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Turning a Dream into Reality

Strategies to Help Your Township Hit a Park and Rec Home Run

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A coach asks the township supervisors to develop a park with ballfields. Parents, on the other hand, want a playground. Older adults want a safe place to walk, noting that township roads can be dangerous. With such diverse requests, how can you, as a township official, meet the recreational needs of your residents?

Townships throughout the commonwealth have struggled with these issues with varying degrees of success and by taking very different approaches. The

goal of this article is to uncover how other townships have hit recreational home runs and provide you with what you need to know to start planning for parks in your community.

Why parks matter

Most of us understand the benefits of having a park in our community. It offers a place where toddlers can swing and climb, youngsters can hit a baseball or score a goal, teens can conquer their fears on a skateboard ramp, adults can connect with nature after a stressful day, and senior citizens can walk to improve their health. Many of us have gathered at parks for picnics with friends and family. We have cheered with our neighbors at a game and met new friends at festivals.

Parks strengthen communities by bringing people together. Our need to occasionally connect with our natural environment is very strong and often explains why we live where we do.

Finally, parks help to preserve open



SOCOLOW PHOTOGRAPHY

Parks strengthen communities by bringing people of all ages together. The truth is, though, that it's a lot easier for a township to dream about a park than it is to make one a reality. However, parks are possible if your township enlists community support, develops a plan, and knows where to find funding.

space and benefit the economy of the area. Land values increase near parks. Employers want to locate in quality communities with parks and trails. Regional parks can enliven the economy of nearby townships.

The truth is, though, it's a lot easier to dream about a park than it is to make one a reality. So how can a township pull together the resources to turn a dream into an actual green gathering place filled with picnic tables, baseball and soccer fields, basketball and tennis courts, and walking trails?

See 'Park and Rec Planning' on Page 5

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The answer: Enlist the community's help, have a plan, and know where to find funding.

Getting started

Townships have acquired their first park in a variety of ways. Many parks, however, sprouted from land donated to the township.

In Jackson Township, Cambria County, the school district donated the land for its first park; the second came about when Bethlehem Steel sold land to the township for \$1. In Redbank Township, Clarion County, the American Legion gave land, once the local fairgrounds, to a recreation commission for a park. Findlay Township in Allegheny County leases the property for its Recreation and Sports Complex from the Allegheny County Airport Authority.

Organizations such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, church groups, sports leagues, and firefighter associations have all helped communities acquire land for parks and develop recreational facilities. In fact, many parks were acquired at costs well below market rate because the township had civic-minded residents who wanted to leave behind a lasting and positive legacy.

There can, however, be a "downside" to townships obtaining parkland through donations or the efforts of volunteers. Donated property with steep slopes or wet areas may not be suited for park facilities that require level land. Also, access can be a problem if the land is "out of the way."

And there is something else to keep in mind: Energetic residents may have good intentions, but they may also lack the necessary planning skills to make a park a success.

Perhaps you have visited a park that never seems to have sufficient parking. In one township, the only place to sit and watch a baseball game is along a park road, creating a big liability for the township.

Yet, despite these and many other examples of poor planning, township officials and residents are hesitant to spend money

to plan for parks. Residents may question why the supervisors would want to spend money on a plan when they could use the funds to pay for one more backstop. Others may argue that they do not want to see another plan that "sits on the shelf."

So why invest in a plan?

The easy answer is that the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which is the primary source of grant funding for recreational projects in Pennsylvania, will be hesitant to allocate money for your park project unless you develop a plan. State officials have seen many poorly planned parks that are abandoned, under-used, or unsafe. They also have received grant requests to fix problems that could have been avoided with good planning.

However, the primary reason to develop a park and recreation plan is to ensure that your township uses its resources wisely.

Think about it this way: If you're planning a major trip, you will likely map a route, consider interesting sites to visit, research accommodations, and figure out how much you can afford to spend. Likewise, planning that new park ensures that your township develops facilities that are truly needed and are designed to be safe and easy to maintain.

This is where a township's planning commission and park and recreation board, if you have one, will be especially helpful. As your township develops a plan, these local experts can help you fine-tune the details, from providing adequate parking to figuring out the landscaping.

Creating a new township park

OK, so now a local landowner has approached the township, saying he wants to sell his property to the community for a park. What's your next step?

The township supervisors will need to determine the recreation needs of township residents; evaluate the property to determine if it can meet those needs; and get a good understanding of the financial commitments the new park will require.



If your township has acquired land for a park, you will need to conduct a feasibility study to determine the recreation needs of township residents; evaluate the property to determine if it can meet those needs; and get a good understanding of the financial commitments the new park will require.

A feasibility study can provide you with these answers.

Once a feasibility study is completed and the land passes muster, the township should develop a master plan that guides its decision making and answers the following questions:

- How can we provide safe access to the park?
- Where should facilities and activities be located?
- What facilities should not be located near each other?
- How can we connect the park to surrounding neighborhoods with trails so residents can walk or bike there?

