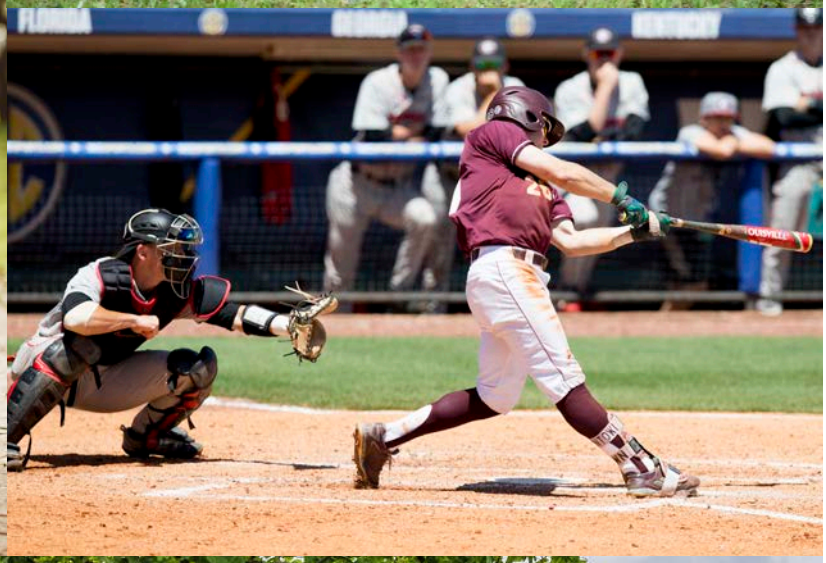
COMMUNITY RECREATION, SPORTS TOURISM, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



A MAYOR'S GUIDE TO CREATING GREAT RECREATION IN YOUR CITY

THE SPORTS FACILITIES COMPANIES

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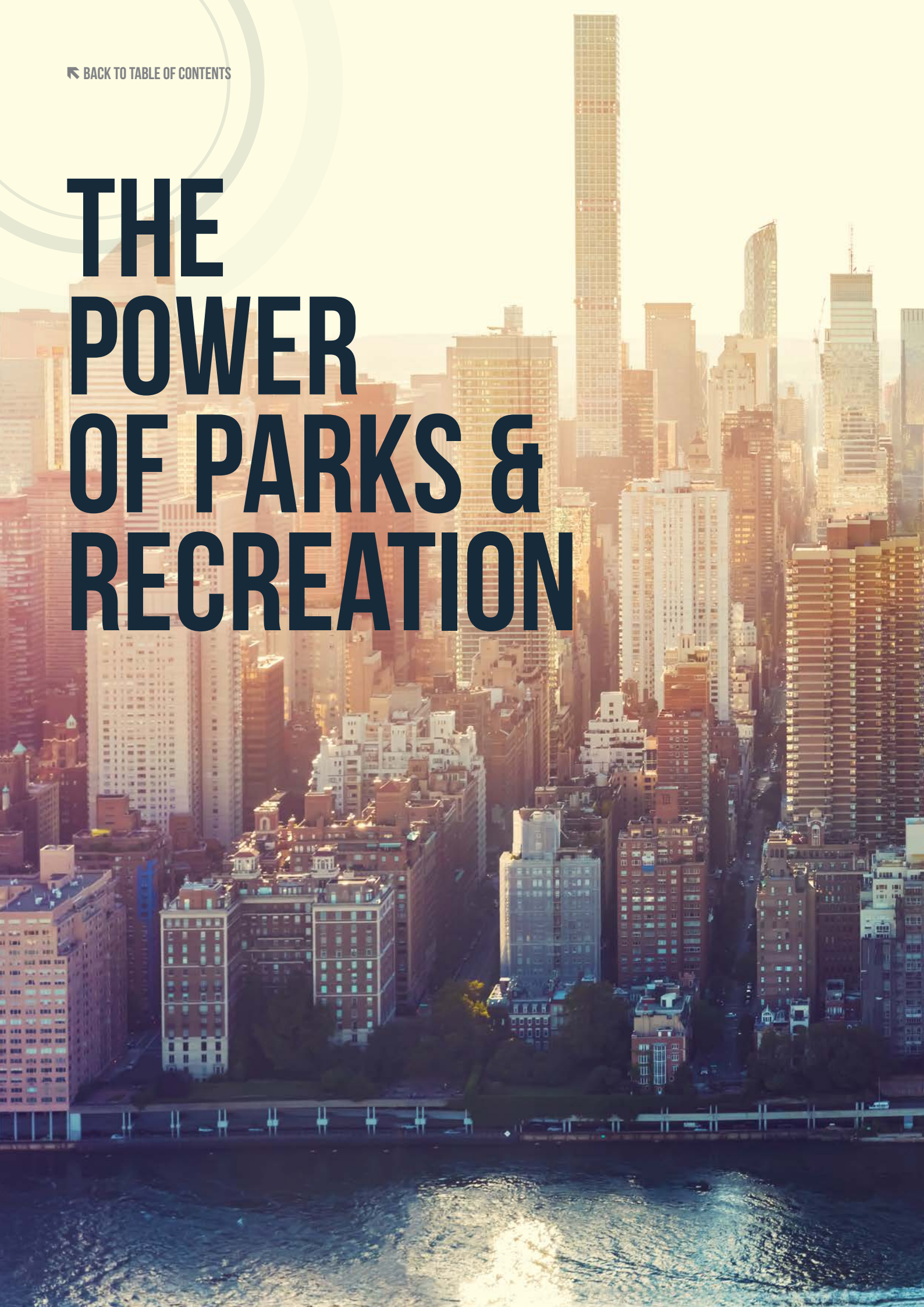
THE POWER OF PARKS & RECREATION



There's a secret ingredient at the core of the nation's "best" cities. Whether they have a bevy of big-name corporations like Minneapolis, an inclusive culture like San Francisco, or a highly educated workforce like Raleigh, NC, there's a feature that ties these qualities together and separates these cities from others. It's not great schools, an active entertainment district, or a tech corridor. Those features are all critical, but one feature has the power to impact a variety of outcomes in any community.

Each year, U.S. News and World Report reveals their list of the best places to live in the United States. At a similar time, The Trust for Public Land reveals their list of the top park systems in America. These lists share many of the same places. Of the top 10 ranked cities on the U.S. News and World Report list, five of them are among the top 60 parks systems nationally with Portland, OR showing up in the top ten for both lists.

Over the years, leaders in communities of all sizes have used their parks and recreation systems to create a sense of place, drive economic development, meet ever-changing user needs, and produce a variety of positive health and social outcomes for their citizens.

The purpose of *The Mayor's Guide to Creating Great Recreation in Your City* is to serve as a roadmap for Mayors who want to maximize the parks and recreation assets in their communities. Each section tackles a critical facet of developing great parks and recreation assets as well as establish the type of culture in your city that makes these projects possible.

TOPICS ADDRESSED IN THE GUIDE INCLUDE:

- How to Evaluate Your Community's Parks & Recreation Assets
- How to Activate Your Parks & Recreation Master Plan
- How to Engage Your Community
- How to Optimize Parks & Recreation Assets
- How to Create Great Programming and Events
- How to Maximize Greenspace

HOW CAN YOU MAXIMIZE THE PARKS AND RECREATION ASSETS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

76%

OF AMERICANS ARE MORE LIKELY TO VOTE FOR POLITICIANS WHO MAKE PARK & RECREATION FUNDING A PRIORITY.

$2.94

IS RECEIVED IN DIRECT MEDICAL BENEFIT FOR EVERY DOLLAR INVESTED IN PARK TRAILS.

50%

OF POTENTIAL HOMEBUYERS WOULD BE WILLING TO PAY 10% MORE FOR A HOME LOCATED NEAR A PARK.

