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URBAN PARKS: Volunteers and Civic Engagement

When citizens are engaged with urban park and recreation departments, everyone benefits. Citizens can improve their local neighborhoods and have a positive influence on community life, while park departments have citizen input to help with decision making and can develop a committed corps of volunteers.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam describes how social change and civic engagement are affecting American communities. Civic engagement is based on the premise that all citizens can contribute ideas, energy and action for improving their communities. Putnam finds that more and more citizens are taking charge of their local neighborhood resources.

People are becoming engaged as *citizens*, not just as consumers (Harwood, 2004). That means they are seeing themselves as resources in their communities and want to participate in addressing local issues. The benefits of civic engagement are well documented in communities nationwide. Where civic engagement is high, streets are safer and public spaces are cleaner (Putnam, 2000).

Civic engagement is beneficial not only for citizens and park and recreation agencies, but for schools and businesses as well, and it can lead

to the formation of partnerships with other public agencies and advocacy groups.

Successful Civic Engagement Programs

As the following examples illustrate, programs can vary in size and scope. They can be seasonal or ongoing, citywide or countywide initiatives. Most civic engagement programs can be initiated without a lot of additional resources. Park and recreation departments often become more innovative as they engage citizens in local efforts and events.

ParkScan – San Francisco, California

ParkScan is a partnership of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department and the Neighborhood Parks Council, an advocacy group. Trained observers track park and playground maintenance issues in San Francisco and in the surrounding county and use a Web-based reporting system. Maintenance conditions are made public and can be tracked at www.parkscansf.org/parkscan.aspx.

ACE – Arlington, Texas

The ACE (Action to Conserve the Environment) Project is a successful volunteer recruitment program that enlists volunteers to work at least 4 hours in one day or one weekend on a specific, assigned project. Volunteers may

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paint, mulch, weed, remove trash or perform other tasks, and are awarded certificates of appreciation for their service (<http://www.ci.arlington.tx.us/park>).



Adopt-A-Park – Austin, Texas

Through this program, citizen volunteers are involved in cleaning up parks and in other activities (<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/volunteer.htm>).

Getting Citizens Involved

There are many ways to get citizens involved with urban park and recreation departments. Park and recreation managers can:

- Be ambassadors to the community, visiting with neighborhood groups and other civic organizations about local issues.
- Make sure the public knows what takes place at park board meetings. Recruit citizens to serve on the board and on various committees. Newer residents, especially, may not know how they can get involved.
- Create opportunities for community or neighborhood groups to “adopt a park” or take responsibility for various programs and activities.

- Be active in schools, so young people will spread the word about what is going on to parents and neighbors.
- Recognize and showcase the accomplishments of citizens to inspire others to be involved.

Who Benefits Most?

The benefits of civic engagement are especially far-reaching for older adults and young people. Older adults can share their experiences, pass on their knowledge to others, and remain active in the community. Young people who participate in park and recreation programs have more opportunity for social, physical and psychological development. Getting them involved in solving issues such as vandalism or the loss of open space helps young people develop leadership skills and prepares them for a lifetime of active engagement in their communities.

Park and recreation departments benefit by improving public relations and fostering a philosophy of partnership with the citizens they serve.

Civic engagement is a two-way street. For park and recreation departments it means seeking common ground with citizens and letting them know how they can be involved with local planning and activities. For citizens, it is an opportunity to participate in decision making and planning for parks and programs. Active civic engagement transforms volunteers into partners. These long-term relationships take time to develop, but produce tangible rewards for communities of all sizes.

References

- Harwood, R.C. (2004). Finding the right path: Public agencies and civic engagement, *National Civic Review* 93:74-76.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The collapse of and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster: New York, NY.

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