What’s in Store for the Future of Parks & Recreation in Wisconsin

The need for a rational understanding of the future is acute. The challenges of political, social, economic and technological change have left particularly the public recreation and park field in Wisconsin at somewhat loose ends. Unrelenting financial problems, more federal and state requirements, enhanced demands for services to an aging population, program requirements catering to greater diversity of lifestyles, a shrinking and ethnically changing work force, stiffer competition for tax dollars, increasing violent crimes in parks, a movement toward privatization of operations, computerization, shrinking public images of the profession, and lack of citizen involvement are among the challenges now faced by public recreation and park agencies.

Beyond the need for agency survival, however, is a larger responsibility by the profession for becoming architects of a change towards a preferred future. Accounting for future change provides information for not only planning the future, but ultimately to bringing about desirable changes. The contemporary role of public park and recreation leaders is to select those challenges of change that are most critical and manage a strategic response to each. Failure to identify the issues and to develop a tactic to deal with those most crucial, leads to "a crisis of insurmountable proportions". When we turn away from the future, we abdicate our right to shape it.

The importance of determining future trends and issues has been stressed by a number of park and recreation professionals worldwide, especially as evidenced by past speakers at the WPRA Great Lakes Academy. Presenters have warned that "the ultimate acceptance of the parks and recreation profession will be based on the quality of services provided and our ability to anticipate and respond to changing trends within society". John Compton believed "futuring, both as an attitude and an on-going management practice, will be the most valued talent of the modern-day professional". He also stated that, "never in the history of the [parks and recreation] movement has there been so much diversity, differences of perception of mission, and conflict over the direction the field is taking or should take". Indeed, many experts have suggested that we are facing the deepest social upheaval and creative structuring of all times.

Recent National Surveys Identifying Trends and Issues in Recreation and Parks

A review of the recent futurist literature by scholars and professionals in parks, recreation and leisure studies that focuses primarily on the decade of the 1990s offers perhaps a background to the shape of the challenges facing public park and recreation agencies. Most of this literature is based on other literature reviews, horizon scanning, analyses of trend data, surveys and essays. The First Annual Leisure Watch National Issues Survey (1989) produced a National Issues Agenda for the 1990s. An "issue" was defined as "a difficulty or problem that has a significant influence on the way an organization functions or on its ability to achieve a desired future". Recreation and park administrators, planners and educators in 13 states (in the U.S.A.) and provinces (in Canada) were asked to identify issues that they expected would have the greatest
impact on their organization's and/or clientele's near future. In order of frequency of choice, those issues identified were:

1. economy/consumerism (7) e.g., the need to better define economic impact of recreation opportunity
2. business management (6) e.g., increasing costs and decreasing resources
3. technology and science (6) e.g., genetic engineering/life prolonging technology
4. family/social relationships (5) e.g., growth of nontraditional families
5. politics/government/legislation (5) e.g., need for federal and state funding support
6. fitness/sports (4) e.g., motivating the nonparticipant (youth, disabled, aged)
7. medicine/health/wellness (4) e.g., growth of employee wellness services
8. education, learning, and training (4) e.g., prevalent illiteracy
9. environment/ecology (4) e.g., management of increased demand for open space/resources
10. workplace/employment (4) e.g., decline of the power of labor unions
11. demographics (3) e.g., an aging population
12. travel/tourism (3) e.g., keeping pace with new demands such as ecotourism

The pattern of current national issues can also be assessed from studying the programs of the National Recreation and Park Association Congresses. A past study conducted a content analysis of the National Issues Forums held at NRPA Annual Congresses over the past 10 years. Since 1983 a total of 65 national issues have been considered; of these the most frequently used topics were constituents, fiscal resources, and space resources. Twenty-one of the sessions (32%) focused on topics related to needs and characteristics of constituents. For example, in the 1990s these have included deliberations about the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act, urban youth, cultural diversity, aging, and drug abuse. Twelve of the sessions (18%) focused on financial concerns, such as the economic impact of parks, joint enterprises, and liability insurance crises. Of note, of the sixteen sessions held since 1990, only one pertained to fiscal resources; yet this issue was most predominant in the 1985 and 1986 Congresses. The third most frequently dealt with issue was space resources with seven (11%) of the sessions considering such topics as preventative maintenance, land acquisition strategies, and environmentalism.

