



An El train passes over the 606, an urban park and elevated trail stretching 2.7 miles across four Chicago neighborhoods.

Contemporary Parks and Recreation Planning

PLANNING TOOLS

AMERICAN PARKS AND recreation planning evolved from the sanitary reform and health movement in the mid-

19th century. In her seminal 1982 work, *The Politics of Park Design*, Galen Cranz discusses how subsequent parks and park systems have reflected the values, needs, and attitudes of American society, including the Pleasure Ground (1850–1900), the Reform Park (1900–1930), the Recreation Facility (1930–1965), the Open Space System (1965–2004), and most recently, the Sustainable Park that responds to the needs for our cities to become more ecologically and socially sustainable.

The current focus on sustainability has led to far more complex parks and

recreation planning processes, as noted by Peter Harnik in *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities*:

“A major problem for [park] advocates and managers is that parks seem relatively simple and straightforward. People frequently say, ‘It’s not rocket science, it’s just a park.’ No! For rockets . . . you need to be good at math. Parks require math plus horticulture, hydrology, psychology, sociology, and communication. They are immensely complicated.”

Today’s parks and recreation master plans may address any number of urban issues important to a community: residents’ needs and priorities; programs; capital improvements; trends; operations and maintenance; funding and fiscal sustainability; political priorities; level of service; comprehensive plan goals;

service-delivery models; mission, and role; branding; partnerships; staffing; land development codes; impact fees; park classifications; economic development; social equity; environment and green infrastructure; agency accreditation; cost recovery; aging in place; design standards; marketing; tourism; health and wellness; quality of life; crime; redevelopment; and resource protection.

There is no prescribed process or methodology for conducting a parks and recreation system planning process. According to APA’s 2008 Planning Advisory Service Report *From Recreation to Re-creation*, “specific guidance on planning for parks and open space systems in a manner similar to other community resources is simply not available.”

The planning process

As outlined in the recent *PAS Memo* entitled "Alternatives for Determining Parks and Recreation Level of Service," the typical parks and recreation master planning process consists of four phases: existing conditions analysis; needs and priorities assessment; long-range vision; and implementation strategy. Each phase of the process builds on the findings and conclusions from the previous phase(s).

THE EXISTING CONDITIONS ANALYSIS includes an assessment of both the community and the parks and recreation system. The community analysis focuses on understanding the context of the parks and recreation system within the community's history, vision, values, demographics, land-use patterns, and standards. This phase typically includes the review of previously prepared guiding documents such as comprehensive plans, vision plans, strategic plans, redevelopment plans, previous parks and recreation master plans, and other documents related to the issues being addressed in the process.

It is particularly important to evaluate existing and projected future land development patterns and demographics to gain a thorough understanding of the types of people who are and will be living in the community, their preferred lifestyles, the density of development in different parts of the community, and other factors that may provide insights into parks and recreation needs, priorities, and desired levels of service.

THE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES ASSESSMENT determines the gaps between existing and desired conditions. Communities typically use a "triangulated" approach to identifying needs, including various types of qualitative and quantitative techniques to determine top priorities from different perspectives.

Qualitative techniques typically include interviews with elected officials, community leaders, and other key

stakeholders; focus group meetings with user groups such as sports leagues, seniors, and teenagers; workshops with a project advisory committee and the public; and informal discussions with residents at special events.

Quantitative techniques include statistically valid surveys, non-statistically valid online surveys, and LOS benchmarking in comparison with other communities. It is important to note that benchmarking has replaced state or national standards in determining appropriate parks and recreation LOS.

The third phase of the planning process is to develop a long-range vision based on findings from the first two phases of the process, best planning practices and principles, and the unique desires and aspirations of the community. Elements typically include a long-range vision for each of the parks and recreation "subsystems" such as parks, trails, and bikeways; athletic complexes; community centers; aquatic centers; civic plazas; natural areas; historical and cultural sites; water access; and programs.

THE IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY may include recommendations for funding, phasing, partnerships, capital improvements, programs, operations, maintenance, staffing, policies, regulations, and the means of accomplishing the long-range vision. The implementation phase also includes recommendations for updates to the community's comprehensive plan, impact fee ordinance, land development regulations, and other policy and regulatory documents to reflect the new vision and standards for parks and recreation.

Relationship to a community's comprehensive plan

David Rouse, FAICP, APA's managing director of research and advisory services, noted at a recent parks conference that "the comprehensive plan is the framework defining how all city plans, investments, and programs fit together to support a

common direction." Since a parks and recreation system master plan addresses so many elements of the public realm—"a community's publicly accessible system of streets, sidewalks, parks, civic spaces, historic and cultural areas, natural areas, trails, stormwater treatment ponds, utility corridors and/or other lands owned and managed by city, county, regional, state or federal agencies" it is imperative that the comprehensive plan reflect the findings and recommendations for the parks and recreation system master plan. Key elements that should be included in the comprehensive plan include the summary of findings from the existing conditions analysis and needs assessment; proposed guiding principles, projects, and initiatives from the long range vision; and an overview of the proposed implementation strategy. The specific details of the parks and recreation master plan can also be adopted into the comprehensive plan by reference.

The role of planning commissions

Planning commissions can play a vital role during the parks and recreation master planning process, providing interim review and feedback regarding the needs assessment findings, the long range vision, and the implementation strategy.

Commissioners should ask to review interim draft documents at each stage of the planning process, as well as interim presentations to the commission. Commissioners can identify any conflicts or inconsistencies between the parks and recreation master plan and the comprehensive plan, as well as opportunities to further community goals and policies.

Perhaps most importantly, planning commissioners can serve as the "vision keepers" for the community, making sure that every planning decision is consistent with the community's vision for its parks and recreation system.

—David Barth, PhD, AICP, ASLA

Barth is the principal of Barth Associates in Gainesville, Florida. He specializes in the planning, design, and implementation of the public realm.