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EVALUATING YOUR COMMUNITY'S PARKS & RECREATION

IN THE LANDMARK PUBLICATION, *"THE EXCELLENT CITY PARK SYSTEM"*, THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND PROVIDED SEVEN FACTORS THAT ARE PRESENT IN THE NATION'S TOP PARK AGENCIES.

7 FACTORS OF EXCELLENCE FOR CITY PARKS, AS DEFINED BY THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND:

1. CLEAR EXPRESSION OF PURPOSE:

Every organization needs a North Star to serve as the standard for the direction they move in. A clear purpose will guide everything your parks system will create from its goals to its strategies to the way it communicates with citizens. Purpose must come before planning as knowing your destination must come before mapping a route. City leaders, through communication, with constituents must determine what the purpose of their parks will be and then determine how their core services will fulfill it. The City of Tampa Parks and Recreation system's vision is to be "a quality park system that meets the community's need for recreation and learning opportunities to benefit health and well-being". This vision guides their strategies in many ways, including in the presence of community fitness centers like the Joe Abrahams Fitness & Wellness Center. It's here where guests have access to a full range of cardiovascular equipment, free weights, and classes at a fraction of the cost of a private gym.

2. ONGOING PLANNING & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PROCESS:

Just as parks and recreation assets give so much to citizens, it's critical that the community gives back in terms of advocacy and financial support. For nearly 50 years, groups like Philadelphia Green have maintained local public spaces while supporting business growth around the city's parks. Philadelphia Green and other groups around the country also raise awareness of the importance of parks and recreation. When citizens understand the impact of these assets, they are more likely to support efforts to maintain them.

3. SUFFICIENT ASSETS IN LAND, STAFFING, AND EQUIPMENT TO MEET THE SYSTEM'S GOALS:

Having a park system that makes a deep impact on the community requires a significant investment in a variety of areas, but none more important than in land, people, and equipment. There are several public and private funding mechanisms, which we will discuss later in this guide. However, land acquisition can be a challenge for many cities. Unless, you have unused land within your city limits, you will need to repurpose specific areas. Across the country, golf courses, shuttered malls, and rail depots are being converted into park space. Red Rock Canyon Open Space in Colorado Springs was once the site of, among other items, a 53-acre landfill. Since the city purchased the land in 2003, it has been converted to a public recreation space with trails, picnic areas, climbing areas, and an open-air pavilion.

4. EQUITABLE ACCESS:

Accessibility can be measured in several ways, most important of which is proximity. This is a primary focus for Washington, D.C., a top scorer in The Trust for Public Land's Park Score Index. Currently, 98 percent of the city's population lives within a 10-minute walk of a park. Accessibility can also be seen in recreation center programming that meets the needs of a diverse group of citizens from families to seniors to young adults.

MINI-CASE STUDY:

SENIOR ADULT DAY AND OVERNIGHT TRIPS- ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY LEISURE SERVICES

Athens, GA, the home of the University of Georgia, is known for having one of the largest student populations in the southern United States. However, Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services developed programming aimed at keeping local seniors active and engaged with local landmarks. The department provides weekly trips for seniors to museums, festivals, and shopping areas in Athens and throughout the region. Recent trips include the Cherry Blossom Festival in Macon, GA and a wine tour in nearby Dahlonega, GA.

The program is an example of how recreation departments are reaching beyond traditional groups to create programming that meets the needs of all citizens. By having programs that reflect the diversity in your community, you greatly increase the likelihood that it will be supported and well-attended.

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5. USER SATISFACTION:

Excellent park systems not only have heavily attended assets, but they are also attuned to the needs of their community. They achieve user satisfaction by understanding the types of amenities and programs their citizens want and need, developing those programs and amenities, maintaining equipment regularly, and assessing performance.

These park systems are committed to gathering data to show community usage as well. The data is critical for maintaining and growing their budget. It's also used to entice new business community partners.

6. SAFTEY FROM CRIME AND PHYSICAL HAZARDS:

It goes without saying that building a safe environment for guests is a central part of park operations. Simply put, if your residents sense that they are in danger at a local park, they will avoid it all together. There are several actions that systems can take to reassure citizens. This includes having the presence of uniformed personnel, maintaining park amenities, and developing youth programs. The latter is particularly important as park systems have a responsibility to be a part of the solution in their communities.

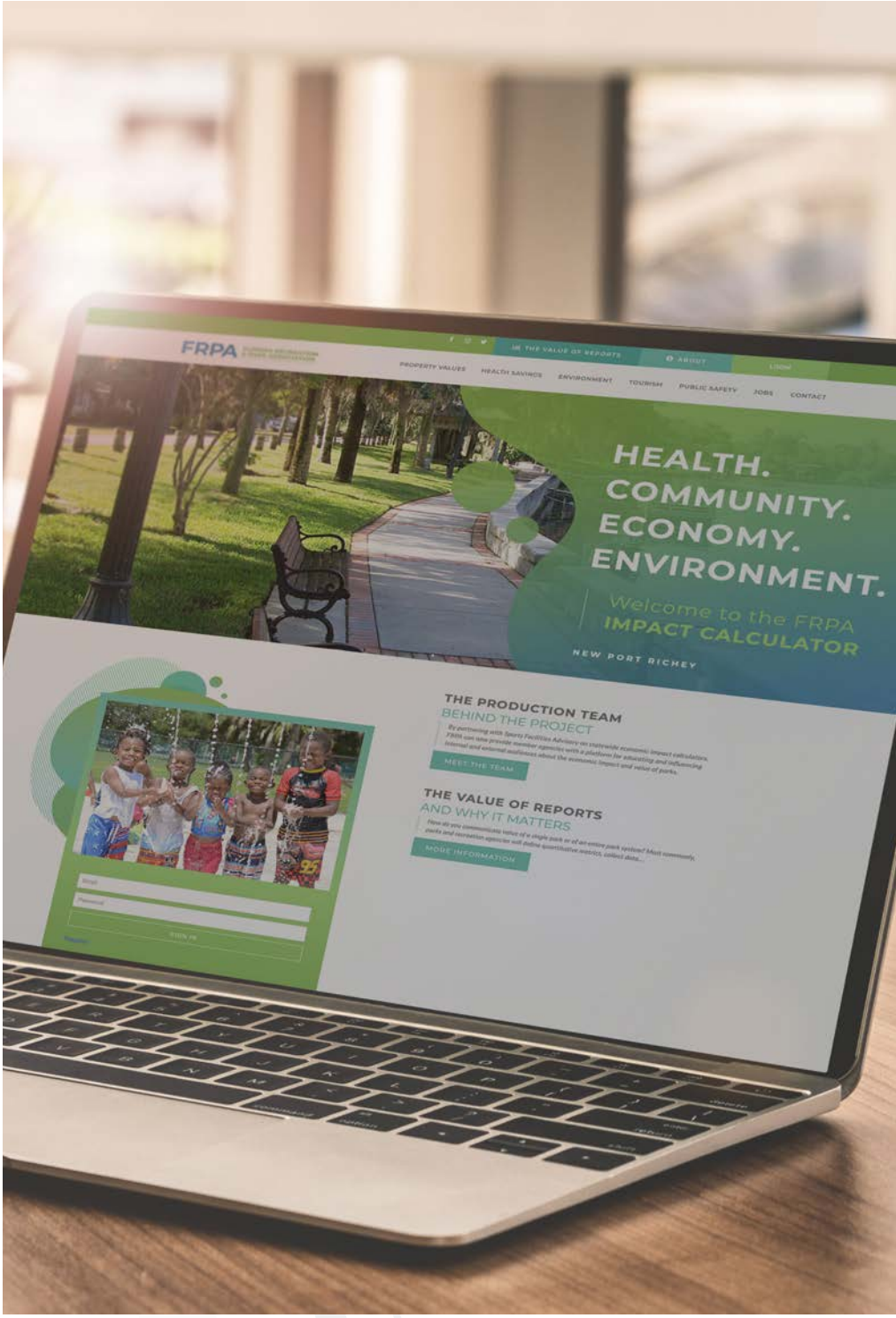
7. BENEFITS FOR THE CITY BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PARKS:

The best parks and recreation systems use data to measure performance against a defined set of goals. Most goals focus on revenue generation or cost recovery, economic impact, or community engagement. Specific performance indicators may include hotel nights generated from events or tax revenue generation if economic growth is your goal. If community engagement is your primary focus, metrics such as membership growth and participation in a variety of programs are key. By defining, measuring, and reporting on an array of factors, parks and recreation directors can better provide Mayors and city leadership with valuable information that is key to maximizing impact, understanding capital investment or expansion plans, or assessing community needs.

