importantly, framing a trail network as transportation infrastructure potentially opens access to a wider range of funding sources.

Trail networks can also connect residential development to commercial development. Many younger, skilled workers prefer locations that offer live-work-play residential options, options often found in urban or downtown settings. Suburban, commercial developments may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage if they lack amenities that provide workers with the ability to exercise during their lunch break or bike-commute to work safely. Commercial property owners can narrow the amenity gap by collaborating with local park and recreation agencies to create more direct access to trail networks.

Oklahoma City, OK—Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS)

In 1992, United Airlines chose Indianapolis over Oklahoma City as the site for a new maintenance facility. The loss was a missed opportunity for the region, perhaps made more painful when United Airlines acknowledged that it selected Indianapolis, in part, because it believed that Oklahoma City had an inadequate quality of life, limited amenities, and in general was just not a place where it thought United Airlines employees would want to live. This created a crisis of confidence that sparked Oklahoma City's civic leadership to launch an ambitious plan to remake the city's image. What emerged was the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) capital improvement program. Given that Oklahoma City had limited financial resources and a generally tax-averse population, this program required creative financing. After Oklahoma City voters approved a temporary one-cent sales tax, the city adopted a pay-as-you-go model that would fund construction of the capital improvement projects only after the city had generated the necessary revenue.

The original MAPS sales tax lasted 66 months and generated \$309 million in revenue, with an additional \$54 million in interest, all of which was targeted for MAPS projects. Since the city paid for these projects with the temporary sales tax revenues, it essentially paid for these projects in cash. With no interest to pay, the cost of these projects was less than if the city used traditional borrowing mechanisms.

To date, there have been three rounds of MAPS initiatives, and Oklahoma City officials are currently considering a MAPS 4. From start to finish (voter approval, revenue collection, construction), each round follows a 10-12 year cycle.

- **Original MAPS (1993-2004):** The original MAPS initiative focused on revitalizing Oklahoma City's downtown area. Investments were made to redevelop the Bricktown area as a center for nightlife and recreation. MAPS revenue paid for the basketball arena, a music hall, a downtown library and improvements to an Oklahoma State fairgrounds. Importantly, MAPS revenue also paid for the transformation of several key segments of the sometimes dry North Canadian River into a seven-mile series of river-lakes. The renamed Oklahoma River Waterways now attracts visitors and residents to the city's urban core.
- **MAPS for Kids (2001-2014):** MAPS for kids was another capital improvement program that focused on schools. Like the original MAPS initiative, it involved the use of a temporary one-cent sales tax, but was done in concert with a bond initiative. Of the revenues, 70 percent was allocated to Oklahoma City schools and 30 percent to surrounding suburban districts. The projects included renovating schools and investing in school technology, purchasing new buses, and school parks and recreation facilities.
- **MAPS 3 (2009-2021):** MAPS 3 is another capital improvement program focused on quality-of-life projects. As a result, significant investments have been made in river improvements including a whitewater center, trails and sidewalks. Construction has also begun on Scissortail Park, a 70-acre park that will connect downtown Oklahoma City to the Oklahoma River and includes trails and sports facilities. MAPS 3 revenue will also fund the construction of a downtown streetcar, a new convention center, and several senior health and wellness centers.

In addition to the creative financing model used for these capital improvements, the MAPS initiatives have also been characterized by the strong partnership between the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce and the Oklahoma City government. While the city leadership and its departments (e.g., Parks and Recreation, Public Works, Transportation, et al.) are key implementers, the Chamber has played the key role of staffing the MAPS initiatives, gathering input about projects to pursue, publicizing successes and generating support for future efforts—particularly within the business community.

