

# The Future of Public Parks & Recreation...crisis or prosperity?

*a call to action for a stronger commitment to ethical decision making and financial discipline in public parks & recreation*

**First Edition**

This paper is the continuation of A CALL to ACTION: Public Parks & Recreation (*March 30, 2020*) and CALL TO ACTION II: Parks & Recreation's Prosperity Project (*May 5, 2020*). It intends to inspire public park and recreation professionals to think differently and act confidently and courageously as they navigate the torrential waters of public park and recreation management and the ethical and economic conflicts inherent in this work.

In a day and age when organizations that were once industry flagships struggle to keep afloat, it is imperative that it is deeply understood that all systems are susceptible to downfall due to a lack of ethical leadership, financial discipline, and poor decision making. The legacy of the profession wholly depends on a commitment to do the right things the right way.

Moments like these are the ones that matter most. They reveal the underbelly of society and shape the future in ways we simply cannot predict. They unveil fault lines and show us who we really are. They also require us to heal and learn to be and do better. They do not guarantee positive change – they can only point us in that direction. The rest is up to us.

We have choices. We can stand paralyzed relying on previously held beliefs, waiting for things to return to the way they used to be. We can follow misguided suggestions that are ill-fated even when popular simply because others do. Or we can choose to be smart, principled, and focused ensuring that parks and recreation is a value held dear long after we are gone and remains a pillar of society for generations to come.

*Jamie Sabbach*

“In leisure may lie the final test of our civilization. The nature of our society is determined less by our accelerated work accomplishments than by the quality of our leisure. This leisure provides the means either for improving the quality of living or for destroying our civilization, and science has given us the tools to perform either task. Though our economic and industrial progress is dependent upon work, our cultural, moral, and spiritual development is dependent, in large measure, upon the use of leisure. Leisure itself is a two-edged sword; it carries not a guarantee for Utopian happiness. It may bring enjoyment of art, music, and science; for development of health, strength, and satisfaction; or for acquisition of inner resources that lead to contentment. Conversely, it may bring idleness, boredom, escape through drugs, riots, overindulgence, deterioration, or corruption. History has shown us that the world progresses or regresses not so much through what is done in our work hours but what is done or not done in our leisure hours. Wise use of the gift of leisure is the challenge of our time.”

***Recreation in American Life 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition***

*Reynold Edgar Carlson*

*Theodore R. Deppe*

*Janet R. MacLean*

*Indiana University 1972*



## Part 1: Let's Begin Here

*"The best way to predict the future is to create it." - Abraham Lincoln*

Covid-19 and the pandemic's consequential realities are the likes of which were impossible to imagine prior to 2020. The economic and health crises that have emerged have placed entire countries under some of the most adverse conditions anyone could imagine.

The onslaught of devastation will eventually subside and become part of history, yet right now the damage has become central to daily life for the majority. A new condition has surfaced while the cloak under which we all once existed and called "normal" has been ripped away, likely gone forever. Looking back, "normal" may have worked for some but was not all that great for others. Excessive entitlement, greed, political self-interest, unsustainable growth, inequities with growing division between the haves and have nots, poor health indicators, climate disasters, and more have led us to a place where many now ask themselves whether or not "normal" was a good thing.

The proverbial ball is in everyone's court. While some may choose to take a "wait and see" approach, the hope is that most will get to work now by setting a smart and thoughtful course of action. One that provides direction so that the most pressing issues in communities today get the time, energy, and resources they need and deserve. A good place to begin may simply be to ask whether or not WHAT, HOW and WHY things are done is best.

Ultimately, communities will expect activities to start again and facilities to re-open, however, many professionals will have to manage the aftermath of the current crises with less or in some cases, a significantly reduced pool of resources. This new fiscal truth will require intelligent decision making with what is available rather than expecting to get more of what does not exist.

Already underway in parts of the country is the re-distribution of financial resources to emergency response and life support services like law enforcement and fire, and other safety nets like health and human services in municipalities that have experienced extraordinary numbers of Coronavirus casualties, social unrest and violence, and climate disasters like tornadoes, hurricanes, and wildfires. These re-distributions are plausible and have likely presented new financial baselines from which many will work.

Today's crises have presented a rare opportunity to review, re-think, and get a do-over when it comes to spending choices, chosen management methods, and quite simply, the ways in which park and recreation services have been provided.

What if this opportunity included thinking about this moment in time as a door into which park and recreation professionals could walk and transform their organizations? What if the organization of tomorrow were positioned to endure volatility and uncertainty and focused on legacy rather than on short-term satisfaction? And what if professionals came together and galvanized around the common cause of public park and recreation prosperity?

As the path of the destruction being left behind comes into focus, it has revealed many weaknesses and fractures in society and systems. If communities are to begin to heal and recondition, it will take a complete and unmitigated commitment to strengthening social fabric, creating rules and policies that favor the common good, and doing some tough but necessary work which will require courage, resolve, determination and strength of character.

It may sound cliché, but this moment in time and how park and recreation professionals respond will define the profession for generations. That is a heavy load to bear and one deserving of more than simply attention.