MINI-CASE STUDY:

FRPA PARKS IMPACT CALCULATOR

Despite data that indicates the positive impact of parks and recreation on health and economic outcomes, parks and recreation spending is often first to be cut. Part of the issue stems from the lack of tools or data to show the true value of recreational assets. SFC partnered with Florida Recreation and Park Association, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Florida Sports Foundation, and dozens of other professionals and organizations to provide a unique solution to parks directors in Florida. The Parks Impact Calculator measures the impact parks and recreation assets across 6 key areas: property values, tourism spending, job creation, environmental savings, public safety, and health care cost savings. The tool is designed to educate and empower parks and recreation professionals and elected officials throughout the State to quantify the value of their parks assets. The reports that are generated by the calculator are being used to inform funding decisions for parks systems throughout the state of Florida.



SPORTS, RECREATION, AND EVENTS FACILITIES OFTEN REQUIRE A MORE SPECIFIC SET OF EVALUATION CRITERIA SUCH AS:

OPERATIONALLY EFFICIENT:

Sports and recreation assets maximize their impact when they are managed and operated efficiently. This includes using best practices for developing budgets, serving customers, maintaining equipment, financial reporting and tracking, and providing a safe environment. To optimize their performance and lessen the burden of government, some cities have elected to create a public-private partnership with a professional management firm for single facilities or entire parks systems.

MARKETING & BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT:

Unlike parks, trails, and greenspaces that are used for more passive activities - sports, recreation, and events centers require a dedicated marketing and business development effort to achieve financial sustainability. Key performance indicators for marketing and business development include revenue generation, memberships, event bookings, ticket sales, website visits, and email database growth.

GUEST EXPERIENCE & REPUTATION:

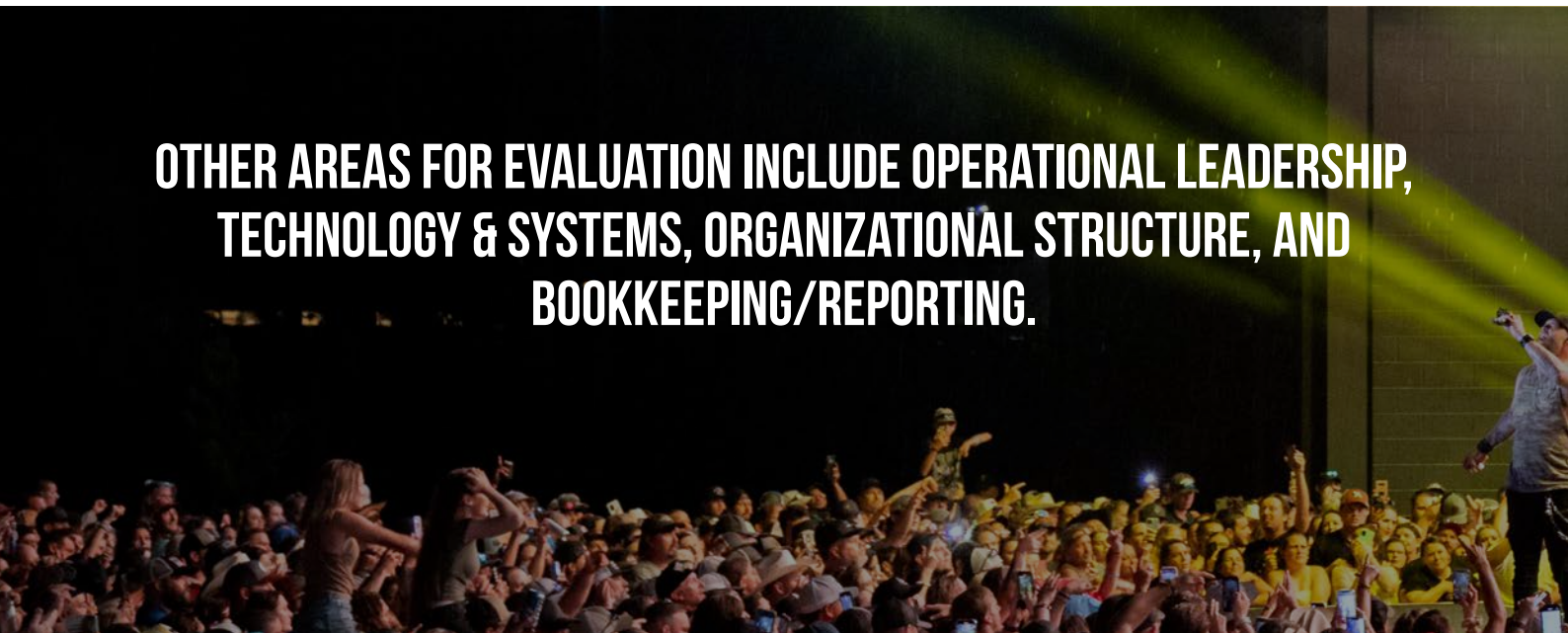
Word-of-mouth remains a critical component of facility success and guest experience is a key factor. Positive guest experiences work for you as a great business development tool while negative experiences work against your efforts. This is realized in both the literal sense – person to person communication- and in the digital sense through online review sites like Google Business and social media platforms such as Facebook. Guest experience starts from the time the visitor starts their journey towards your facility and ends when they arrive home. Everything in between, from the walk up to your front door, the greeting at the front desk, quality of food and beverage, and event schedules play a role in the overall guest experience.

PHYSICAL FACILITY:

This factor extends beyond the venue's ability to sufficiently serve guests and goes into its ability to effectively draw new visitors in the local, regional, and national markets, depending on the business model. Many aging recreation centers have outdated technology, equipment, and interior design that become an obstacle to keeping existing and attracting new members. For example, communities with pocket ball diamonds or a one diamond 'quad' often struggle to break into the tourism market because they are competing with purpose-built sports mega-cilities.

PLACEMAKING:

Not only do parks and recreation assets serve residents, but they can build a powerful sense of place that draws new people to your region for sports, eco-tourism or events. In spring 2021, Sand Mountain Park and Amphitheater opened in Albertville, AL, a town 80 miles north of Birmingham. The 120-acre complex is a sports, entertainment, and recreation mecca featuring 16 tennis courts, 14 outdoor turf fields, a 7,500-seat amphitheater, an 8-lane indoor competition pool, an outdoor water park, playgrounds, an RV park, and a community recreation center. The complex has transformed the small town into the region's must-stop venue for popular music artists and set a new standard in outdoor recreation.



