

IDENTIFYING ISSUES WITH LOCAL RECREATION PROVIDERS FOR THE 2004-2009 INDIANA SCORP

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Abstract

The focus of this research was to identify issues faced by local recreation providers. The State Division of Outdoor Recreation, as sponsor of the project, considered local issues identification important, because they are responsible for documenting issues and trends across the state. The research team conducted a content analysis of the master plans of local park departments to identify important issues, which were then tested with quantitative approaches through a mail survey. Responses from agency employees and park board members were organized into the following categories – organizational structure, demographics, administration, capital projects, facility maintenance and renovation, educational and other programming, and funding issues. In some instances, qualitative and quantitative results were similar. In other cases, the qualitative method produced findings somewhat unique from those found through the quantitative method. Results were provided to the state agency for documentation of local issues in writing the next Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of this project was to identify the most pressing issues facing local park and recreation providers across Indiana. Local providers were defined as those agencies providing recreation at municipal, township, and county levels of government. The funding agency for the project was the Indiana Division of Outdoor Recreation. As the agency responsible for statewide recreation planning, they sought to better understand local issues and to incorporate research findings into the writing of the next 2005-2009 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). The research was conducted by a team of students and their faculty advisor at a state university.

There are various issues facing local park and recreation providers. For example, one important issue involves the role that the local park and recreation system plays in the minds of citizens and community leaders. As Hunt, Scott, and Richardson (2003) suggest, local recreation leaders try to position a public park and recreation agency as an important part of the local community in the minds of citizens. Kraus and Curtis (2000) argue that the concept of community relations is one of the most important things that recreation managers need to address for successfully reaching their goals. This involves working with several stakeholder groups in the community, not only clients using recreation programs. Thus, issues would include perceptions of residents about the community role of their park boards and recreation agencies.

The role that local park systems play in the community can be examined from different perspectives. One is that park and recreation providers seek to improve the health and quality of life for their citizens. Health goals can be formulated for all citizens, or for specific groups, such as senior citizens or persons with disabilities. Public recreation agencies can offer a variety of programs and facilities, often more diverse than the offerings of fitness clubs. Furthermore, the philosophy behind public provision of parks and recreation is that opportunities can be made available and accessible for all citizens (Orsega-Smith et al. 2000). In order to provide opportunities for participants, local recreation agencies have to manage facilities, which may involve capital projects or facility renovation. They may also provide staff for programming. Some have argued that these goals are increasingly difficult with shrinking governmental budgets. Others have counter-argued that there is a lack of empirical data to show that municipal parks have experienced budget declines and in fact that park budgets have remained stable (Connolly and Smale 2001/2002) or that capital project funding has increased over time. According to Crompton and Kaczynski (2003), money for capital projects by local governments across the U.S. grew by 58% from the early 1990s to 2000. However, as noted by Gladwell et al. (2003), funding affects every part of a park and recreation agency and is increasingly an important issue. For this reason, local providers seem to be looking to alternative funding strategies, such as fees

and partnerships. They also look to marketing to enhance their identity in the community and increase public participation.

Local recreation providers deal with community issues, facility renovation, capital projects, funding, programming, staffing, and marketing, as well as many other issues. In the statewide project being discussed, we sought to identify those issues as perceived as most important by local recreation providers. Issues were defined for this project as follows: goals, objectives, concerns, opportunities or threats that can be identified as most relevant to planning for the future activities of local park and recreation departments.

2.0 Methods

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used for this project. First, a qualitative approach involved doing a content analysis of a stratified, random sample of local master plans based on population size (N = 55). The sample was drawn to represent different community sizes in the state. These five-year plans were read to detect the most important issues, based on how much coverage they were given in the master plans. Interviews were also conducted with park and recreation leaders as a qualitative approach, using open-ended questions. Qualitative approaches were used for the project from 2002-2003. The issues identified through qualitative methods were placed into one of several categories. They were as follows: 1) Park and Recreation Organization; 2) Community and Demographics; 3) Administration; 4) Capital Projects / Facility Development; 5) Facility Maintenance and Refurbishment; 6) Education/Programming; and 7) Funding. From the issues that emerged from the qualitative methods, questions were created for a mail survey. Variables were measured using quantitative approaches, e.g., Likert scales. An important goal of the project was to compare and contrast the qualitative and quantitative findings. For this reason, the survey questions were created based on the content-analysis of the local, five-year master plans. In this monograph, a selection of issues was made to be addressed from the mail survey data, given space constraints. However, they were some of the most important issues identified through the quantitative and qualitative methods.