The city government/chamber of commerce relationship has been instrumental in the ongoing voter support for MAPS program, as the two groups can convene the people and other entities necessary to move forward with such ambitious efforts. The City and Chamber share the work in organizing and implementing the initiatives—from generating support for the sales tax to overseeing the final construction. They also have regular communication: the City's and Chamber's senior leadership meet quarterly to discuss the MAPS work and any other relevant city initiatives. Stable leadership in both organizations helps, but these relationships have, over time, become more institutional than personal. The strength of these relationships has ensured that there is no gap in the vision of the city's future direction. The Chamber's central role in providing the city with economic development, tourism promotion and retail development services further strengthens this alignment since there are fewer outside organizations that might have competing visions.

The MAPS programs have transformed Oklahoma City's image—both externally and internally. Internal messaging is vital, as MAPS would not have succeeded without strong public support. Such support often begins with the business community, but ultimately the voters need to approve any temporary sales tax to fund these initiatives. In short, the community needs an army of advocates to create a culture in which people care about the built environment.

Generating continued support for future MAPS initiatives will require proponents to be strategic about the projects they want to fund. Up to this point, many MAPS projects were in the city's downtown core. But as the city considers the possibility of a MAPS 4, there are discussions about whether those future projects should be located outside of the downtown area. In doing so, more people would stand to see and benefit from these future investments, and in turn continue to maintain support for MAPS.



Parks and recreation contributes to business retention and expansion

Even after a city or town attracts a new employer, the local park and recreation agency is a vital component in a community's business retention efforts. Economic developers often focus primarily on attracting companies and creating jobs in their communities as these activities generate new corporate tax revenues. But communities also benefit by attracting the workers that fill those jobs: new residents drive additional home sales and consumer spending, both of which magnify the economic impact of a corporate move-in. Park and recreation departments can play an important role in attracting a workforce. This is particularly true for those corporate moves that involve relocating and attracting high-wage, highly educated workers.

Local government services that contribute positively to quality of life (e.g., park and recreation, schools, transit) can also make companies "feel good" about their site-location decisions. Positive community experiences for a company and its workforce can help influence decisions about future expansion and investment in the area. Moreover, satisfied companies are more likely to share their experiences with other firms, further promoting the community as a good place to do business.

CASE STUDY

Arlington, VA—Aftercare Services

Arlington, VA provides new companies with aftercare services that promote the community as a great place to live as well as a great place to work. As part of this effort, the Arlington County Government meets with a company after the firm has made its site-location decision, but before relocated workers have moved to the area. Representatives from Arlington County's various quality-of-life departments, including Parks and Recreation, make a coordinated and comprehensive pitch that sells the community to the company's incoming workers.

Over the long term, this word-of-mouth among companies and site locators can burnish a community's reputation as a good place to both live and do business. Parks and recreation can contribute to this virtuous cycle, not only by providing high-quality facilities and programs, but also by actively engaging

THE LOCAL PARK AND RECREATION AGENCY IS A VITAL COMPONENT IN THE COMMUNITY'S BUSINESS RETENTION EFFORTS

with newly located companies to encourage their workers to take advantage of available facilities and resources. As corporate relocations typically affect high-wage workers, convincing these workers to live in the community where they work can generate additional home sales and property tax revenues.

CASE STUDY

Westerville, OH—Engaging Companies

In Westerville, OH, the park and recreation department contributes to the city's economic development activities during the business attraction phase, but it continues to engage companies once they begin operating in Westerville.

Recognizing that employers hire regionally, Westerville's "Workplace Wellness" program extends resident rates for their programs and facilities to all workers who are Westerville-based, regardless of where they actually live. This not only makes companies feel appreciated by the community, but it also allows the community to build relationships with potential residents. For instance, Westerville workers that rent in a neighboring community might consider buying homes in Westerville if they have had a positive experience with the community.

Recreational amenities are key to attracting talent and entrepreneurs

Parks and recreation helps communities make positive first impressions not only on companies but also on potential entrepreneurs and small business owners. As is the case for representatives of larger companies and site-location consultants, many small business owners, entrepreneurs and even some highly skilled telecommuters are first exposed to a location as tourists. More so than for company site-location decision makers, quality-of-life factors are more likely to drive these individuals' decisions about where to live. Most entrepreneurs will remain "lone wolves," but

some will go on to grow into larger business entities and add employees.