## Part 1: Let's Begin Here

# Questions to Consider DISCUSSION

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For professionals, boards, and elected officials

1. **What is your initial reaction to the content in this section?**
2. **Has the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences shaped the current state of your organization? If yes, in what ways. If no, why not?**
3. **Was your organization's pre-Covid-19 "normal" best for the community you serve? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?**
4. **If you had the opportunity to re-create your organization today, would it look like it did before Covid-19? If yes, why? If not, why not?**
5. **What can you do to position your organization to withstand volatility and uncertainty moving forward? Essentially, what can you do to position the organization to be "resilient"?**

## Part 2: A Walk Through Time



### ***history is the best teacher***

*"History is important. More than any other topic, it is about us. Whether one deems our present society wondrous or awful or both, history reveals how we got to this point." – James W. Loewen*

Public parks and recreation's roots were set centuries ago. Starting with the Classical Age, the Athenian ideal integrated art, literature, philosophy, music, and sport into a unified concept – what we today know as *leisure*. This was followed by the Middle Ages where Europe was held together by the influence of the church and excesses in leisure were blamed in part for the downfall of Roman civilization. Next, the Renaissance, a term used to designate the space in time between the Middle Ages and modern world, saw relief from the oppression of church authority, and a renewed interest in classical arts and activities, and a new philosophy of the meaning of life.

Colonial America at first, prioritized survival and hard work over idleness and amusement. New England law prohibited the misuse of time (“no person shall spend this time unprofitably”). To be idle was to be evil – a Puritan guilt complex that has haunted society to this day.

Later, this age brought economic prosperity to coastal cities, a widening of western frontiers, and the creation of urban centers such as New York and Philadelphia and what many consider to be the first city park in the United States, Boston Commons. It was also an age where the slavery of the deep south gave plantation owners the reputation for unrestrained leisure and the propagation of inequity.

Following the previous centuries, society entered what may be considered the infancy of what we know today as the field of parks and recreation. Park planning efforts, schools with gymnasiums, the rise of volunteerism, the beginning of organized recreation, the creation of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), playgrounds, and other “firsts” revealed themselves. Many historians suggest that the recreation movement in the United States began with the establishment of Boston Sandgardens, a “playground” where children would play in heaps of sand while volunteers stood watch. This “movement” soon gained momentum with its efforts to affect the human condition through play and a focus on enhancing quality of life and the pursuit of happiness.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the formative years of what we today recognize as public park and recreation. Recreation and leisure services continued to evolve through wars, a depression, and other disrupters. Post World War II resulted in a growing interest in recreation and the expectation of government provided leisure opportunities paid for in large part with taxpayer dollars.

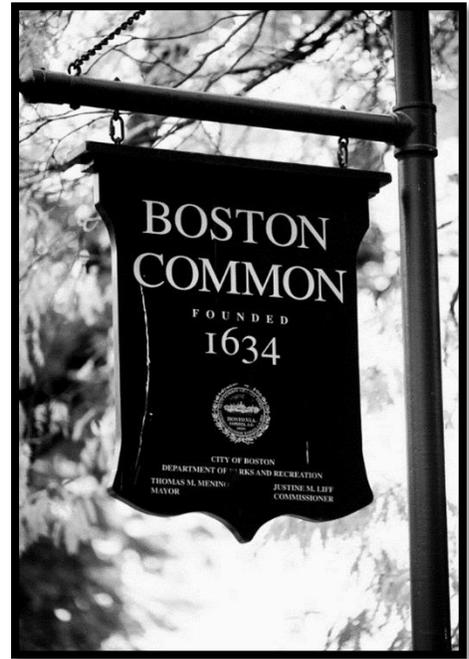
However, taxpayers began to pay attention to how government was choosing to spend their money beginning in 1978 when Proposition 13 (People’s Initiative to Limit Property Taxation), a California constitutional amendment was approved starting what was then considered an American antigovernment tax revolt. The ballot measure set real estate property value for tax purposes at 1975–1976 market value, limited real estate taxes and tax increases, and made any local government tax increase dependent upon a two-thirds approval of local voters. This stands today as one of the most prolific efforts by taxpayers to freeze their tax burden and began a shift towards park and recreation organizations exploring revenue sources beyond those of tax dollars.

Throughout the evolution of public parks and recreation, organizations became and most remain dependent upon taxes as a primary revenue source. Driven to size by the interests of some taxpayers, and the often-unspoken expectation that all taxpayers will financially support extensive service menus has become a problematic assumption. While park and recreation professionals want to satisfy what can at times be the unreasonable demands and expectations of their ever-changing communities, the result has become the manifestation of the burden of sustaining what has been created over time.

All of this contributes to the DNA of today’s public parks and recreation organization.

Organizational capacity and competence are being tried and tested, and a bright light shone on the overall systemic condition and vulnerabilities of the profession. Time will tell what happens next but each and every park and recreation professional has the power to decide what the next chapter will say, and how it will be read and judged.

## Part 2: A Walk Through Time



## Questions to Consider **DISCUSSION**

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For professionals, boards, and elected officials

1. What is your initial reaction to the content in this section?
2. How has history played a role in organizational decision making?
3. How would you describe the appetite of your community to pay more in taxes to support park and recreation services?
4. How would you describe the appetite of your community to pay more in fees and charges for park and recreation services?
5. How would you define your organization's DNA?