MINI-CASE STUDY:

HOOVER MET COMPLEX
HOOVER, AL

The Hoover Metropolitan 'Met' Complex is a premier community recreation and sports tourism destination located in Hoover, AL, a suburb of Birmingham, AL. With an existing asset, the Hoover Met Stadium, (originally built in 1988) the community had a foundation in sports. In 2016, the city of Hoover adopted an aggressive sports tourism strategy to drive economic impact through new market visitors and increased community engagement. The first phase of the $80 million development was the construction of a 155,000 square-foot indoor sports facility (The Finley Center), a new baseball/softball complex, and an RV Park next to the stadium in June 2017. Phase two of the development was the addition of a 16-court tennis complex, community splash pad and playground, and 5 synthetic turf soccer/long fields. Since its opening, the Finley Center has become a hub of community activity with its walking track, weekly events, and pickleball. The results have been significant from an economic and community engagement standpoint with $68 million in economic impact in the 2020-21 fiscal year.

IN 2016 THE CITY OF HOOVER ADOPTED AN AGGRESSIVE SPORTS TOURISM STRATEGY TO DRIVE ECONOMIC IMPACT THROUGH NEW MARKET VISITORS AND INCREASED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

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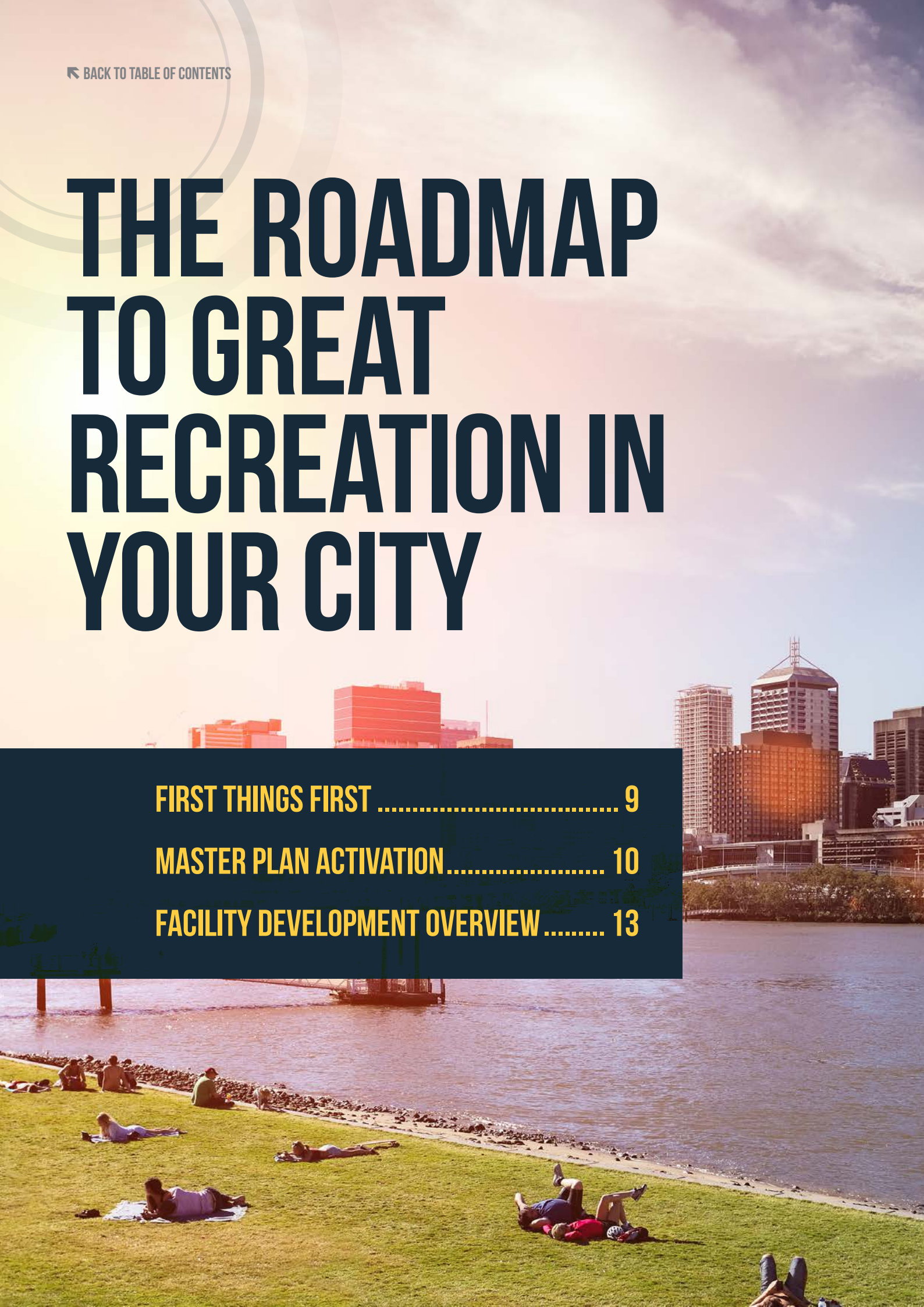
THE ROADMAP TO GREAT RECREATION IN YOUR CITY



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FIRST THINGS FIRST...

With an understanding of the power of parks and recreation centers and a list of the traits that impactful systems share, it's time to build a plan. Through our work in over 2,000 communities nationwide, the Sports Facilities Companies have developed a set of best practices that can transform your community assets to the life-changing facilities your residents deserve. In the following pages, we will share strategies for addressing several important components for cultivating a parks and recreation system that enhances the lives of residents.

ALIGN WITH YOUR CITY'S MASTER PLAN:

Parks and recreation systems, while impactful, don't exist in a bubble. For assets to truly serve the community, they must be a part of the greater effort to solve issues including infrastructure improvements or supporting less fortunate citizens. They must also be an active part of a city's placemaking strategy. In short, the system must align with a city's master plan to ensure that assets and services always meet community needs. Also, aligning with a city's master plan raises the profile of parks and recreation among stakeholders and citizens and gives them a seat at the table when major decisions are being made. For example, part of Columbia, MO vision statement expresses the city's desire to be "the best place for everyone to live, work, learn and play." Columbia has turned to their parks and recreation department to fulfill this desire through a variety of initiatives including hosting the Show-Me State Games which drives $10 million in direct economic impact. They also host programs like "Lunch in the Parks," which feeds hundreds of children per day during the summer.

SET PRIORITIES:

As the parks and recreation master plan is developed and aligned with the overall city plan, a variety of needs and desires will be revealed. To ensure the impact of your plan, and subsequently, your parks and recreation assets, priorities must be determined. Which items will have the greatest positive impact on the community? Engaging residents through surveys, social media, and in person meet-ups will help you find those answers and garner buy-in. Gathering and analyzing data to determine the market viability of your idea will be crucial as well.

DEVELOPING YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN:

With a grasp of what's needed to elevate your community, you must build a strategic plan with a timeline for implementation. The timeline is critical for both internal planning and external understanding of the time it will take to complete projects within your plan. Residents should know that facility development projects can take from 3-4 years, on average, from planning to grand opening.

BUILDING YOUR PROJECT TEAM:

Advisory Firm
Select a qualified advisory firm to perform a market analysis, feasibility study, recreation master plan, or optimization study.

Landscape Architect
Select a landscape architect for your site analysis, site planning, storm water management, trails and greenspace planning.

Owner's Representation
Select an Owner's Representative to oversee the entire project on your behalf - including the planning, design, construction, and commissioning.

AEC Firm
Select an Architect or Architecture Engineering and Construction (AEC) firm to design and construct your facilities.