In a 2010 survey of Deschutes County (Bend, OR) business owners, consulting firm Headwaters Economics found that most of the company leaders they spoke with indicated they located their firms in Central Oregon simply because they liked it as a place.¹⁰ Specifically, these business leaders mentioned the climate and the access to trails, rivers and public lands. In fact, many of the owners first discovered the area when they came as visitors.

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Participate in the economic development planning process

Membership on an EDO's board of directors is a sign that park and recreation leaders are essential partners in a community's economic development process. This not only means that park and recreation agency contributions are fully recognized; it also means those agencies are able to influence a community's economic development marketing messages. Moreover, raising agency visibility could transform local public officials' and other community leaders' perception of parks and recreation from a "nice to have" luxury to a

critical component of a vibrant community (and help to close that "perception gap" about the economic contributions of parks and recreation). These same government leaders may then be less prone to target park and recreation budgets during future economic downturns.

Still, park and recreation leaders indicate participation on local/regional economic development boards is relatively uncommon—and can take a long time to be effective. In order to cultivate a strong relationship between a park and

¹⁰ *Improving Deschutes County's Competitiveness: Business Location and Retention Factors, a report by Headwaters Economics commissioned by Economic Development for Central Oregon, July 2010. Available at: https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/Deschutes_Report_Full11.pdf*

recreation agency and economic development board, agency leaders should:

- **Find opportunities for collaboration:** It is easier to collaborate when one is already collaborating, so even small partnership projects can strengthen relationships with an economic development community. Small projects can also better position park and recreation departments to contribute when larger opportunities arise.
- **Invite economic development practitioners to participate on park and recreation boards:** Park and recreation agencies should invite economic developers (e.g., local EDOs, city departments, utility companies, etc.) to sit on their organizational board of directors. Beyond bringing developers' unique perspectives to the park agency's board, such engagement will broaden developers' understanding of the full range of activities that parks and recreation offers.
- **Identify other potential collaborators:** Park and recreation leaders should also pursue opportunities to serve on the boards of area convention and visitors' bureaus, downtown development groups and chambers of commerce sports commissions—all of which may serve as an indirect path to the economic development process.
- **Play the long game:** These relationships do not develop overnight; external partners' perceptions of parks and recreation likely will need to evolve. As a result, engagement efforts should include not only a park agency's director but also the agency's leadership team. By including agency senior staff in networking opportunities, these relationships will be more sustainable and will foster organizational relationships in addition to personal relationships among partnering agencies and organizations.

CASE STUDY

San Diego, CA—Finding Opportunities for Collaboration

Finding collaborative opportunities is fundamental to building relationships and creating allies. Some of the opportunities can come in an unexpected form. The San Diego Parks and Recreation Department does not have a strong connection to the regional economic development corporation, but it does have a relationship with the City's economic development department. This pre-existing relationship allowed the park and recreation agency to help an innovative company, Aira, which was looking for a location to test its product after it approached the City's economic development department for assistance. Aira has developed a headset that connects sight-impaired people with professional agents to help describe what they are seeing and explain where they need to go. The City's economic development department worked with the park and recreation department to allow Aira to use Balboa Park as a testing site for its technology.

This partnership benefitted all parties involved. The company received access to a premier location to test its new technology. The economic development department was able to help the company solve its challenge of finding a testing location and thus enabled the company to succeed in San Diego. The park and recreation department contributed to the development of a technology that will make its parks more accessible. These kinds of small, collaborative opportunities can lay the foundation for more significant future engagements between a park and recreation agency and the economic development department

ACTIVATE AN INVOLVED SET OF STAKEHOLDERS (WE'RE ALL AMBASSADORS)

The business and economic development community can be a powerful advocate for park and recreation departments. While this support is necessary, it is not always sufficient. The park and recreation leaders interviewed for this report emphasize the need for an involved public. Engaged citizens do more than just use park and recreational facilities and

ENGAGED CITIZENS SHAPE THE POSITIONS OF LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS OR RELIABLY VOTE FOR BOND INITIATIVES OR THE CREATION OF SPECIAL TAXING DISTRICTS

programs; they also actively work to influence the policy positions of local, elected officials, reliably vote for park bond initiatives and support the creation of other funding mechanisms.