## Part 3: Business Acumen is Required



***no longer a nice to have, but a must have today***

*"Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds."*

*- Albert Einstein*

Social changes have altered both traditional as well as contemporary philosophies around the need for and expectation of park and recreation services. These changes have significant implications for public parks and recreation primarily due to altered attitudes and behaviors. Among the many factors and considerations that are expected to influence the future provision of services include the following.

**Amounts of Leisure/Discretionary Time:** The five-day, 40-hour work week has given way to flexible schedules and four-day work weeks while technological advances have led to "work from home" models. The pandemic has led to mandated social distancing and school closures requiring most parents to stay home, and record setting unemployment. These realities and more have produced an unintended and potentially positive bi-product – increased leisure and discretionary time. But it is important to note that leisure time can either weaken or strengthen depending on personal choice, access and opportunity, and quality of options and experience.

**Changes to Home Life:** Major changes to home life continue to occur. Parents working and children being schooled from home, older adults relegated to their residence reducing socialization, those unemployed seeking the most basic of assistance in order to stay in their homes, and other major shifts continue. These changes call for safe, healthy and in some cases, close to home activity and other alternative approaches which can provide much needed assistance and support.

**The Economy & Economic Inequality:** The instability of the economy for the majority of Americans along with growing inequities are calls for alarm in communities across the nation. While the stock market appears to be stable in spite of the pandemic, millions of Americans are unemployed, many major economists have suggested the country is in a recession, and while Wall Street has been used as an indicator of economic stability, the top 10% of US households own 87%+ of the market (source: Federal Reserve, August 2020). Continued growth in overall inequality has been driven mostly by increasing inequality in wages and salaries, and compounded by issues like gentrification, housing insecurity, and other factors that continue to increase the wedge between the "haves and have nots".

**Technology & Screen Time:** Technological advances have been celebrated for providing convenience, efficiencies, social connections, and other benefits that the past did not offer. As each new technology develops, the hope is that it improves quality of life in some way. But some research has found that various types of technology can negatively affect physical and emotional health. Studies suggest that musculoskeletal problems, sleep disruption, emotional well-being, and other health factors result from the overuse of some forms of technology – and society has yet to see long term effects on the human body and mind given that it is still new in many ways. The potential health consequences of screen time on youth and young adults as the result of excessive television viewing, video games and other types of tech toys, and smartphones indicate that too much screen time leads to behavioral problems, altered social skills, obesity and other physical health symptoms, and potentially violent behavior.

**Growth & Infrastructure:** The nation’s infrastructure is in a state of chaos and crisis. Across the United States common physical resources (bridges, dams, roads, water systems) are in some cases, beyond repair requiring complete replacement. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) it would take a \$3.6 trillion-dollar investment today to stop the continuance of the current backlog. In public parks and recreation, maintenance backlogs and deteriorating infrastructure are of concern all across the country. This is the result of significant building and development when times were good with less attention given to how to pay for the necessary, ongoing maintenance that would ultimately be required to care for the asset over its lifespan. All too often when funding projections are tallied for both development and maintenance, the tendency is to choose to invest in building and delay identifying maintenance dollars for another time and on someone else’s watch.

**Conservation & the Environment:** A conservation ethic exists to protect natural resources and ensure minimal impact on a community – particularly by human use. Conservation is not preservation, and the two are often conflated. The key difference according to the US National Park Service is that a conservation ethic seeks the “proper use” of natural resources while preservation seeks to protect the natural environment against any kind of use. Working to maintain biodiversity is conservation (regulate), making it illegal to build in a designated wilderness zone is preservation (eliminate). The ongoing challenge has and will likely always be balancing conservation and preservation, and passive and active use. Adopting and implementing conservation focused practices is a hot topic knowing today’s use and overuse of public parks, trails and open spaces has prompted more discussion about how to ensure that they are cared for to the degree they deserve.

**Public Health:** The toll of the COVID-19 pandemic is enormous and devastating and has now compounded the current public health crisis in the United States. Opioid use, rising obesity rates, diabetes, and other ongoing health concerns have all had profound impacts on individuals, families, communities, and the overall healthcare system and were prevalent before Covid-19 and its new variants were even a consideration. Today’s public health concerns have now been extended to include the effects of climatic extremes like flooding, wildfires, excessive heat, and other climate emergencies and acknowledgment of the severe and disproportionate impacts of public health issue on neighborhoods of color and those who are poor.

How does one begin to respond to these issues? It may be as simple as embracing an operational model that is laser focused on “principle driven service”. Essentially, this will mean putting hard stops on satisfying special interests, perpetuating the myths of growth, following the “herd” assuming they are informed, and bending to political will. Addressing these problems will require sharp, studied, and ethical leadership and those with these traits to stand up and speak coherently. And yet it is just a place to start.

Operating from a foundation built upon sound management principles challenges convention. It charges today's park and recreation professional with being more diligent in how they go about making decisions and justifying how resources are spent. It requires organizational cultures to reflect social conscience and ethical principles. It encourages doing the right thing even when it may not be popular knowing these efforts will lead to strengthening a community's social fabric and place service in the name of the common good above all.