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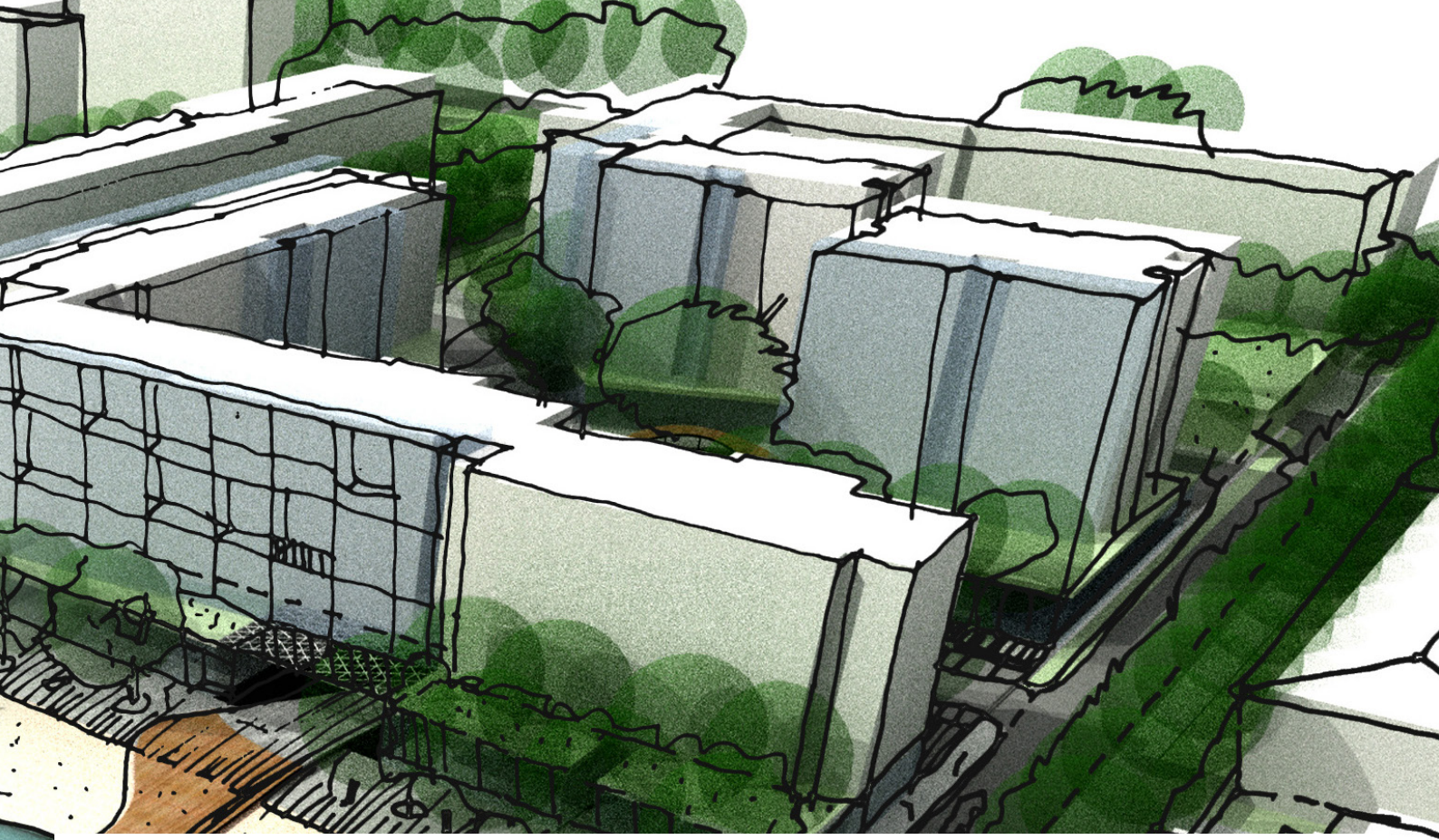
ACTIVATING YOUR MASTER PLAN: GUIDE TO FACILITY DEVELOPMENT

MANY STRATEGIC AND MASTER PLANS INCLUDE NEW ASSETS IN YOUR COMMUNITY. WHETHER YOU'RE DEVELOPING A NEW PARK OR FACILITY, UPDATING AN AGING FACILITY, OR ESTABLISHING A NEW INITIATIVE, A LAUNCH STRATEGY IS CRITICAL AND SHOULD INCLUDE:

CONCEPT VALIDATION:

When your vision includes developing a new sports, recreation, or events venue, it will require strategic stakeholders/partners, a right-sized development plan, and an appropriate funding structure. Your vision must be vetted for market and financing feasibility. A feasibility analysis examines all aspects of the project concept and compares it with real-world data of similar facilities and communities. The info provides potential strategic and funding partners with an estimate of a project's key performance indicators such as program and service offerings, annual visitation, community access, return on investment (ROI), and other important factors used in decision making for projects with similar components. This data is the basis for the evaluation of financial feasibility and a recommended program plan for the project.

Other critical tools used at this stage include a local demand assessment and a competitive analysis. It's important to determine development and startup cost estimates, as well as preliminary cash flow forecasts. These tools provide insight on the types of facilities and programs that a community can support. For example, market data may examine the number of households in a 50-mile radius that have children between the ages of 7-13 and compare to the number of available indoor basketball courts. This age group is most likely to engage in youth sports and if there aren't any nearby options, a gap in programming has been discovered.



PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

It often requires several strategic partners to take a feasible project for recreation services from concept to reality and community impact. This may include private businesses, the local healthcare system, schools, existing service providers, or investors. Essential data for attracting and building partnerships comes from tools such as financial forecasts and economic impact reports.

FUNDING STRATEGIES:

Historically, garnering funding for parks and recreation assets has been challenging as departments receive intense opposition both from other departments within city governments and from citizens who may not understand the value of these assets. The challenge is greater when developing a new asset. However, several funding strategies have been implemented across the country to raise the necessary funds for these projects. These include:

Using specific taxes- There are a variety of taxes that can be leveraged to fund new parks and recreation projects. This includes using sales taxes as a part of a capital improvement plan, hotel taxes to fund hybrid facilities for tourism and recreation, and Tax Increment Financing (TIF) bonds. A TIF bond is a funding mechanism that allows municipalities to use the anticipated increase in tax revenues generated by the project as its funding source. This mechanism is typically used for large scale projects that will lead to significant increases in tax revenue.

Bonds- Large capital projects such as trails or multi-purpose recreation centers can benefit from the use of bonds that are voted on by residents. The bonds are used to fund long-term debt for these projects.

Grants- Annual formula-based, competitive, and discretionary grants, such as HUD-CDBG, EDA-Travel, Tourism and Outdoor Recreation, and NPS-LWCF, are intended to support community development activities and may be utilized to assist with projects that address infrastructure and public facility improvements, economic development projects, and social services.

Capital Improvement Programs- Parks and recreation development projects can be funded as part of a larger capital improvement plan. Typically, these plans are focused on improving a municipality's infrastructure. While funds are not exclusive to parks and recreation improvement, CIP has been applied to the development of greenways and trails among other projects. An example can be seen in Tampa, FL where the CIP has been instrumental in the transformation of its central business district, including the development of walking paths along the Hillsborough River, the development of Waterworks Park (including splashpads, docks, and popular restaurants such as Ulele), and the renovation of Julian B Lane Park.

PARTNERSHIP TYPES:

There are a variety of organizations that can make a tremendous impact on your parks and recreation system through partnership. These organizations derive a significant benefit as well. Key partners to consider are:

HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS:

Parks and recreation systems share a mutual goal of promoting health and wellness with organizations such as hospital systems and doctors' offices. Your assets can be bolstered by the financial resources and instant credibility of the health organization. They also receive access to medical personnel for wellness-related programming. In return, health organizations receive access to residents who attend recreational assets. For example, Baylor Scott & White Health opened a health and wellness center at a recreation facility in South Dallas. Along with a clinic, the health system offers fitness and evidence-based intervention programs.

> "YOUR ASSETS CAN BE BOLSTERED BY THE FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND INSTANT CREDIBILITY OF THE HEALTH ORGANIZATION."

