

Maximizing Citizen Participation in the Recreation Master Planning Process

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Citizen participation is the active, voluntary involvement of individuals and groups to change problematic conditions in communities, and influence the policies and programs that affect the quality of their lives or the lives of other residents. One area in which citizen participation is crucial is in the development of master planning for park and recreation services.

Citizen involvement strengthens resident participation in democratic processes, assists groups in advocating for their needs, and builds organizational and community problem-solving resources and capacities. Citizen input is a vital segment of the master planning process and the first critical link in forcing governmental accountability, and creating shared responsibility for sustaining crucial recreation and park resources in communities.

Public participation should inform and educate the general public about problems and alternative solutions, and identify impacts and opportunities available with regard to park and recreation issues in communities. It can identify and document the needs, values, and goals of affected individuals and communities within the planning area. It informs decision makers of the impacts, values, etc. associated with a proposed action, and identifies conflict while providing a process through which conflict can be resolved.

Common Methods for Obtaining Citizen Input in Recreation Master Planning

Over the last two decades obtaining public input in the master planning process has become more strategic. Traditional methods such as personal interviews and print and telephone surveys have proven useful in collecting data. Technology has created new methods for obtaining valuable feedback from citizens via web-based surveys and the use of kiosks located in government operated buildings. Focus groups are frequently convened as a part of the citizen input process to triangulate data obtained from other sources.

Utilizing a multi-method approach to garner public input will produce a realistic picture of the community's recreational needs. The key is to let the public know they have an opportunity to express their needs and concerns.

Recently, IBM and Neighborhood America combined efforts to develop an innovative strategy for improving and fully supporting citizen participation. The IBM - Neighborhood America Public Comment® Service (www.publiccomment.com) enables planners and project managers to collect, moderate, and report public comment--those comments collected both on-line and by traditional means such as fax, phone and public hearings.

The Web-based system also simultaneously enables project teams to create and manage project records, and empowers these teams to easily publish content to dedicated public involvement web sites or government portals. The IBM - Neighborhood America Public Comment® Service has been used in small projects such as downtown master plans, and in large, complex projects such as environmental, transportation, and regional planning.

The National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior recently used the service in its “Flight 93 Memorial Project” with a high degree of success.

Public Meetings

The most productive method to determine the leisure time needs is to solicit input through public meetings. Public meetings provide the citizenry with opportunities to give their ideas and comments on the proposed park and recreation master plan. The following are examples of the types of public meetings which can be conducted:

- Neighborhood meetings. This type of meeting educates, informs and solicits input on a community level.
- Meetings with key community leaders. Provides local officials with unique perspectives from long-standing residents or influential stakeholders related to the recreational interests or needs in a given community.
- Meetings with service organizations and community groups. Allows user groups to provide collective input into the planning process.
- General public meetings. Residents are invited to comment on the proposed draft of a comprehensive recreation master plan. At least two general public meetings should be held to review the proposed master plan. Enlisting the support of local television stations, cable access channels and radio stations to announce and actively cover and support public meetings helps to promote and validate the process.
- Charettes. Engage citizens in a short, intensive design or planning workshop designed to stimulate ideas and involve the public in the community planning/design process. It is a valuable tool for laying the foundation for the development of a recreation master plan.

Barriers to Citizen Participation in the Master Planning Process

Toward maximizing public participation in the recreation master planning process, emphasis should be placed on removing potential barriers to participation. Some of the most common barriers to participation include the following:

- Posting information related to public meetings on agency websites. Despite the progress that has been made in reducing the technology gap across socio-economic strata, many households do not own computers, therefore cannot access information nor provide input electronically.
- Failure to place information in the most common places that people frequent. In many instances, as an oversight, officials fail to place information in places such as supermarkets, churches, dry cleaners, Laundromats, or in and on various modes of public transportation to announce the meeting.
- Time and place. Periodically, meetings are scheduled to begin directly after the standard 9:00-5:00 p.m. work shift, without regard to the post-work activity of families or for those who work non-traditional work schedules. Additionally, the proximity of the meeting site may have an adverse impact on meeting attendance. Optimally, neighborhood locations, within a one mile radius of impacted residents will yield good results.

- Residents' perceptions of demands on an individual's time. A major resource of small voluntary organizations, such as neighborhood organizations, is the participation of its members, including their time and energy which must be mobilized into active involvement and performance of tasks. Therefore, it is important that residents believe that their time is valued and they have the capacity to make a difference.
- Failure to focus on the relevant issues by neighborhood and community. People will attend and provide "lively" comment on issues that relate to "quality of life" concerns in their own neighborhood.

Consideration for Diverse Participation

As communities become more diverse, avoiding "single voices" becomes an imperative. Inclusiveness in the process is critically important to both its validity and success. As forethought, recreation users and nonusers, individuals with disabilities, seniors, racial and ethnic minorities and special interest groups who have a vested interest in the plan and its future implementation must be engaged. This way, there will be a plurality of viewpoints engaged on the front end of the planning process.

To protect the integrity of the citizen participation process and to avert undue criticism stemming from "exclusivity" or limited access to various facets of the public, the process must be well documented. Documentation must include the following information:

- Identification of key stakeholder, the methods used to contact stakeholders, and the results of efforts made to enlist the support of stakeholders
- Sampling plan (type, size of sample, etc.). Random samples of people are best. The more people in your sample, the more reliable your information will be.
- Methods (questionnaire, public meetings, etc.) used in gaining public comment.
- Number of people surveyed or attendance at meetings.
- Date(s) and location(s) of the survey and/or meetings (Newspaper articles are good documentation).
- Summary of the comments. Comments extracted in the public input process should be summarized and placed in accessible, conspicuous places for public viewing as well as placed in the final plan.

Outcomes of Meaningful Citizen Participation

The vitality of communities depends upon an informed and involved citizenry. One of the most important outcomes of meaningful citizen participation in the recreation master planning process is collective efficacy. The term describes residents' perceptions related to their ability to work with their neighbors and local government officials to intervene in neighborhood issues to maintain social control and solve problems.

Where there is significant citizen input, a master plan can be developed which reflects the shared vision of local officials and the citizenry. Finally, where the contributions of the citizenry are solicited and valued, the pragmatic side of financing the implementation of plan can be discussed and agreed upon with little dissent.

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