The mail survey was sent to park superintendents and park board members operating at the local government

level, based on a mailing list supplied by the State Division of Outdoor Recreation. The mail survey questionnaires were mailed in November of 2003. All responses were received by the end of January 2004.

2.1 Response Rate

Multiple mailings were used to try to achieve a higher response rate (Sallant and Dillman 1994). A total of 484 mail surveys were sent to local leaders, defined as park board members and park and recreation superintendents. One week after the initial mailing, a reminder postcard was sent. Based on the mail survey and postcards sent, 16 had undeliverable addresses. After the initial mailing and the reminder postcard, there were 182 usable questionnaires returned and entered into an SPSS database for analysis. The effective response rate for the mail survey was as follows: 182 responses/468 deliverable surveys, i.e., a 39% response rate.

3.0 Results

Findings from the mail survey are now examined according to some of the categories that had been identified in the content analysis of local master plans. Survey results are presented in subsequent sections as follows: characteristics of respondents; community representation, issue identification, capital projects and facility maintenance issues, and marketing strategies.

3.1 Survey Respondents

Respondents were examined according to the government agency and role they represented. The mail survey was mailed to park board members and employees of park and recreation departments. The term "local" was defined for this project as municipal, township, or county government. The data in Table 1 suggest that there are two dominant voices represented by the survey respondents, namely municipal employees and park board members. There were fewer respondents from township and county levels of government.

Regarding organizational structure, respondents represented different types of systems: 60% (N = 110) had both park boards and park and recreation departments in their communities; 34% (N = 62) had only park boards operating but no park and recreation department; 5% had a park and recreation department but no park board; and one rare respondent noted neither a park and recreation agency nor a park board.

Table 1.—Characteristics of mail survey respondents.

| Respondent role in park system | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Employee of Municipal Park and Recreation Department | 81 | 44.5 |
| Employee of Township Park and Recreation Department | 1 | 0.5 |
| Employee of County Park and Recreation Department | 19 | 10.4 |
| Member of Park Board | 59 | 32.4 |
| Other | 17 | 9.3 |
| No answer | 5 | 2.7 |
| Total | 182 | 100.0 |

Survey respondents were examined by gender and years of experience as shown in Table 2. There were more men in parks and recreation leadership roles than women. More than half of the respondents had 10 years or less of experience working with the parks and recreation profession; however 19% had been in the profession for more than 21 years. This represented a range of professional experience among park and recreation leaders in Indiana's communities.

3.2 Community Sizes

Respondents represented communities of different sizes. The data were compared to all of Indiana's jurisdictions. The mail survey had higher representation from larger communities than smaller communities based on the state distribution of community sizes. On the other hand, there were higher frequencies of respondents from smaller communities. The highest response was from persons associated with populations between 10,000 and 49,999.

Table 2.—Gender and years of experience among survey respondents.

| Gender | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Male | 121 | 68.0 |
| Female | 57 | 32.0 |
| Years in parks and recreation | Frequency | Percent |
| 1-5 | 44 | 25.9 |
| 6-10 | 51 | 30.0 |
| 11-15 | 26 | 15.3 |
| 16-20 | 16 | 9.4 |
| 21 or more | 33 | 19.4 |

3.3 Identifying Issues

Respondents to the mail survey were given an open-ended question that asked them to indicate the biggest issues their park department faces in planning for the future. Analyzing these data involved a two step approach. First, the terms were coded into broader categories when possible, and we noted how many times a word or phrase was listed first, second or third. In a separate question, later in the survey, respondents were provided a list of specific issues and asked to rank them as 1st, 2nd, or 3rd in importance. In this way, there was a qualitative, open-ended question used to identify issues, as well as a quantitative question incorporated into the mail survey.

By far the most frequently listed items fell into the category of budgets/funding. More than half of the respondents listed this issue first in their answers to the open-ended question. The next most important issue was the need for land acquisition. This was listed first, second or third by many of the respondents. Maintenance of existing facilities seemed to emerge as the next most important item, followed by capital projects. Finally, personnel issues were seen as important to local providers. These items were based on open-ended responses.

