

Introduction

Every year, thousands of Westchester County residents enjoy the County's extensive park system, from beaches on the Hudson River and Long Island Sound to mountain lakes and urban swimming pools. Since its inception almost 90 years ago, the County park system has developed into one of the premier county systems in the nation. Yet, few realize that Westchester built the nation's first system of parks linked by parkways. This ambitious plan was inspired by America's new attitude toward leisure and was executed by visionary leaders.

Recognizing the need to continue this commitment to maintaining the same excellent level of service of recreation into the 21st century that the citizens of the County have come to expect, Westchester County Parks Recreation & Conservation (WCPRC), together with Vollmer Associates and a team of sub-consultants: Arthur Andersen, Beyer Blinder Belle and Carol Johnson Associates, prepared the first phase of a two phase planning process that develops a Strategic Plan which will guide the development, management and preservation of County park facilities. Phase Two of the master plan study will provide short term individual park master plan solutions and long range county-wide planning objectives and policy. A Steering Committee was established to support the project team in identifying key issues and concerns. The Committee was comprised of representatives of the Parks, Planning and Public Works Departments as well as representatives from the County Executive's Office and other recreational and park groups.

Goals and Objectives of the Master Plan

The County's goals and objectives for this planning project included:

- The preparation of a comprehensive inventory and analysis of all existing parks;
- The identification of needs, options and priorities for the Department's future operation of its parklands;
- The analysis of present and future operating and capital budgets;
- The development of a Master Plan with maximum public input including municipal parks and planning professionals; and
- Formatting project plans for incorporation into a future GIS databank for all County parks in order to assist with their on-going development and stewardship.

To achieve these goals, the project was divided into two phases of grouped tasks: Phase I - Information Gathering, Needs Assessment, and Initial Findings; and Phase II - Synthesis, Solutions and Final Recommendations. Phase I of the study is divided into two parts: inventory and information gathering and assessments and projections. Within the first phase are two major tasks: park, recreation and facility planning and financial planning.

Benchmarking

Part of the Master Plan process was to gather information about comparable counties in the Metro New York area and to analyze how Westchester County is doing in the field of recreation. The counties of Bergen and Morris in New Jersey along with Montgomery in Pennsylvania were selected. Westchester County has the largest number of parks (44) and is the only system that provides County pools (7) for use by residents. Of all the counties, the Westchester County Parks system offers the widest variety of recreational activities to its residents.

The most marked differences between Westchester and the other counties is revealed in Table V-III of the report representing the parks' budget comparison. In 1997, Westchester County devoted the highest percentage of its total budget for salary and wages, 87.6 percent, while Montgomery County, PA devoted less than half, or 40.4 percent. The 44 parks in the Westchester County System require greater allocation of dollars for staff, while the seven in Montgomery County require less staff and therefore fewer dollars. However, the total operating budget for Westchester County, at \$47 million, is more than nine times that of Montgomery County at \$5 million. This kind of comparison, identifying similarities and differences, provides insight into the operations of other counties and help underpin the foundation for the recommendations phase of the Master Plan process.

Growth Opportunities

The Westchester County System has an extensive history and legacy, which results in its positive image. The system also benefits from its location in a large suburban/urban county, which has a high national profile. The profile includes positive demographic features such as income and recreation expenditures growth. Additionally, the parks have the advantage of excellent access by various means of transportation. The significance of this finding is that to the extent WCPRC needs to capture a larger market, diversify the parks' utilization, and increase "earned income", the "product" - a highly respected parks system - is well known and has a positive image. Park utilization has increased, reflective both of current and projected trends in the demand for parks. For example, attendance at County Parks has increased approximately 10% from 1.77 million visitors in 1991 to 1.94 million in 1995.

Financial Summary/ Potential New Revenue Sources

The Westchester County Parks system has significant new revenue potential. That potential comes not only from the development of a new golf course and a new aquatic center (for which demand is clear), but also from reconfiguring existing fee structures and their application, as well as the development of new park uses and the reuse of under-utilized facilities.

New or additional revenue generators have significant potential for the County Parks system and that potential is considered and planned for within the context of a balance between park use by residents and the traditional fees (and taxes) paid by residents. The process of planning for and implementing new revenue generators must respect traditional park use, yet make accommodations for park growth by users and uses, on-going park maintenance which respects future park use into the 21st century, and declining public dollars. The potential for additional receipts revenues can be grouped into two categories: existing and future park uses. Additionally, a flat fee, similar to other county systems, to replace parking and per-use fees may be implemented, as it offers a straight-forward revenue strategy and may, because of its ease of usage and broad-based understanding, offer a basis for further analysis. For marketing purposes, it also offers a unique way of attracting new and repeat usage. Careful monitoring of revenues to assure no loss in overall earned income will be required.