FOR-PROFIT BUSINESSES:

For years, parks and recreation systems have worked with their local business communities to elevate them from a financial and programmatic standpoint. In terms of the benefit to local businesses, not only are they building a community-focused brand, but parks and rec systems are devising innovative ways to enhance their value. A recent Florida Recreation and Parks Association conference introduced the idea of checking license plates to provide location data for event attendees. Also, items such as car dealership stickers can give insight into consumer preferences.

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS:

Parks and Recreation departments are also partnering with non-profit organizations that share a similar mission to strengthen their resources and reach. An example of this can be found in St. Petersburg, FL where their parks and recreation department partners with the Sages Theater, a local non-profit that supports seniors. Sages Theater produced a play titled "Defying Gravity", which promotes fall prevention and raises awareness about the dangers of falling. The play is being shown at the St. Pete Parks' Sunshine Senior Center, a recreation center for the area's senior population.

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

ASSET DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT:

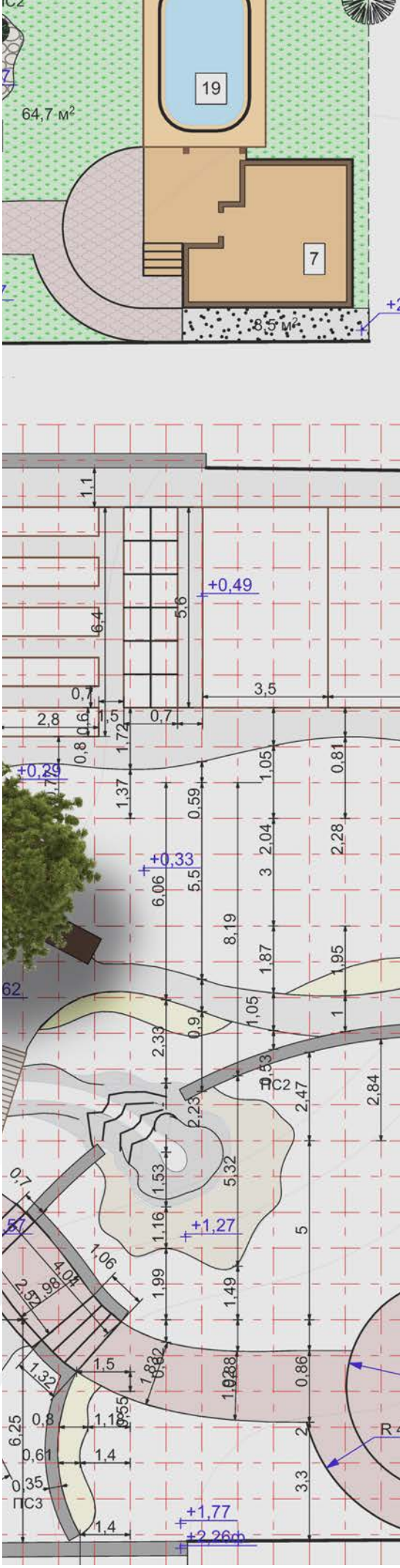
Aside from specific mechanisms that require viewing basic project design work prior to awarding funds, projects may enter the design and development phase after you've secured funding and garnered the commitment of a network of partners. The nuances of this process will vary depending on the type of project (new construction vs renovation, indoor recreation center vs outdoor park), but they should all follow a similar process to achieve success. A project plan must be developed that considers data from the financial forecast. This is critical because the financial forecast provides the operational details and amenities that a facility must include to achieve its stated goals. In turn, the project plan will serve as your project roadmap and will dictate all design and construction decisions going forward.

OPERATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Opening a facility on time, on budget, and positioned for operational success is the goal of this stage. 12-18 months prior to grand opening, the operational development process commences in which staff members are hired, a branding and marketing plan is developed, and HR, legal, risk, finance, and maintenance systems are implemented. Operational development provides strategies and processes that establish the foundation for success.

FACILITY OPERATIONS:

Building a new recreation center or sports mecca doesn't ensure that residents or visitors will come and enjoy it – far from it. Competition from private sector operators exist in most cities and the needs of residents are ever evolving. To engage your community, you'll need a team adept at executing day-to-day operations, developing marketing and branding campaigns, booking events, connecting with residents, and selling sponsorships. It's also critical to have people with an understanding of proper legal, risk management, and financial procedures on board. Traditionally parks and recreation departments operate community centers, trails, and greenspaces – however, with the rise of multimillion-dollar recreation centers, sports complexes, and entertainment facilities, many communities are choosing to partner with a professional management firm in the space.



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GUIDE TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

SET A VISION:

To develop your idea into a refined concept, you must discover the "why" behind your vision. How will your vision enrich the lives of your citizens? Are there opportunities to elevate the profile of your community? What does your community need right now?

It's also important to consider operational effectiveness both at the system level and within individual assets. What areas must be improved to help your city reach its goals whether it's reducing a subsidy, generating revenue, or positioning itself for future investment, among other items.

GATHERING COMMUNITY SUPPORT:

For the vision to grow, it must have the support of the community. Ultimately, parks and recreation assets exist to serve people and any initiatives whether it's facility development, optimizing assets, or events and programming, must align with their desires or solve a community need. To get buy-in from citizens, it's critical to make them a part of the conversation-an owner in the process of enhancing the parks and recreation system. Conversations both online (via surveys and social media) and in-person (via town halls) should pose questions about the level of satisfaction with the current recreation center offerings, the overall direction of the community's recreation spaces, and options for future programming.

When engaging the community, NRPA suggests not only working with community leaders to garner support for parks projects but engaging them early in the process and meeting them where they live. Going to places where they gather whether it's a place of worship or their workplace is critical to showing a commitment to making citizens a part of the parks and recreation growth process. It's also crucial to set proper and realistic expectations about the scope of your vision. This is critical in cases where citizens feel they have been promised items that were not fulfilled. "Perception is reality." Be clear in your communication, especially on items related to budget so that they understand the parameters of how parks and recreation assets can be enhanced.

SPECIAL SECTION

TIPS FOR COMBATING OPPOSITION TO YOUR VISION:

"Not in My Backyard!" If a new facility is a part of your parks and recreation vision, there's a chance that you may hear this term. Citizens may see your vision as an unnecessary expense, link a new facility with potential increases in traffic or crime, or don't see your vision as pertinent. Their voice is small, but mighty and can make it difficult to activate your vision.

The first step in winning this group over is to build a team within your community that not only understands how to garner support for projects, but also knows how to use data to show the impact of recreation assets in a number of areas.

The next step is gathering the data itself. Citizens need to understand why your project should be supported over other projects that they deem more pertinent. Unkept promises may have been made to this group in the past, so your data needs to serve as a differentiator over projects that did not meet expectations. Data related to health, economic, or social benefits often speak the loudest.

"NOT IN MY BACKYARD!"

Next, cultivate partnerships with community members whose influence can make a difference in the opinions of this group. This may include city officials, school administrators, county government leaders, convention and visitors' bureau or tourism officials, local user groups, and medical organizations.

Use tools such as social media, media relations, and a dedicated website to control the narrative about your initiative. Opponents will provide a great deal of public pushback, that's why it's critical to build data-led stories around the positive impacts of your project. Also, consider one-on-one meetings with potential stakeholders and hosting public forums.

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GUIDE TO PARKS DEPARTMENT OPTIMIZATION

Optimization is a comprehensive evaluation of all components of facility operations. It can focus on a variety of items, including organizational structure, operational systems, program development, marketing strategy, facility or system financials, or the physical asset to increase performance against a set of established goals. Communities often bring in an independent optimization team to perform this process because the assessment will be unbiased and based on experience with comparable parks and recreation assets or systems throughout the country.