The most comprehensive study, however, was that recently completed by Whyte that focused on trends and issues in local government recreation and parks administration. The Delphi technique was used to elicit opinions from a jury of 36 experts from the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration (mostly practitioners) and the Academy for Leisure Sciences (mostly educators). Over 650 trends and issues suggested by jurors in the first round, were then condensed into 106 unique trends and 89 unique issues. These items were rated as to their impact over two consensus-building rounds, which narrowed them down to 11 key trends and 13 key issues having the highest ratings. Table One lists the top ranked trends according to rated impact and Table Two lists the top ranked issues according to rated impact for local government recreation and park service systems.
Table One
Top Ranked Trends

EXTREME IMPACT

1. Deteriorating park and recreation infrastructure
2. Increasing crime (violence, drug use, vandalism, gangs) in communities and parks
3. Declining park and recreation budgets relative to costs
4. Increasing competition for shrinking federal, state, and local tax resources
5. Massive public sector debt

GREAT IMPACT

1. Neglect of children
2. Greater cultural diversity (growing and more influential minority populations)
3. Greater difficulty in providing equal opportunity for leisure to all people
4. Declining quality of life and livability of urban areas (insufficient open space, deteriorating city)
5. Greater division between "haves" and "have-nots"
6. Increased public demand for participation, accountability and productivity in government

Table Two
Top Ranked Issues

EXTREME IMPACT

1. How to ensure adequate finance for capital development (land/open space, facilities)
2. What spending priorities should be set in the face of budget cuts or when services are stretched too thin
3. How to make parks safe places (from crime, vandalism, gangs, substance abuse) while maintaining visitor enjoyment
4. How public parks and recreation can strengthen its political position and shape the future through affecting state and national policy
5. How to compete successfully for funding against other community services (education, health, police)

GREAT IMPACT

1. Should park and recreation services be managed more like a business
2. How to build on the wellness movement to promote alternative programs to drug abuse, anti-social behavior, etc.
3. How to make services more accessible to low income groups, single parents, and homeless people
4. How to increase local tax support
5. How to build public trust and satisfy demands for accountability
6. How to ensure investment in infrastructure maintenance and improvement (community pride)
7. How to foster coalition building and cooperation between other service providers and related disciplines (community networks, resource sharing, service consolidation)
8. How to develop public recognition that parks and recreation contributes to the health and well being of society and counteracts the effects of disabilities

One City's Validation: A Case Study

As one phase in a strategic planning process the City of Indianapolis, Department of Parks and Recreation invited employees, city
officials, business and industry officials, and other citizens to participate in a futuring exercise. Four teams of people met to discuss and identify trends which might affect both the function and form of the Department in the future. These teams began by making some assumptions about the future, then generated a set of questions raised by each assumption. As follow-up to this intuitive work, staff from the Leisure Research Institute at Indiana University searched current professional and research literature in order to validate the teams' assumptions and to answer some of the key questions raised. These trends, and their literature validation, became a starting point for additional citizen meetings for planning desired future responses by the Department. An abridged listing of the trends includes:

1. Trends focused on the community.

What is the public recreation agency's role in creating neighborhood identity? Do people want neighborhood identity? Although there is virtually no research addressing the relationship between concepts of community and recreation services, the conceptual basis exists for suggesting that recreation and park services contribute to one's perception of the good community. The good community has been defined as the efficacy of primary group relationships, autonomy, viability, power distribution, participation, commitment, heterogeneity, and control. In contemporary models of community satisfaction, neighborhood attributes are integral. For example, "Community involvement in recreation facility design is the new trend". Neighborhood identity can be developed through a park; neighborhood identity can be lost through a park. Unless local residents are incorporated into all phases of park planning, development, and management they will end up requiring protection from their park rather than receiving enjoyment from it. A great deal of professional literature featuring case studies on developing neighborhood identity and good will through parks is available.

b. From the center to the suburbs.

Indianapolis has more parks in the center of the city than the suburbs, reflecting an historical philosophy of parks as a social service. Is this still a viable priority? It appears that the future of park development is focused on park revitalization in the inner city. While land acquisition for future new parks is taking place as the opportunity for inexpensive and convenient land tracks become available, the crisis of downtown parks is of top priority. Parks as a social service is an increasing ethic among public park and recreation professionals in the nation's largest cities.