In a separate question, survey respondents were given a list of items that had been created after the research team read the local master plans. It was our intent to see how the mail survey respondents would rank a list of 11 items that seemed to emerge as important concepts from the local master plans. These items were also revised by a panel of experts serving on the SCORP advisory committee. We felt confident that they were important and accurate issues based on the expert opinion of local

Table 3.—Size of population represented by survey respondents.

| Population | Frequency of Survey Respondents | Percent of Survey Respondents | Percent of Indiana Jurisdictions |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 4,999 or less | 46 | 25.3 | 68.5 |
| 5,000-9,999 | 27 | 14.8 | 7.6 |
| 10,000-49,999 | 72 | 39.6 | 17.8 |
| 50,000-149,999 | 26 | 14.3 | 4.4 |
| 150,000 or more | 10 | 5.5 | 1.4 |
| Total | 182 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Table 4.—Ranked votes for an issue list provided in the mail survey.

| Item | Number of first place votes | Number of second place votes | Number of third place votes | Total votes | Mean score |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Competition from other recreation providers | 29 | 21 | 10 | 60 | 1.68 |
| Staffing | 37 | 15 | 20 | 72 | 1.76 |
| Level of public participation | 28 | 17 | 21 | 66 | 1.89 |
| Amount of facilities available | 19 | 21 | 13 | 53 | 1.89 |
| Communication issues | 16 | 21 | 18 | 55 | 2.04 |
| Safety | 9 | 11 | 12 | 32 | 2.09 |
| Staff training and development | 3 | 4 | 5 | 12 | 2.17 |
| Number of programs offered | 17 | 27 | 31 | 75 | 2.19 |
| Perceived value of parks and recreation | 4 | 10 | 11 | 25 | 2.28 |
| ADA compliance | 5 | 16 | 16 | 37 | 2.30 |
| Land for recreation | 2 | 6 | 9 | 17 | 2.41 |

recreation leaders. The first, second, and third-place votes as well as the mean score for each item of the issue list are shown in Table 4. The most important items were competition from other providers, staffing, public participation, and facilities.

3.4 Facility Renovation

Based on a content analysis of local master plans, it appeared that facility renovation was a more pressing issue than the need for capital projects for many communities. Facility renovation was noted in the local master plans to include various repairs and changes, e.g., infrastructure improvements with parking lots, buildings, lighting, and water/drainage systems. Mail survey respondents were asked to note needed facility renovations from a list provided to them. The top categories for facility renovation from the mail survey data are shown in Table 5. The quantitative data showed the playgrounds, parking lots, and buildings, such as

Table 5.—Top categories for facilities needing renovation and refurbishment (N = 182).

| Renovation Projects | Percent of Respondents |
|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Playgrounds | 50% |
| Parking Lots | 48% |
| Other buildings (Restrooms) | 40% |
| Shelter houses | 37% |
| Tennis Courts | 35% |
| Baseball Diamonds | 34% |
| Basketball/Volleyball Courts | 31% |
| Swimming Pools | 27% |
| Lighting System | 26% |
| Picnic Areas/Gardens | 22% |

restrooms and shelter houses were the most important renovation projects for the future. These suggest the need for improvements in the infrastructure of their properties. Sports facilities are also in need of repair, for example to support tennis, baseball, and basketball opportunities. These quantitative findings are consistent with the qualitative findings from the content analysis of local master plans.

3.5 Capital Projects

Although local recreation providers need to renovate and refurbish many types of facilities, they also are pursuing capital projects. The two most popular types of capital projects mentioned in the local master plans were land acquisition projects and trail networks. Many park and recreation departments and park boards are seeking to acquire land and green space specifically to keep pace with urban sprawl. Authors of the master plans wrote about focusing land acquisition efforts on the rural/urban fringe. They are also searching out locations near areas of new development to provide recreation to new neighborhoods. Finally, they are often deciding to focus the acquisition of land on underserved neighborhoods, to provide recreational opportunities where they were previously non-existent.

Another important theme from the content analysis of local master plans was the need for developing trail networks. Local park departments were facing issues with how to develop walking and biking trails, multi-use trails, greenways, trails between their own parks, and trails to connect communities, e.g., a local park in one area to a state park in another. Communities ranging in size from very small towns to metropolitan regions are pursuing trail projects. These findings from the qualitative data can be compared to quantitative data in the mail survey. The mail survey respondents were asked to select from a list of capital projects that they planned to pursue in the next five years. Their responses are shown in Table 6. Playgrounds, a traditional use for parks and recreation areas, had the highest frequency of respondents as a capital project category. Multi-use trails and land acquisition projects were noted by half of the respondents.