Adaptation is difficult. All park and recreation organizations include cultural DNA that has been fostered over time and may need to let go of some of this DNA in order to make necessary change for the better. Questions needing to be asked and answered so that positive change can be made include:

- 1) What is it that must be kept?**
- 2) What is needed that is currently not available – essentially, what critical things are missing?**
- 3) What is it that should go?**

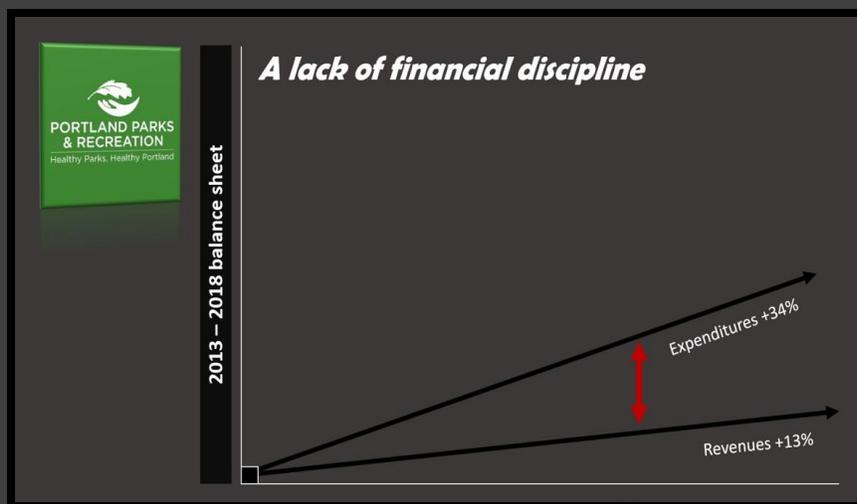
These questions provide the stage from which park and recreation professionals can begin to take corrective action.

When an organization must change, those in the organization are often asked to give up something that is important to them. People do not inherently resist change as the common assumption goes, they resist loss. They want to be protected, validated, and encouraged, and not asked to give up what is comforting or familiar. Leading change requires acknowledging that resistance to change is not a function of people not getting it. They likely get it. They just may not like it.

## A Lack of Financial Discipline - Perspective

Portland Parks & Recreation does a lot of things Portlanders love. Over the past six years it's wanted to do even more. The Bureau raised money by getting voters to increase taxes - most recently with a 2014 property tax bond set expiring in 2021.

For decades, the City of Portland Parks & Recreation Bureau was considered a model for public park and recreation systems nationwide. With their innovative and ground-breaking services, they became a beacon for others as many wanted to emulate the Bureau. At the national level, Portland Parks & Recreation received numerous awards that validated their efforts to themselves and others. What was lurking behind the scenes, however, was the fact that while their focus was on growth and expansion and building new, they were dismissing existing infrastructure needs and providing "affordable" programs for everyone – even those who could afford to pay. The bottom line suffered as the Bureau set aside the need to think about how it would financially support what it was they were creating long term.



Now the Bureau sees that it actually could not afford the way it chose to manage the organization - and Portland's leadership did not enforce any financial discipline. For five years, the Portland City Council failed to confront a growing gap between the Bureau's ambitious agenda and its limited resources. From 2013 to 2018, expenses grew 34 percent, while revenues grew 13 percent.

Through the years, one-time strategies to close the gap were relied upon. Underspending in divisions to balance the Bureau's overall budget, transferring funds internally, and implementing hiring freezes became common stopgap measures that did not address the structural problem. Today, the gap is now so big that the Bureau can no longer use these same strategies. The proverbial can is no longer being kicked down the road – because quite simply, it can't.

"This monster of cost exceeding revenues has been growing beneath the surface of the water for some time," says Randy Gragg, director of the Portland Parks Foundation, the private fundraising arm, for the Bureau. "In past years, we have seen its eyes and its nose, and we now see the whole beast." (*Portland Parks Are a Cherished Gem. But They Can't Make Ends Meet. Willamette Week, July 17, 2019*)

## Part 3: Business Acumen is **REQUIRED**



## Questions to Consider **DISCUSSION**

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For professionals, boards, and elected officials

1. What have been the effects of the social changes included in this section on your community?
2. What strategies should you consider in response to each of the social changes included in this section?
3. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being not adaptable and 10 being extremely adaptable, how would rate your organization's ability to be adaptable?
4. How would you respond to each of the following as it relates to making positive changes to the operations and management of your organization?
  - a. What policies, practices, and services must be kept? Why?
  - b. What policies, practices, and services are not available that should be – essentially, what critical things are missing?
  - c. What policies, practices, and services should go? Why?

## Part 4: The **COMMON GOOD**



### **for the good of ALL in a community**

*“No decision should ever be made without asking the question, is this for the common good.” – Michael Moore*

When trying to make sense of what is meant by “the common good”, the phrase “social cooperation” becomes a good place to start. It implies a society and communities that are well functioning and which co-exist to their mutual advantage. In essence, when all in a society do well, the common good benefits. The less preferable alternative is when any in a society struggle, so too does the common good.

While certain public policies and practices may benefit everyone, others may benefit one group at the expense of all others - and the group that benefits will argue for what it is that they want with persistence.