2. Trends focused on people.
   a. Quality of urban life.

How are cities solving the decline in quality of urban life? Is there a concern for humanizing city life? Of increasing focus for public park and recreation agencies in the future is their role in solving the problems of the homeless. Of immediate need is policy development. Considerations for inclusion in policies are: (a) task force development to determine responsibilities of therapeutic recreation and community recreation specialists for comprehensive services, (b) linkages with other institutions to maintain participation and service continuity, (c) community integration participation is preferred to mass segregated programming, (d) collaborative efforts to address illiteracy, addiction, low self-esteem, independent living skills, etc., and (e) assistance to local
referral networks in identification and referral to appropriate services.

b. Special needs populations.

What are the trends for the physically challenged? What are the trends for older adult constituents? Without a doubt, recreation and park professionals nationwide feel the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act will significantly increase in the future. In terms of older adult constituents, a shift is occurring toward the development of service initiatives for urban and frail elderly.

c. Youth.

Do crises in the schools affect parks and recreation? What should be the contemporary stance for serving a changing teen constituent? These were the questions you asked.

Youth have become of prime focus to public recreation and park agencies. Unlike two decades ago when those over the age of 65 years represented the poorest sector of the population, today children have that distinction. Children are the most "at risk" age group in so. The following statistics from Congressman George Miller, Chair of the U.S. House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families support this trend: one in four children is poor, one in six have no health insurance, one in seven will drop out of school, one in five will become a teenage parent, and one in four will spend time on welfare. The United States ranks seventh in life expectancy, tenth in educational expenditure per student, tenth in public health expenditures, and seventeenth in infant mortality. Children appear to be less physically fit than were their predecessors, they are frequently abused, and millions are "latch-key" children. It is, then, not surprising that a study found that of the 54.4% of the U.S. households that have a VCR, children under the age of 18 years spend twice as much time watching taped programs as do adults.

If public recreation and park agencies are to remain a human service, then youth must emerge as the prime constituency group. Some very innovative case studies are available on highly successful youth programs sponsored by city park and recreation nationwide. agencies in U.S. communities.

d. Leisure time.

How much leisure time will people actually have in the future? A 1991 Harris survey showed that the amount of leisure time enjoyed by the average American shrank by 37% between 1973 and 1989. At the same time, the average workweek (including travel time to work) grew from under 41 hours to nearly 47 hours. Other polls have shown that people prefer to work longer hours for higher income rather than have more leisure and less pay.

e. Demographics.

What is the impact of the baby boomers? What are important new constituent groups? The most powerful and influential (not necessarily needful) future constituency groups are middle aged adults, healthy older adults, and women. The trends relative to ethnic and minority groups, children, and frail elderly have been discussed under other categories.

In the United States the median age, about 33 in 1990, will be 36 by the year 2000. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of people between 35 and 44 will jump by
16%, and those between the ages of 45 and 54 will increase by 46%. Secondly, not only are older people becoming a larger segment of the population, but they are enjoying better health and longer life, and wielding greater economic and political power. By 2020, when baby boomers reach 65, old people will be 20% of the U.S. population. Finally, women are moving gradually up in the social and economic hierarchy of the nation and in the next two decades will force open the door of the executive suite. They will be counted among the 15 to 25 people in each of the largest corporations who run the show.

f. Cultural diversity.

Should cultural services provide melting pot impetus or ethnic identity enhancement? Hispanics will be the largest fast-growing minority population in the United States in the near future. Hispanic populations grew from 14.6 million in 1980 to 21.9 million in 1990, about 50% in 10 years, five times that of non-Hispanics. Despite similarity of language, Hispanics are not a homogeneous group.

Most black African Americans, it is predicted, will advance in the future. About 70% are currently advancing in nearly every aspect of American life. For example they have advanced in large numbers from unskilled and blue-collar work to highly skilled white-collar work. There is movement toward closer income parity with whites, due to educational advances and greater political and economic power.

Perhaps the most powerful future minority populations are Asian Americans. They are already out performing all others in the classroom and the workplace. For example, Japanese Americans have a 96% high school completion rate, compared with a white rate of 87%.