THE OPTIMIZATION PROCESS FOR PARKS AND RECREATION SYSTEMS INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

1. LOOKING FOR ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES:

The optimization process starts with an examination of the function that you want your parks and recreation assets to serve in your community. This may include a look at solving issues that your city faces, including low graduation rates, access to places to play, or activities for seniors. You may seek opportunities to spur economic impact or increase visitors coming to your community. This exercise is internal and includes determining a vision for your community but it's also external. Looking at park systems in comparable cities to see what you'd like to bring to your community is important.

2. EXAMINING EXISTING FACILITIES:

With a vision in mind, it's important to look at your current assets. This review should focus on key business areas including your organizational structure, facility conditions, marketing and business development systems, and program plans.

3. GAP ANALYSIS:

The next step is to compare your facility's performance in the areas covered in your facility review to your vision and industry standards. This exercise will reveal areas where improvement is required for assets to reach optimal performance.

4. STRATEGIC PLANNING:

Next, work with stakeholders, subject matter experts, and the community to develop a plan that addresses deficiencies. This plan should include specific projects whether it's improving or adding to existing venues, developing new assets, or establishing programs to increase access. If facility development or improvement is a part of your plan, a financial forecast must be developed to provide a comprehensive initial picture of all the financial considerations associated with a facility project, including construction and/or start-up costs, land requirements, project revenues, and operating expenses, among many other items.

5. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION:

It takes a team to implement your strategic plan. So, communication and coordination will be vital to the success of your project. Strong skills in these areas are helpful. So are tools such as Gantt charts and technology such as Trello and Slack. Gantt charts give everyone a clear picture of how certain tasks are dependent on other tasks and provides timeframes for execution. While Trello and Slack provide a clear picture of project milestones and allow for real-time communications related to specific tasks.

6. REPORTING:

Successful optimization will largely come down to your level of reporting. Reporting allows you to see your progress against project goals and gives you insight into what adjustments needs to be made and where additional resources are needed. Utilize the KPI's you defined in the visioning step. KPI's to consider include:

- Revenue generation
- Facility usage
- Customer feedback
- Program participation

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GUIDE TO RECREATION PROGRAMMING & EVENTS

PROGRAMMING AND EVENTS HELP BUILD SKILLS, BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER, AND ACTIVATE YOUR SPACES AND PLACES. THESE ARE ALSO IMPORTANT REVENUE AND ECONOMIC IMPACT GENERATORS. HERE'S A FEW TYPES TO CONSIDER:

LOCAL SPECIALTY INTEREST GROUPS:

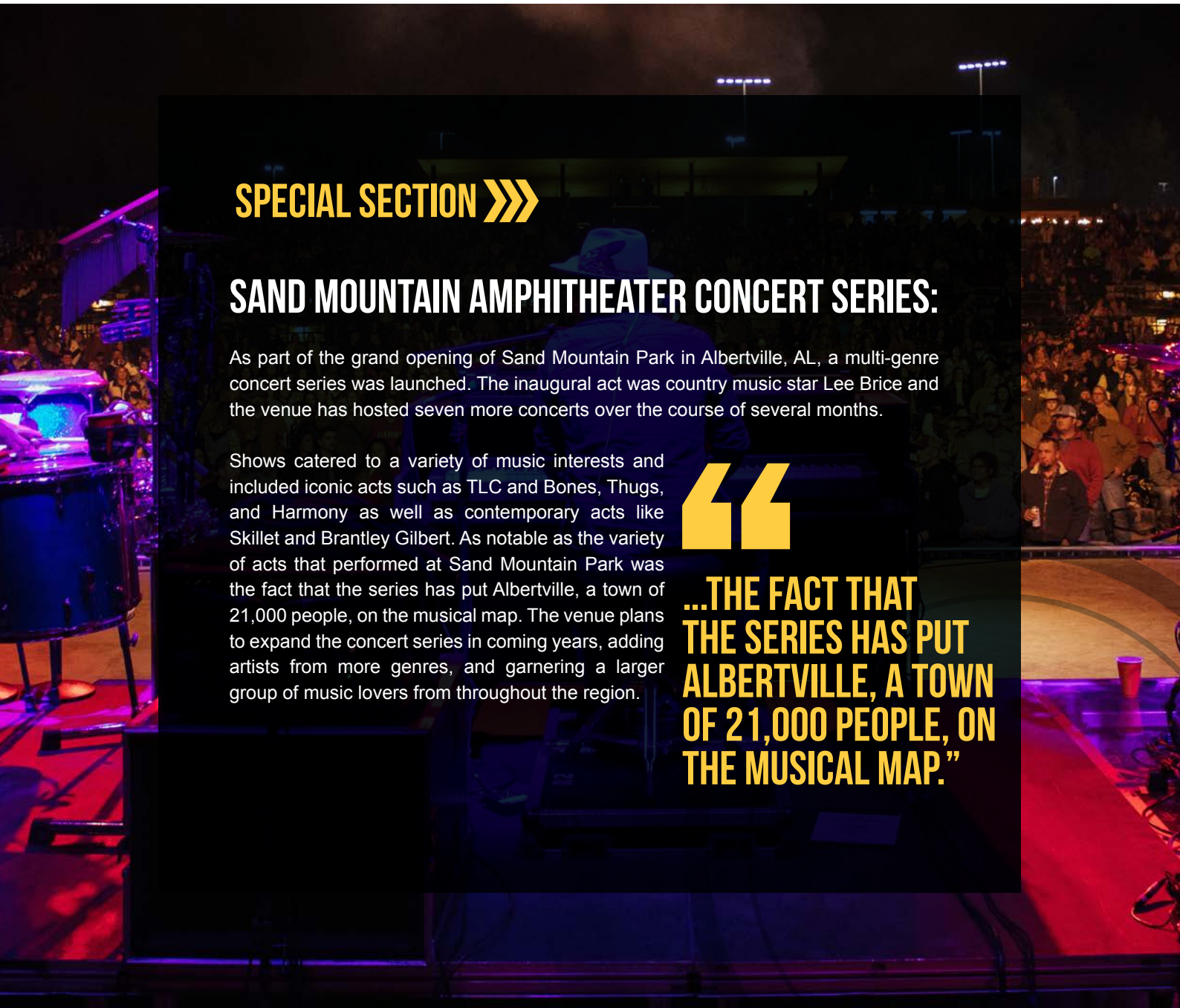
Within your community are smaller communities of people with shared interests. Your recreational assets can serve as an affordable home base for gathering and building connection. The importance of serving in this capacity cannot be understated. For many people, small interest groups for activities like running, hiking, or yoga, is what makes a community feel like a home.

CAMPS:

The popularity of camps, especially ones that take place in the summer, is well-established. What's important is to not only cover the basics such as summer day camps, but to provide a diverse, innovative selection of offerings with sports specialty camps, sports sampling camps, arts and theater camps, science/STEM, and music camps. At the Hacienda Heights Community Center, near Los Angeles, a mixed-media mini camp teaches children a varied group of skills, including video production, podcasting, broadcasting, E-sports production, and audio engineering. Campers also learn how to put on a theater production.

LEAGUES:

Parks and recreation assets play a critical role in providing activation of great facilities, regardless of skill level. Statistics show a drop off in sports participation after the age of 13. This is the age when athletes with the potential to play college sports are often identified. Leagues in sports such as basketball, volleyball, and soccer keeps children active and allows them to continue to garner the intangible benefits of competitive sports. Adult and Senior leagues play a pivotal role in creating a multi-generational cycle of physical activity and social-emotional connectivity. The sport of pickleball has emerged has an adult and senior favorite for league play. In 2020, the USA Pickleball Asspociation reached almost 40,000 members by the end of the year, a 1,000% growth rate since beginning of 2013.



SPECIAL SECTION

SAND MOUNTAIN AMPHITHEATER CONCERT SERIES:

As part of the grand opening of Sand Mountain Park in Albertville, AL, a multi-genre concert series was launched. The inaugural act was country music star Lee Brice and the venue has hosted seven more concerts over the course of several months.