As the township develops the master plan, it will also need to build consensus. A successful public participation process, like a cake, has several layers.

Well-facilitated public meetings and a study committee representing varying viewpoints can provide important information. Questionnaires distributed to residents can glean more opinions, especially from those who do not attend the meetings. Focus groups and interviews with key people also help to build a common view.

Be sure to include neighboring landowners in the consensus-building process. They will have concerns about access, noise, lighting, and the potential for trespassing. In Winfield Township, Butler County, for instance, one neighbor initially opposed the park.

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However, when her concerns were addressed in the master plan, she became an advocate.

Township officials should also build consensus among competing organizations and leagues. Often, a municipality cannot meet everyone's needs in one park. However, by including everyone in the discussions, the plan should be widely supported.

The bottom line in all of this is that the more residents are involved, the better the master plan will be, and the greater its potential for implementation.

Funding parks and recreation

Once your township acquires land for a park, it must clear another hurdle: Paying for it.

Money will be needed to develop, maintain, and operate the park so your township will need to consider multiple funding sources. You will want to identify groups, organizations, or state agencies that may have an interest in the specific project.

Creativity here is key since tapping into a variety of sources will enable the township to lower its tax contribution to the project. Potential funding sources include:

- **State agencies** — The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has money available to fund everything from ballfields to playgrounds and picnic shelters to trails.

DCNR's Community Conservation Partnership Program, a combination of several funding sources and grant programs, provides money that helps townships acquire parkland and develop feasibility studies, master plans, comprehensive recreation, park, and open space plans, and greenway/trail plans. (*Note: The deadline to apply for these grants is generally in April and September. You can learn more about the program by logging onto www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/grants/.)*

The challenge for many townships that receive this funding, though, is securing the 50-percent local match that is required as a condition of the grant. Most communities assume that the match has to be in the form of cash. However, the program allows land-value donations if the property has been purchased for less than market value. For example, if a parcel of land is appraised at \$100,000 and the landowner agrees to sell it to your township for \$50,000, the donated value of \$50,000 can be used toward the local non-cash match.

Other state agencies, including the Departments of Community and Economic Development and Transportation, also provide funding for parks and recreation.

In addition, townships can apply for Community Development Block Grants to help them meet requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act or provide recreational facilities in areas that meet certain income guidelines.

- **Neighboring municipalities** — Your township should approach your municipal neighbors about participating in or contributing to your park project. DCNR looks favorably on projects that involve more than one municipality

- **Local organizations** — Often, local recreation organizations are willing to raise funds to build or upgrade park facilities. These funds can be used to help your township meet the local match required to receive grant funding.

- **Funds set aside for other projects** — Money that your township has set aside for another project in or near a park can be a source of matching funds, too. For instance, if the township is planning to install a water or sewer line in the park, the money spent on its construction could go toward the local match. The same is true of money budgeted for parking areas, roads, trails, trailheads, and other recreation-related projects.

'Do today what is possible'

Turning your park and rec dream into reality can be a daunting task for township supervisors, planners, and park board members. But, as many communities have proven, the dream is within reach.

As the late Paulo Freire, a noted Brazilian educator, suggested: "The best way to accomplish that which is impossible is to do today what is possible."

About the author: Jim Pashek is president of Pashek Associates, a community, recreation and site planning firm in Pittsburgh. The firm also has a Mercer County office. Pashek leads a team of specialists that plan all aspects of parks and recreation. He has lectured on park planning at PSATS' annual state convention and authored articles on park development. For more information about park planning, e-mail Pashek at jpashek@pashekla.com or log onto www.pashekla.com. ♦

DCNR publications can help you plan your parks and preserve open space

The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources offers a wealth of publications to help townships with all aspects of their parks and recreation programs.

The following are available for download at www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/publications. Townships can also order printed copies of publications (*unless otherwise specified below*) from the same site or by calling the Bureau of Recreation and Conservation at (717) 787-7672.

- **Multi-Municipal Cooperation for Recreation and Parks**
- **Community Recreation and Parks Handbook**
- **Financing Municipal Recreation and Parks**
- **Better Models for Development in Pennsylvania** (available in book and CD)
- **Using Conservation Easements to Preserve Open Space — A Guide for Pennsylvania Municipalities** (available as a PDF on the Web and CD only)
- **Opportunity Knocks — Open Space is a Community Investment** [available on the Web and CD only; for the CD, call the Heritage Conservancy at (215) 345-7020.]
- **Public Finance for Open Space: A Guide for Pennsylvania's Municipalities** [available on the Web and CD only; for the CD, call the Heritage Conservancy at (215) 345-7020.]
- **Implementing a Municipal Open Space Program: A Guide for Pennsylvania's Municipalities** [available on the Web and CD only; for the CD, call the Heritage Conservancy at (215) 345-7020.]
- **Pennsylvania Greenways: An Action Plan for Creating Connections**
- **Recreation and Parks Board Handbook**

Parks strengthen communities
by bringing people together.