Having an engaged citizenry requires taking care of the fundamentals: providing consistently high-quality park and recreation facilities and relevant programming—voters are more willing to support amenities they themselves use or those that contribute to community pride. A local park and recreation agency must constantly communicate with its constituents regarding current and future programs and facilities, and why residents should be proud of their park and recreation system.

An engaged populace creates a cadre of ambassadors that can help “sell” the community at large, including its park and recreation amenities. Particularly effective for economic development efforts are engaged citizens who embrace, understand and promote the brand being put forward by civic boosters—including how park and recreation amenities improve a region’s quality of life—as it makes those marketing messages more authentic.

Park and recreation leaders should also consider generational differences. Millennials will soon be the nation’s largest block of potential voters, and are a generation that places a premium on work-life balance and a greater value on publicly supported amenities and recreational opportunities. At the same time, many baby boomers are becoming empty nesters, looking to downsize into townhomes or condos, and will have their own unique needs and desires for local park amenities. Each of these generational cohorts represents large voting blocs that may prove particularly supportive of public parks and recreation.

TRACK AND MEASURE IMPACTS

It is not enough for park and recreation leaders to say that their activities make positive contributions to the local economy; they need to provide evidence to strengthen their case. As park and recreation systems engage more with

economic development partners, agency leaders need to identify compelling metrics that demonstrate the economic development contributions of parks and recreation.

PARK AND RECREATION LEADERS NEED TO PROVIDE EVIDENCE THAT THEIR ACTIVITIES MAKE POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Park and recreation agency leaders should highlight and communicate metrics that speak to parks and recreation’s role and contributions to business attraction and retention. Examples of such metrics may include:

- The number of bike commuters using system trails
- Number of residents that both live and work in the community
- Number of park workers being hired for their first job
- Number of companies and company employees that used park and recreation facilities and programs.

These data are often not readily available. Consequently, dedicated resources—and the cooperation of local employers —may be needed in order to collect and generate this information. Internally, these data provide feedback about program efficacy and impact. Externally, these insights can be used to motivate continued interest from partners, potential partners and funders. Even the act of requesting information from companies can be an opportunity for engagement.

In addition to communicating metrics about the impact of park and recreation activities, there is value in finding effective anecdotes to further illustrate such impact. A good case study can help put a face on the data and make it more memorable to partners, funders and the community at large. All of this information is required to help park and recreation systems tell their story and promote their efforts.

KEY CONCLUSIONS

Park and recreation agencies contribute to their local economies in a variety of ways. Strong park and recreation departments generate significant direct and indirect economic impacts through their employment and spending, and proximity to well-maintained parks can boost property values. Park and recreation departments can also shape their community's quality of life, building a sense of place that makes an area more attractive to employers and talented workers. Investments that strengthen quality of life can spur sustained economic growth that attracts talent, which in turn supports business attraction and development.

While elected and appointed public officials may personally appreciate the value of parks and recreation, park and recreation agencies historically have endured the most aggressive budget cuts during times of fiscal austerity and economic downturns. Creating an understanding of the connection between parks and recreation and economic prosperity among agency stakeholders and constituents is the best defense against the next fiscal downturn. Park and recreation leaders must communicate effectively the story of how their agencies can shape the trajectory of their local economy and routinely promote their successes.