Recreational User Preference Survey Summary

The Westchester County Department of Planning and the Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation have worked together in studying the recreational activities, needs and preferences of county residents. Recreational surveys have been conducted in 1960, 1971, 1986 and 1996. In the summer of 1996, a survey questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of 5,000 county households. Geographic distribution of sample respondent households in the 1996 survey is comparable to 1990 Census distribution of households county wide.

Information relating to popular recreational activities, familiarity and visitation discrepancies, park visitation, use of public facilities, user demand, user fee preference and special event attendance was obtained. Comparisons with the 1986 survey results were made to give a sense of how the recreational patterns and needs of county residents have changed over the past decade. The analysis of the data collected is summarized below:

Leading Sports and Recreational Activities				
Rank	1996		1986	
1	walking/jogging	62.1	swimming	58.1
2	swimming	51.8	picnicking	39.7
3	bicycling	45.3	music/drama	38.9
4	historic sites/museums	40.8	bicycling	34.2
5	cultural performances	40.0	walking program	33.0
6	picnicking	33.9	tennis	31.2
7	golf	30.1	skiing	25.8
8	tennis	27.7	fishing	24.6
9	playground (kids)	25.1	golf	24.5
10	ice skating/hockey	24.7	baseball/softball	24.0

There is a relationship between a respondent's residence and their knowledge of parks and facilities in a particular location. The survey discovered that there is a notable gap, about 10-30 percentage points, between familiarity with and visitation of the facilities within the system, indicating an additional potential or capacity for increased attendance. There is a need to raise the familiarity level of many parks individually and the County park system as a whole.

Master Plan Recommendations

The purpose of Phase II will be to develop specific solutions to short-term needs and outline a long-range plan and policy for future open space recreational needs. The Phase I Report concluded with a summary of all background data obtained in the survey and inventory section, the summary analysis of that data, the results of the financial models and specific course of action proposals identified as "Next Steps" to direct the Phase II portion of the work. These recommendations are based on projections of future demographics, growth patterns, spending patterns and revenue projections. These are practical guidelines to support and direct the future development, management and preservation of recreational parks.

From the Phase I Report, the top six recommendations are briefly discussed below:

1. **Park Preservation and Stewardship:** The legacy of Westchester County Parks has been built on preserving natural landscapes and open space. Based on public meeting responses, meetings with Friends Groups and consistent with the County's mission statement, clearly the vigilant preservation of all the habitats, built facilities, unique environments and natural beauty of the County's parklands

must be the Department's number one priority; also **Infrastructure Improvements** including upgrades and rehabilitation of existing utilities and roads; and **Facility Improvements** of the prioritized list of existing parks, landscapes and buildings.

2. **Economic Studies** of major revenue generators and their primary and secondary impacts.
3. **Park Linkages:** The 1996 Residents Recreation Preference Survey ranked walking/jogging as the number one activity and Bicycling as the number three activity of Westchester County residents. These strong results coupled with the clear indication that these activities will remain popular into the future demonstrate the need for expanding the County's Trailway system.
4. **Swimming:** Because swimming received a high rank in the user surveys, public meeting input and comments from town and municipal park departments, it has been identified as a priority "need" in Westchester County.
5. **Marketing Program:** A comprehensive marketing program should be designed to encourage additional overall park use by County residents and increase usage of under-utilized parks and parks activities. Additional usage will aid in the continued recognition of the parks system and increase annual revenues for the system. Since economic and demographic growth are solid market indicators for increased park use of all types, the aggressive, comprehensive marketing program must be able to capture that potential usage.
6. **Golf:** Based on strong public meeting responses, the Residential Recreation Preference Survey responses, and results from a National Golf Foundation survey that documents an unmet demand in the County of some 400,000 rounds of public golf per year, the County should clearly provide more public golf. In addition, golf benefits the entire system because it is a significant revenue generator that can fund other park programs. Because the demand for golf remains unabated and seemingly will continue that way for some time, it is strongly recommended that the County undertake site feasibility studies for the construction of several new full sized and executive style courses with teaching stations.

The remaining eight recommendations are listed below:

7. **A Master Plan for Playland** including the phased accommodation of historic facilities with new amusements, upgraded access and parking as well as adaptive reuse potentials;
8. **Individual Park Master Plans** developed for parks with critical needs;
9. **Natural Resource Inventory/Environmental Studies** including biodiversity and carrying capacity analyses;
10. **Historic Resource Inventory/Preservation Studies:** documentation and eligibility for National Register;
11. **Geographic Information Systems** as a management tool for projecting future needs;
12. **ADA Compliance** survey of all structures and paths;
13. **Interpretative Plans** for the entire park system and five parks with historic buildings;
14. **Parkland Acquisition** of unique, fragile, waterfront or linking parcels between parks.