Shows catered to a variety of music interests and included iconic acts such as TLC and Bones, Thugs, and Harmony as well as contemporary acts like Skillet and Brantley Gilbert. As notable as the variety of acts that performed at Sand Mountain Park was the fact that the series has put Albertville, a town of 21,000 people, on the musical map. The venue plans to expand the concert series in coming years, adding artists from more genres, and garnering a larger group of music lovers from throughout the region.

"...THE FACT THAT THE SERIES HAS PUT ALBERTVILLE, A TOWN OF 21,000 PEOPLE, ON THE MUSICAL MAP."

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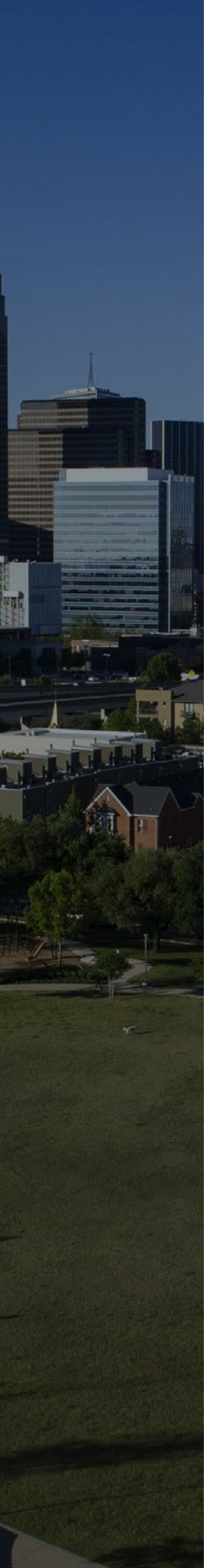
GUIDE TO MAXIMIZING GREENSPACE

When you think about great recreation in your city, it's impossible to not think about greenspace. These lush pockets of grass and trees evoke a sense of peace, freedom, and wellness. Unfortunately, as renewed interest in living in urban areas grows, greenspace often gets squeezed out in favor of revenue-generating developments and supporting structures such as roads and gray infrastructure. While this has a negative impact on the natural beauty of our cities, the environmental, health, and social consequences are even greater. A new way of thinking is required for the benefits of greenspace to be realized.



To maximize the impact of greenspace, cities such as Atlanta, Detroit, and Philadelphia are installing a green infrastructure to not only beautify their urban settings, but to solve a myriad of issues linked to densely populated areas. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, green infrastructure is an installation that "uses vegetation, soils, and other elements and practices to restore some of the natural processes required to manage water and create healthier urban environments." In practice, green infrastructure may include using roads with porous materials, green roofs, wetlands, and park spaces to mimic the natural drainage properties of undeveloped land.

INSTALLING GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE IS A KEY PIECE OF MAXIMIZING THE VALUE OF GREENSPACE AND HAS THE FOLLOWING BENEFITS:

PROMOTING COMMUNITY HEALTH AND WELLNESS:

Green infrastructure, including parks and hiking areas, can have a tremendous impact on the social determinants of health including physical activity, sense of place, and crime reduction. The benefits of physical activity include lower medical costs due to individual health benefits such as reduced obesity rates, improved mental health, and a more productive workforce. In terms of workforce productivity, a study by the organization Living Streets, which advocates for safe walking environments in England concluded that for every $1.50 invested walking areas, $20 of economic benefit is realized.

Greenspace also enhances the perception of a community externally and internally. For example, parks such as Mission Delores Park in San Francisco and Chain of Lakes Park in Minneapolis are centerpieces for physical recreation, events, and culture.

Third, well-designed greenspace can lead to a reduction in crime in the surrounding area. A study in Chicago showed that 52 percent fewer crimes were reported near buildings surrounded by trees and other vegetation.

STORMWATER MITIGATION:

When rain falls on city streets, the impervious surface prevents it from absorbing into the ground. Cities have built underground pipe and drainage systems (gray infrastructure) to capture stormwater and direct it toward nearby rivers and other bodies of water. Over time, these systems become overwhelmed, leading to flooding and, potentially, raw sewage contamination. Green infrastructure reduces the burden on older gray infrastructure systems by capturing rainwater and slowly absorbing it and harvesting it for re-use. Effective green infrastructure tools include, porous road building materials, rain gardens, and urban tree preservation.

HEAT ABATEMENT:

Many cities suffer from a phenomenon known as urban heat island effect. This is caused when heat gets trapped between people, buildings, and vehicles and impervious concrete surfaces. As expected, the effect greatly intensifies during the summer leading to increased energy consumption, which can increase air pollution. The air pollution further traps in heat.

To combat this, green infrastructure such as urban tree canopies, green roofs, and park greenspace can be developed to capture and absorb rainwater, creating a cooler surface. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, trees can capture up to 700 gallons of rainwater per year, due to the expanded surface area it creates. Trees also create channels and open space in soil, which enhances the ground's ability to soak up water.

TIPS FOR BUILDING GREENSPACE INTO YOUR COMMUNITY

Here are a few tips from the National Recreation and Parks Association to get you started:

BUILD AN INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM:

You can't go it alone. Having a team is critical to building new greenspace or redeveloping an area of your community. This winning team should include members of your community and parks and recreation department leadership as well as technical experts such as architects and engineers. The team should also include planning experts that can assess the feasibility of parks projects and develop a program plan.

LISTEN TO AND EMPOWER THE COMMUNITY:

A vision for greenspace in your city will only goes as far as the population's interest. Community members must see the value in parks projects and must be a part of the planning process. Provide a platform for them to communicate their own vision through tools such as public meetings and visioning sessions.

COMMUNICATE THE BENEFITS:

When engaging with your community. It's important to communicate the benefits of green space, specifically green infrastructure. The benefits listed above will build a compelling argument for citizens.

DESIGN FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY:

When developing green infrastructure, it's vital to consider all citizens regardless of socioeconomic status, age, or physical ability. Underserved communities are often overlooked when it comes to parks projects. Site selection and design that includes all citizens must be standard practice when developing greenspace. Additionally, NRPA suggests using tools from the Government Alliance on Race and Equity to guide your process.

ESTABLISH A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

Gaining understanding and buy-in from the community can be greatly enhanced through the development of a demonstration project. Several strategies can be used to establish demonstration projects including holding a green infrastructure design competition, developing a pilot program in a high-profile park, and creating educational programs teaching the benefits of green infrastructure.

SUPPORT PUBLIC HEALTH

The most critical benefit of greenspace and green infrastructure is how it supports positive health outcomes. Placing an emphasis on programs that enhance health and wellness for citizens will not only build a healthier community but one that is interested greater access to greenspace. This can be accomplished by developing a diverse group of programs that supports all users and partnering with organizations to expand program offerings.

PLAN FOR CONNECTIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY:

For your community to experience the full benefit of greenspace, they must have proper access to it. While it sounds easy, commercial real estate development can limit access points to parks, which can reduce park usage. NRPA provides a variety of suggestions, including developing non-vehicular transportation plans, gathering community input on connectivity and accessibility issues, and incorporating it into park design, and creating eye-catching wayfinding.

ENSURE DESIGNS ARE “BIDDABLE” AND “BUILDABLE”

To avoid construction delays and cost increases, careful consideration must be placed at the beginning of the project to ensure that the resources can be attained when needed and that the structure can be built on the pre-determined schedule. While determining how the project will be funded, including attracting funding partners is an essential early step, NRPA also suggests bringing in your construction team to conduct constructability reviews early in the design phase to ensure projects are “buildable” and “biddable”. It’s also important to consider stormwater quality and flood control requirements at the onset of the project.

GREAT RECREATION STARTS WITH A VISION, A PLAN, AND A GREAT TEAM.

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