While park and recreation leaders should take advantage of opportunities where they can to promote their agencies' positive impact, this message may be more effective if it comes from other voices. Park and recreation agency directors and senior leadership teams should actively engage other organizations like economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, and even competing organizations or neighboring park agencies, all of which—directly or indirectly—benefit from strong park and recreation amenities and offerings.

Building such a network requires developing relationships through collaboration. This report has identified several ways that park and recreation departments can collaborate with local and other organizations to promote their contributions to economic development—directly engaging companies, providing marketing content or serving on organizational boards. The onus is on park and recreation leaders to find ways to contribute to and collaborate in the economic development process, and help transform the perception of parks and recreation as not only a driver of quality of life in the community, but also as a basis of economic prosperity in the region.



ABOUT NRPA

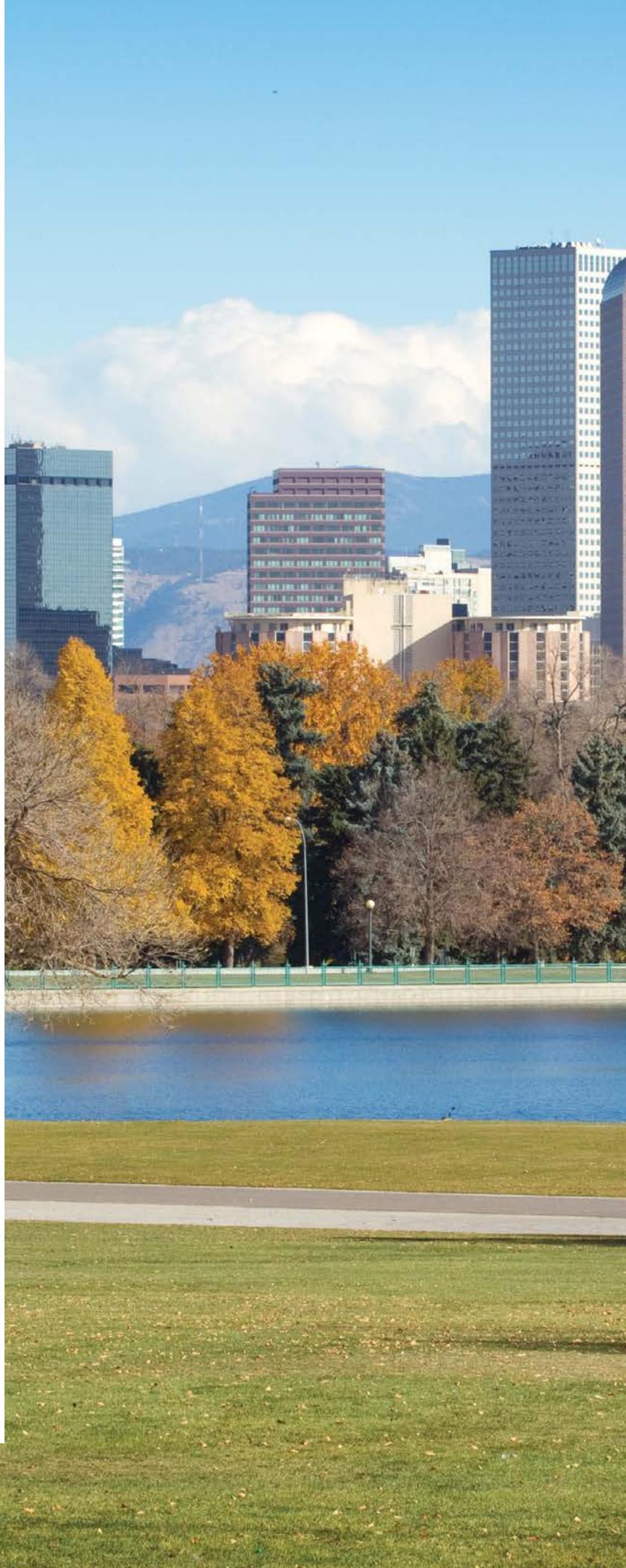
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**800.626.NRPA (6772)
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