Yet another trend observed multiple places in the futures literature is that a process of cultural homogenization is occurring. There is a growth of a national society. U.S. citizens travel more (9% per year increase in common-carrier passenger miles for all modes from 1981 to today), we hear and see the same messages in the mass media, intermarriages are more frequent, schools teach essentially the same thing across the country -- all this has a leveling influence.

g. Health and illness.

Programs and activities that directly affect the health of the residents of the city, and the minimum support required to maintain those services, is the first mission of a public park and recreation agency according to a recent conference of California park and recreation managers. No longer are we simply the providers of community vitality and enrichment benefits; our focus now must be the essential and fundamental life and health services.

What is the impact of AIDS on public recreation services? Recreation and park professionals have the opportunities and creative environments in which to educate adolescents --particularly at-risk youth -- about HIV prevention. Programs that have been sponsored by cities around the country include drama clubs that role play HIV situations, community project programs where youth seek to correct community social disorders that compromise their future, and contests using HIV/AIDS and related information.

3. Trends focused on natural resources.

a. Linking parks.
Is there a current trend for linking parks together with green corridors and trails? What links are made between city transportation systems and parks? Much of the new park land acquisition that is desired today appears to be of this type: developing linear green spaces designed to link people using foot and bicycle transportation to parks, to shopping, to other neighborhoods. Within this trend is another, the recycling of no longer used or underutilized built environments as linear parks: for example, railroad beds, abandoned roads, utility pole rights of way, the underneath of highway overpasses, etc. Extensive literature and case studies are available in this; the topic also served as the theme of a recent Congress of the National Recreation and Park Association. Examples also exist in U.S. cities of converting no longer used modes of transportation (such as street cars) into recreational transportation and attractions.

b. Land stewardship.

Has the "sacred trust" of the land become more important? Should public recreation and park agencies seek to acquire more land? In a report from the President's Commission: Americans Outdoors (1987), the protection of natural resources and open space was the first priority for the future. Public recreation is positioned to lead in land stewardship because collectively they are often one of the largest land managers in a community. Because public recreation professionals tend to be activity services oriented and because they have not formulated an environmental ethic to guide decision making, anti-land stewardship dilemmas result. Our philosophy must be grounded by ecological principles, not in merchant values".

c. Safety.

What is the appropriate level of safety in the parks? Who's responsibility is it? Many urban parks nationwide are losing their positive image as special places. This occurs because the number of homeless people, drug dealers and gang members who frequent public parks is included. The social problems associated with this growing use pattern stigmatize many urban parks as unsafe and unhealthy places for children and families to recreate. This condition further erodes the image of public parks and recreation in communities as a positive social benefit. This remains a vital problem for the future of public recreation. More research needs to be done on this major stigma as it continues to inhibit our profession's progress.

The 2000s will be the age of the expert witness as society and the legal system demand new and higher standards of safety in park and recreation programs and facilities. Of increasing need for public agencies will be safety consultants and risk management plans. A primary ingredient for park safety is public support. The park and recreation community must reclaim its rightful place as a leading provider of safe and healthful leisure services. This means for many cities the development of security prevention strategies. For example, the consideration of a night "total darkness policy", the design of parking lots that discourage through-traffic cruising, publicized incentive programs to combat vandalism, and recreation program delivery partnerships with law enforcement agencies should be considered.
d. Specialized facilities.

Are constituents willing to support the development of specialized recreation facilities? The specialization of participation in many forms of leisure expression represents the reversal of a trend of increased mass production and "commodification" of recreation activities which occurred over the last few decades. The advent of increased specialization in recreation interests will mean that the amount of knowledge about specific forms of leisure behavior will have to increase for those in the planning process. More important, it will mean that planning of such recreation environments will have to be done with the continual and direct participation of those who are specialists in the leisure behavior in question. Design of specialized facilities, in effect, will have to be done much more specifically for those who will use that particular environment. This follows not only from trends in specialized recreation behavior but also from consumer expectations for customized, specialized products. The very big questions remain unanswered, however. What is public recreation's role in this trend? If public recreation is involved, what creative financing can be counted on and how can these specialized facilities be designed for flexibility of use as special interests change?

4. Trends focused on management.

a. Market driven.