The tendency to see only the immediate effects of decisions and to neglect the effects of policy and practice on the long term is irresponsible and in large part, is how and why things got to be as challenging as they are today.

Considering the secondary consequences of actions becomes the fundamental difference between good management and bad – the good being management that concerns itself with the common good.

Bad managers see only the immediate and what satisfies short term interests and appetites while the good manager looks beyond. The bad manager considers the direct consequences while the good manager considers the indirect consequences. The bad manager sees the effects of a given policy or

practice on a particular group while the good manager painstakingly considers all groups and the commons.

While this all may seem obvious, oftentimes these elementary truths are ignored. One of the park and recreation profession's unfortunate tragedies is the suffering from long term consequences because of bad policies and practices of the past. Today is the tomorrow the bad manager yesterday told us not to worry about. And the long term consequences of some recent policies and practices are likely to become evident in the not to distant future. Still others may not become evident for decades.

Is it possible that bad managers actually present their errors in judgement better than good managers present the truth? Or is it simply that bad managers appeal to special interests out of a sense of obligation and in order to satisfy interests in popularity? If this is the case, they are likely sharing half truths and speaking only about the immediate effects of a proposed policy or practice on a special group. If only they were to show the longer and less desirable effects, or that it would benefit one group at the expense of all others. This would reveal the other half truth.

But oftentimes, considering all of the effects of a proposed policy or practice on all requires a long, complex and dull reasoning and decision making exercise. Many find "process" too much, too difficult, too boring – leading to impatience, inattentiveness, and a debilitating viscosity.

When the time and energy needed to understand all of the effects and potential consequences of our choices is not given or invested, far reaching mistakes and errors in judgment are made. And oftentimes, at the expense of those who typically have no voice.

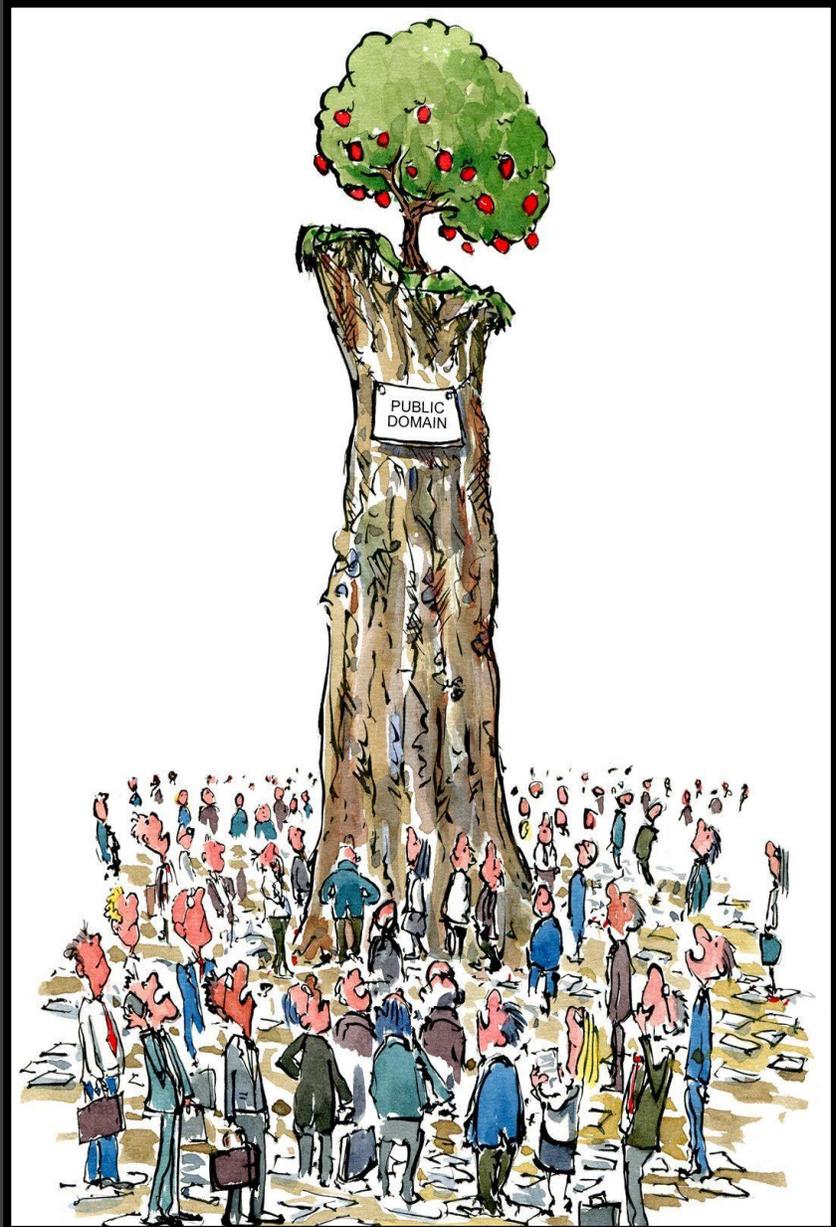
That public parks and recreation is the platform by which communities all across the nation can influence the common good more than any other form of government requires relentless optimism. At the same time, an ardent realism is required knowing that there are many corrective actions that need to be taken to ensure that the common good, while the ultimate end game, requires real civic leadership and a pledge and commitment to care to do right by all in a community - not just some.