Facility renovation and capital projects both require budget amounts to be allocated. As an example of a case study from the local master plans, a larger city in Indiana was pursuing some innovative strategies. In

Table 6.—Most popular capital projects planned for the next 5 years (N = 182).

| Capital Projects | Percent Selecting Response |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Playgrounds | 58% |
| Multi-use trail | 54% |
| Land acquisition | 51% |
| Parking Lot | 50% |
| Other Buildings (nature center) | 49% |
| Picnic Areas /Gardens | 44% |
| Shelter House | 43% |

their local master plan, they recommend that 10% of a capital budget for a project be put into a maintenance endowment fund within the Parks Foundation when new parks are developed, and they also recommended that maintenance plans be included in the scope of work for design plans for all new park sites and facilities. For many reasons, facility renovation and capital projects are related, and they both create ongoing issues for local government providers.

3.6 Marketing Strategies

In order to justify the ongoing desire for funding, facilities, and programs, local recreation providers need to send messages to the public at large about the value of parks and recreation. Achieving goals for positive community relations involves marketing parks and recreation effectively. The need for marketing was a strong theme in the local master plans, thus it was a qualitative finding that seemed particularly important. Local providers discussed that they needed to develop strategic marketing plans. They also talked about diverse ways of marketing, such as through logos, signage, web sites, and mass media approaches. Some communities are moving toward more web-based services, such as providing programming information online and using these tools for scheduling participants into programs.

There was a strong desire expressed by the authors of the local master plans to pursue marketing strategies for parks and recreation in Indiana's communities. They wanted to make their residents more aware of the facilities and programs that local recreation providers offer to communities. Marketing included a need for public

Table 7.—Marketing strategies used to promote programs and services.

| Marketing Strategy | Frequency of respondents | Percent of respondents |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Newspapers | 158 | 82 |
| Informational Signs | 131 | 69 |
| Pamphlets or Flyers | 119 | 63 |
| Web site | 84 | 46 |
| Radio | 82 | 45 |
| Park and Recreation Logo | 82 | 45 |
| Direct Mail | 58 | 32 |
| Newsletter | 49 | 27 |
| Television | 40 | 22 |

relations campaigns and the establishment of a marketing image, i.e., an identity, so that members of the local community can become more aware of the services and programs provided by the parks department. Some local park departments talked specifically in their master plans about increasing their advertising through signs, flyers, and other materials. For other departments, developing a marketing image meant plans to create a specific logo to increase visibility. Another issue is implied in marketing efforts – that of the relationship between parks and recreation and the tourism industry. Communities not only provide recreation for citizens; but they also attract tourists into their communities, who in turn bring in revenue and boost economic activity. For many different reasons, marketing was discussed in the local master plans.

We tested the marketing theme as a qualitative finding from the local master plans by adding a question about marketing in the mail survey. Respondents indicated how likely they were to use different marketing strategies (Table 7). Mass media approaches were the most important to mail survey respondents, such as the use of newspapers. Many of the strategies discussed in the local master plans were not yet popular among local recreation providers: less than half of the mail survey respondents were pursuing web sites, logos, or direct mail campaigns.

4.0 Conclusions

This statewide project involved an examination of the important issues faced by local recreation providers. Local providers were defined as park and recreation agencies or boards operating at the municipal, township, and county levels of government. The project was designed to allow

for a comparison of qualitative and quantitative findings, by using a content-analysis of local master plans followed by a mail survey of local superintendents and park board members. Many of the findings from the mail survey confirmed themes that had emerged from the content of the local master plans. Local government providers face many issues in planning for the future. Some involve demographic issues, such as size of the population to be served. Other issues deal with budgets and funding, which relate to the availability of monies for facility renovation and capital projects. Finally, local government providers exist in a competitive environment. To achieve their goals, they pursue marketing strategies to create greater awareness about the recreational opportunities available. All of the issues discussed in this project are interconnected. This creates the need for local recreation leaders who can take into account the many varied issues and the ways that they affect each other, as they provide important services to their communities and plan for the future.

5.0 Citations

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