Should public recreation and park delivery systems be market driven in management philosophy? Whether they "should" or not appears a moot question as trends for the future are studied. The trend is an increased market segmentation in service delivery. For example, the poor and the frail are not viable markets for many recreation programs or provisions. Meanwhile the high end segments are usually well-supplied; they have learned to use their affluence to purchase access to the best environments and the most attractive opportunities. Thus the markets with the highest "sales" potential are found among the new "discretionaries". This is a new class of people; they are the first generation in their families with college degrees and special skills that are at a premium in the labor markets. They have developed wider interests and new talents in their educational histories. But those in the earlier phases of their careers cannot afford the same recreation costs as the wealthy. They will spend time and money on leisure, but will remain price conscious.

b. Privatization.

Where do we stand on the trend of government right sizing and downsizing? Essentially, discussions of privatization in government service delivery are currently prevalent and enthusiastic across the country. However, those public recreation and park agencies that are successfully utilizing privatization are those which have completely re-envisioned and re-invented government.

Examples of privatization in terms of property acquisition and development include Racine, Wisconsin, Sandusky, Ohio, and Eufaula, Oklahoma, which have been able to revitalize unused or underutilized harbor and marine areas at minimal public cost. In each case, outstanding new recreational boating facilities have been developed through the use of private operators who expanded and rebuilt city-owned marinas, including beach, fishing, and refreshment units under a continuing rental arrangement with long-range contract with the municipality.
Other common examples of privatization have been in subcontract park maintenance, security services, and golf course starter operations. Garbage collection, building maintenance, and tree trimming have also been carried out by private concerns, sometimes resulting in substantial savings. In spite of these and other excellent case studies of successful privatization, the importance of accurately defining the work to be done with a contract that clearly specifies the quantity, quality, and price of the work cannot be ignored.

c. Alternative funding sources.

What are funding sources other than taxes for public recreation? Park and recreation agencies, as producers, are aggressively seeking strategies to concurrently generate revenue and expand service levels to broader segments of society. One recent trend is selling services at discount prices. Those agencies utilizing this approach feel they can maximize facility use and generate varying levels of revenue from multiple sources. Discounting provides an incentive to target markets already familiar with shopping sales. Another trend is price fencing. Price fencing allows customers to logically and rationally segment themselves into rate categories based on their needs, behaviors, and willingness to pay, and allows park and recreation agencies to develop better rationale for user fee rates. A third trend is price bundling -- marketing two or more services into a single "package" at a special price.

5. Trends focused on services.

a. Customer communication.

What is the contemporary role of public agencies in customer service communication? Citizens are increasingly participating in public processes to plan programs and formulate policies. Even private institutions are being increasingly required to make available more information on products and plans. Public parks and recreation must remain customer oriented. The high cost of losing a customer means: (a) the average wronged customer will tell 8 - 16 others, (b) 92% of unhappy customers never purchase the service/goods again, and (c) it costs five times as much to recruit a new customer than to retain an old customer. Recreation and park agencies must be able to trust citizens, try new programs, improve the quality of current programs, develop strategies to quickly remedy the complaints of unhappy customers, stand behind what they say, and establish "no questions asked" customer policies in order to remain viable.

b. Individualization.

Is the choice movement, and thus the customization of services, still viable? Is diversity of services choice appropriate in public recreation? The desired philosophy of the profession for the future supports diversity and customization of services. After all, true recreation involves the value of freedom of choice, and it is ethically imperative that of all the types of agencies delivering recreation and park services, public agencies must be the vanguards of freedom of choice. However, just how this can be operationally realized in the future in the face of shrinking budgets and increasing service demands will require creative thinking. Perhaps old ways of offering variety, such as the cafeteria approach to program services, will simply no longer be feasible, and new ways will need to be invented.
Conclusion

Overall the question remains: Is the assumption that in the future public recreation and park agencies must do more with less still accurate? Yes, undoubtedly. The message remains clear. Efficiency without sacrificing effectiveness is the future challenge. Key concepts within this message include greater attention to public and community relations, innovative fiscal management, better mastery of information systems, and greater sophistication in sales and marketing. Yet, the supreme task is the development of a broader and more sensitive definition of what we are as a profession, without forfeiting the essential ingredients of enjoyment and personal well-being.