## Common Good vs Special Interests - Perspective

The *Tragedy of the Commons* is an economic theory by American ecologist, Garrett Hardin (1968) which states that individuals acting independently and rationally according to their self-interests behave contrary to the best interests of the whole by depleting some common resource. It is grounded in the fact that a user receives a direct benefit from some resource yet only receives minimal immediate impact of its exploitation (e.g., overuse of parks). Essentially, individual benefit invites overall ruin.

It is seemingly obvious that a direct link exists between this theory and that of some of the more profound challenges that park and recreation organizations face daily. At the core of many of these issues are reactive decisions about growth and spending, and special interests willingly served and conceded to, compromising finite resources. What is often forgotten or simply ignored is the devastating effect that myopic thinking and self-interest can have on common, finite resources (land, tax dollars, etc.).

Approaches to solving the Tragedy of the Commons and therefore how to best manage the issues that compromise finite resources continues to come down to one of two conflicting options. The first is through privatization or private ownership. The second is through government or public ownership or when the collective rights to the asset are shared with the greater good (e.g., the National Park Service). However, among the more compelling aspects of public ownership is that employees and decision makers do not bear the costs of their actions nor do they receive any monetary value from the good decisions they make. The incentive then to make sound, resource-based decisions is absent.



## Part 4: The Common Good



### Questions to Consider **DISCUSSION**

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For professionals, boards, and elected officials

1. Does satisfying special interests drive decision making more than consideration of the “common good”? If yes, why? If no, why not?
2. In what ways can the consideration of the “common good” be more thoughtful and intentional?
3. Would you say your organization considers long term consequences as much as it does short term interests? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?
4. What strategies can you employ that will position the organization to consider all of the effects of a proposed policy or practice on the “common good”?

## Part 5: Ethical Leadership



### **disappointing people at a rate at which they can tolerate**

*“Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.”*

*– Potter Stewart*

The frequently expressed concern that our country is experiencing not only public health, social justice, and economic crises also suggests we are in a leadership crisis - that people are looking to those who anoint themselves as “leaders” for answers. The prevailing idea of leadership, then, is critically important to understand, especially because the kind of leadership we praise, the types of leadership methods we teach, and the leadership under which we operate influences the realities we live with today and the future we will live with tomorrow.

It is easy to focus energy on the fun stuff – especially right now when many professionals are desperate for anything resembling optimism. The latest program trends, how to provide great customer service, or building a new facility are exciting topics of interest among staff, policy makers, and communities. These are the things that generate enthusiasm around innovation and satisfying customer interests and demands. And while all are organizational considerations, none require true leadership.

When thinking of the critical issues affecting public parks and recreation that could use some attention and improvement, many require courage – the courage to stand up and to speak up and to get people’s attention. The saying “the first through the wall is always the bloodiest” seem apropos in that it speaks to the need to dare some of today’s most basic management decisions that appear to be in direct conflict with the pillars of the profession. Staying quiet translates to being complicit.

Here are a few examples of questionable practices which align with the three pillars of the park and recreation profession (*National Recreation and Park Association*) and the inherent conflicts presented due to today's policies and practices.

**Health & Wellness** Why is there a gravitation towards questionable trends like eSports? While popular, eSports and like activities that encourage the increased use of discretionary screen time have become one of public health's principal adversaries - and continues to be scrutinized and questioned by researchers for its potentially damaging effects on overall health and well being.

**Equity** Why is there not more effort beyond providing scholarships and reduced rates to efforts to address inequities in communities? Equity based service extends beyond financial assistance for youth and older adults. Providing safe access to parks and programs and adding tree canopy for underserved neighborhoods are among the many other actions that should be considered.

**Conservation** Why is there continued use of pesticides and other types of toxins on public lands? Research explicitly states that there are exposure dangers to those who come in contact including consequential impacts to fauna.

Park and recreation professionals along with appointed and elected officials have a duty to represent all they have been tasked with representing by being diligent stewards of publicly owned resources. This includes going beyond satisfying those with large voices, deep pockets, or influence and considering those who more often than not, do not have a seat at the table or a voice in process. When this most basic responsibility is dismissed or compromised, the manifestation of corrupt systems in favor of those who dominate the public realm by unfairly benefiting from everyone's tax dollars results.

Today's ethical imperative must be to understand and impact the "common good" – the collective of the individuals who make up a community and society. Because no organization can possibly fulfill the burden of offering "something for everyone", it is important that today's organizations analyze their community's most critical needs (not desires or demands) that can be affected and served by park and recreation organizations, followed by their operational methods and service menu offerings in order to discover the best and most responsible ways of spending taxpayer resources so that what is deemed essential is no longer compromised in favor of what is popular, discretionary or simply the flavor of the day.

Part 5:  
**Ethical Leadership**



## Questions to Consider **DISCUSSION**

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For professionals, boards, and elected officials

1. Are there any needed corrective actions that your organization avoids addressing due to expected conflicts? If yes, why?
2. What are your thoughts about the three pillar examples (Health & Wellness, Equity, and Conservation) included in this section?
3. Does your organization represent the interests of those in the community who do not have a "voice in the process" or "a seat at the table"? If yes, in what ways? If not, why?
4. Would you say your organization understands your community's "needs" in contrast to your community's "demands/wants"?
5. In what ways does your organization respond to community "need"?

## Part 6: What's Next?



### shift thinking from recovery to transformation

*"Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change."*  
— Martin Luther King

Imagine the park and recreation organization of the future emerging stronger rather than collapsing under the weight of today's conditions and realities. If organizations are to exist and flourish, every park and recreation professional must call attention to the very issues whose structure, composition and constitution have had and will continue to have far reaching negative effects if nothing changes. By directing energies and resources towards paramount issues, the manifestation of a fruitful path forward will materialize.

Moving forward, the emerging parks and recreation organization will be intelligently managed and fully prepared for whatever crisis comes their way. They will:

- ✓ be bold and have an all-in resolve.
- ✓ embrace and learn from the past while challenging convention and tradition.
- ✓ step into new management patterns and methods with a commitment to innovation.
- ✓ identify desired outcomes and measure progress.
- ✓ emphasize the value of educating citizens, elected and appointed officials and employees in order to advance advocacy.
- ✓ engage communities across boundaries and include marginalized populations and the silent majority with focused intention.
- ✓ pursue collaborations to reduce duplication and best use finite resources.
- ✓ generate action focused on making an impact.
- ✓ have diversified revenue sources that provide greater long-term financial stability.
- ✓ prioritize existing physical assets by taking care of what they have first and foremost.
- ✓ always focus on community NEED and the COMMON GOOD as the ends to their means and never allow "the way it's been done" to dictate the future and limit what they can become.

Where to begin? Read on for the differentiators that can transform park and recreation organizations, putting them in a position to **optimize resources and make direct and profound impacts** – sooner than later.

## Public Health Must Be Priority #1

Emerging park and recreation organizations will initiate and lead the community conversation about the consolidation of social and health services and community recreation centers while also combining libraries with community centers. Essentially, they will take their organizations back to the very foundation of parks and recreation when parks were considered the public's keystone to community wellness and the principal gathering place for healing and improving physical and emotional health (as has been realized as a result of the pandemic - history does have a way of repeating itself).

- ❑ Create consolidated service centers that incorporate walkable/bikeable access, healthcare, and child/afterschool services into existing parks, providing close-to-home access.
- ❑ Design partnerships with hospitals and other health service providers offering a focused energy on the efficient use of collective resources, opportunities to bridge markets, and initiate cooperative capital investment.
- ❑ Access, use, and capitalize on the enormous amount of health data available locally, regionally, and nationally that directs efforts towards affecting community health concerns like obesity, diabetes, asthma, opioid use, and other poor health indicators.
- ❑ Design policy that connects tax-payer dollar investments to health indicators.

## Address Inequities

Emerging park and recreation organizations recognize that many people experience deprivations and may not have their most basic needs met. These organizations dig deep to identify and define community “need” in order to support and provide services that have the propensity to enhance and change lives in profound ways. They reverse course to counteract historic disinvestment and underinvestment in low-income communities and other sub-communities that have been left without access to quality parks and recreation services and in park assets in need of significant upgrades that serve these same communities. These revelations position organizations as well as their communities to better understand what “essential” really means.

- ❑ Understand the beneficial outcomes of equitable investment, these organizations use contemporary, geospatial-based research that provides new place-based information which identifies and maps neighborhood health and environmental indicators.
- ❑ Use this information to ensure that funding is distributed for existing assets, new assets and their operations and management in ways that align with community needs.
- ❑ Develop an awareness of services that should be considered the Must Haves in your community. As an example, families who have one or two working parents are currently home with their children. However, we can with a high level of confidence predict that the pandemic will subside allowing people to return to work. If this happens before school is in session, the floodgates will open with requests and intense demand for children's activities and services. Think Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – and revenue generating opportunities.

## Financial Discipline is Daily Work

Emerging park and recreation organizations possess a solid cost recovery philosophy and policy(ies) which provide the operational foundation from which all investment and spending decisions, and funding strategies are built. They expect higher returns from discretionary services moving towards full cost recovery, no longer allowing these services to benefit from taxpayer subsidies, and analyze unconventional options regularly in order to diversify funding sources.

- ❑ Understand your fiscal reality. This is not just the bottom line or what may be left of it. Have a complete understanding of your financial truth.
- ❑ Always be prepared to respond to important financial questions. What are the organization's high-cost and low-cost services? How much subsidy is being directed to each service offered? Do investment/spending choices align with the organization's interests in making a community impact? What operating scenarios can be developed to illustrate budget reduction impacts? How much lost revenues will result from reductions? If reserves exist, how long will they last in various scenarios?
- ❑ Let go of services that provide for the few with little to no community benefit, do not align with organizational purpose, or are no longer prudent, particularly when they are being subsidized by tax dollars. There is no better time than right in the midst of a pandemic and while many services are in hibernation and doors are temporarily closed to make these changes.
- ❑ While serving as facilitators of public lands/spaces for specialized users, the total cost of facility operations and maintenance is recovered (at a minimum). This allows for taxpayer dollars to be spent on park and recreation services which have more far-reaching community impact.
- ❑ Understand the difference between those who may or may not have an "ability to pay" and those who may or may not have a "willingness to pay". Avoiding the common default of offering "affordable" services and pricing to the lowest common denominator provides discounts to many who do not need assistance. Ultimately, this comes at the expense of providing services that may fill a gap or serve an important need.
- ❑ Ensure that all planning efforts (comprehensive plans, master plans, strategic plans) include a cost recovery component. Growth breeds debt and it is critical that organizations can pay for their planned futures.

## Take Care of Existing Assets

Emerging park and recreation organizations know the maintenance requirements necessary to take care of their current assets and do not have a backlog. If they do, they do not delay investments in existing infrastructure, rather, they position themselves financially to diminish the backlog until one no longer exists. They know that trading short-term growth and the "bright, shiny new object" for long-term liabilities that result is slowly bankrupting communities.

- ❑ Create innovative, broad based planning efforts that place a value proposition on resilience over the "vocal minority's interests".
- ❑ Embrace continuous adaptation, invest in infrastructure based on how places work and what neighborhoods need rather than on abstract and outdated theories - obsess about financial stability rather than growth.
- ❑ Develop informed narratives and stories which include accurate data and information encouraging new development only when they have identified funding sources and methods for

both construction as well as preventative and long-term maintenance over the life of the asset. These pre-emptive efforts safeguard organizations from assuming any debt of which they cannot afford.

- ❑ Place firm moratoriums on new development. This is meant to ensure that existing infrastructure (facilities and parks) is the investment priority. While the decision to postpone new build may not be popular, it will minimize any chance that the agency will assume additional maintenance backlog during what has already been termed a recession and an extended time of economic uncertainty.
- ❑ Acknowledge the insufficiency of and/or temporary nature of grants and other alternative revenues (e.g., the Great Outdoors Act). These alternative resources, while helpful, are not a panacea to taking care of infrastructure. The focus should be on self-sufficiency and the best uses of the resources readily available. If the opportunity presents itself for grant funding, that's simply a bonus.

## Invest in Constituent Education

Emerging park and recreation organizations stress the importance of informed and educated constituencies by re-distributing sufficient resources in order to develop and generate greater advocacy for parks and recreation. They go beyond repeating stories about the importance of parks and recreation or sharing data that implies how much parks and recreation impacts the local or regional economy. They know that while these stories are noble, they have already been told and will not result in more dollars when no more exists.

- ❑ Use marketing resources towards a focused energy on community education – and not just creating awareness of services, but on how tax-payer dollars are spent, the importance of shopping locally, the pros and cons of dedicated funding sources, why organizational decisions are made, etc.
- ❑ Be proactive and out ahead of potential controversies using a “frequently asked questions” approach to any and all issues that may raise public concern.

## Help Policy Makers Focus on the Commons

Emerging park and recreation organizations include appropriate numbers of advisory boards and committees whose composition is representative of the broader community offering regular opportunity for public assembly and therefore, greater democracy.

- ❑ Improve and expand engagement and outreach processes so that those with resources and access are not the only ones invited to participate in representing their community. This fosters a greater understanding of the community's common issues, needs, and fate.
- ❑ Connect policy makers with advisory groups so that policy development aligns with a broader representative community interest.
- ❑ Policies are created and developed in unison with staff. The basis of the emerging organization's policy is the ethical orientation of all decisions made with the “commons” as the ultimate guidepost. Emphasis is placed on the good of all over the good of a privileged few.

Part 6:  
**What's Next?**



## Questions to Consider **DISCUSSION**

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For professionals, boards, and elected officials

1. **What is your initial reaction to the content in this section?**
2. **Do you believe your organization “has what it takes” to be an emerging organization based upon the descriptors included in this section? If yes, why? If no, why not?**
3. **Do the actions suggested in this section align with what you believe to be the values and needs in your community? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?**
4. **How can you begin to take action? Where will you start?**

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*The Foundations of Morality Third Revised Edition*, Henry Hazlett, The Foundation for Economic Education, Inc. 1998



Jamie Sabbach has spent her entire adult life serving the public park and recreation profession. Afforded opportunities few will ever have, she has been a practitioner, an educator, and consultant. She speaks from a place of experience, realism, and observation.

A self-described “disappointed idealist”, she believes society should be fueled by anger and love in order to do what may not be popular, but what may be necessary.

Jamie’s work has spanned three decades, serving communities in Illinois, Indiana, and Colorado as a park and recreation professional, teaching at Eastern Illinois University, Indiana University, Illinois State University, and Metro State University (CO), and working alongside professionals in 40 of the 50 US states as a trainer, consultant, and advisor, assisting them in their efforts to be responsible servants to their communities.

Jamie has taught hundreds of professional development and training programs across North America and Europe and has had the privilege of testifying in front of the United States Congress on the critical importance of public lands and recreation.

She has been an active member of the National Recreation and Park Association having served in a variety of leadership capacities during her career. She is a past President of the American Park and Recreation Society and in 2008 was inducted as a Fellow into the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration.

As she always says, “I’ve been privileged to spend my working days doing something I love. Not everyone can say that.”