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A Creative APPROACH to Comprehensive Planning

by Michael Mulvaney, PhD., CPRP, Hollice Clark III, and Kelly LaMore, CPRP

Today, the provision of recreation services and facilities is recognized as an essential component of a community's master plan. Residents want opportunities for participation in quality recreation programs, attractive parks, and effective and safe recreation facilities. Only through local government provisions can recreation truly be made available to all residents. Local government provides the major opportunity for many people, and the only opportunity for some of the people, for access to recreational facilities such as parks, recreation centers, tennis courts, softball and baseball diamonds, swimming pools, and other specialized facilities.

In remaining accountable for expenditures and to meet these community needs, public park and recreation agencies are responsible for accurately identifying the park and recreation interests within the community. This task is often achieved by means of a community-wide recreation study. The purpose of the community-wide study is to obtain accurate insight of community attitudes, opinions, and perceptions toward possible park and recreation programming, facilities and services. The data collected from the community-wide study is then used by the park and recreation agency to plan for the provision of programs, resources, and facilities to best meet the interests of their residents.

Despite its importance in an agency's short and long-range planning efforts, many agencies lack some of the resources (human, physical, or financial) to conduct a community-wide recreation study.

In response to this issue, the Department of Recreation Administration at Eastern Illinois University partnered with the Bourbonnais Township Park District to identify the specific purpose, techniques, and procedures of the community-wide study to obtain a clear planning direction for the future recreational services within the Bourbonnais community.

Initial Meetings

The partnership began with a series of meetings among the park district and the university. Specifically, initial contact between the course instructor and staff at the Bourbonnais Township Park District was established three to four months prior to the start of study. The purpose of the initial meeting between the instructor and key representatives of the park district was to discuss the community-wide study and partnership. A few weeks after the initial meeting, another meeting between the course instructor and park district representatives was scheduled. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss, in greater detail, the Bourbonnais Township Park District's interests and identify the specific purpose, techniques, and procedures of the community-wide survey that could be used to make evidence based decisions for future recreational services within the community. An initial formal, written draft of the contract for the project was also developed. The draft of the contract contained information pertaining to the project's objectives, steps/procedures to

be employed by both parties, and a project timeline. Approximately four to six weeks prior to the start of class, another meeting was held between representatives of the Bourbonnais Township Park District and the course instructor for the undergraduate research class. At this time, the contract was signed by both parties.

Once the timeline was finalized, the instructor spent considerable time developing course lectures and discussions. Attention was given to planning the timing of the lectures and discussion to ensure they coincided with the appropriate steps. Classroom discussions and lectures provided a platform for students to raise questions, identify areas of concern, and discuss project issues with the instructor and other students. In addition, the lectures provided the content necessary for implementing the various steps of the project (i.e., interview protocol, sample selection, instrument design, data entry, analysis, report writing, etc.).

Agency Staff and Stakeholder Interviews

Once the students were briefed on the project, interviews were scheduled and conducted with staff from the park and recreation agency and community stakeholders. Subscribing to a purposive sampling strategy, the instructor worked with the park and recreation agency to obtain a list of agency staff and stakeholders within the community. The purpose of the interviews was for each student to collect background information from staff and stakeholders that was relevant to the project's objectives (that were identified in the contract).

Guided by the instructor, each student created a list of staff and stakeholder interview questions. The instructor facilitated classroom

discussions and activities that allowed the entire class to review and discuss each student's list of questions. Based upon these discussions, a finalized list of questions was determined. Once developed, the instructor equally divided the list of staff and stakeholders among each student. The instructor then provided the students with the necessary contact information for each staff member and stakeholder (contact information was obtained via discussions with representatives from the park and recreation agency).

Next, phone interviews with staff and stakeholders (i.e., community leaders) were conducted by each student from the class. The instructor coordinated facility and equipment needs (i.e., teleconference phone, room, etc.) to assist students with the interview process. Once the interviews were completed, data was reviewed to identify themes to describe and organize the staff and stakeholders' views, anticipated needs, and future trends impacting the community. To identify the themes from the interview data, coding techniques were conducted by the students and instructor. Specifically, the coding procedures broke down the data into manageable segments, leading to the identification of themes. This process helped contextualize the experience for the students as one student stated, "The stakeholder interviews were a very beneficial part of the assignment. When we started the project, I knew very little about the community. However, after talking to the stakeholders I felt I had a much better idea of the issues and opportunities facing the community."

Survey Development

Based upon the information collected during the interviews and material discussed in class, a questionnaire was developed to collect information that would meet the project's objectives and the needs of the agency and its community. Each student developed a draft of a cover letter and questionnaire. The instructor reviewed the questionnaire drafts and developed a revised draft that was submitted to the park district for review. Based upon the feedback obtained from the agency, a final community-wide questionnaire was developed. Kelly LaMore, Superintendent of Recreation for the Bourbonnais Township Park District stated "Working with Dr. Mulvaney and the students at EIU was a great experience. The entire process was professionally implemented and completed on schedule. We were able to make changes to the draft to meet our specific needs." Finally, the instrument was pilot tested prior to the printing to enhance the questionnaire's face validity and readability.

Data Collection & Analysis

In an effort to allow each household an equal opportunity to share their views, the Bourbonnais Township Park District elected to send a community-wide survey to every household within the district. Working alongside the university, the Bourbonnais Township Park District printed and mailed the questionnaire to each household within the district. Each mailing included a cover letter, the questionnaire, and a pre-paid return envelope. To improve the response rate, a variety of reminder messages were sent out to residents through the local newspaper and the district's marketing materials.

The completed questionnaires were mailed to the university where students entered the data and worked with the instructor to check the data for completeness and accuracy prior to analysis. The instructor assigned each student a different date to notify and update the park district on the current response rate for that given date. This procedure ensured the agency was kept informed of the study's progress while the interactions further connected the "real-life" implications of the study to the students.

Overview of the Partnership

The purpose of the partnership was two-fold. First, the partnership sought to design and implement a community-wide study to assess the public park and recreation community's services. The results of the study provided the Bourbonnais Township Park District with accurate information for the short-term and long-range recreation planning within the community. This service was particularly beneficial to the Bourbonnais Township Park District as they lacked the expertise and staff to conduct the study themselves and the financial resources to hire a private consultant firm. In describing this need, Hollice Clark, Executive Director for the Bourbonnais Township Park District, stated, "As the Bourbonnais Township Park District continued to grow, we felt it was important to understand the pulse of the community and where to invest our limited resources. Our 2008 Strategic Plan called for a community needs assessment and we believed a partnership with EIU could benefit both organizations."

The second purpose of the partnership was to create a research-based, experiential learning opportunity for undergraduate students majoring in recreation. With the guidance of the course instructor, the learning experience provided students with "real life" experience in the (a) design and implementation of a survey, (b) administration (i.e., sampling) and data collection procedures (i.e., coding, data entry, data cleaning, etc.), (c) understanding and use of appropriate data analysis procedures, (d) interpretation and summarization of results, and (e) report writing and oral presentation of the study.

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Report Writing & Oral Presentations

Upon completion of the analysis, the students developed a preliminary report and oral presentation that discussed the study's purpose, background, methods, results, and conclusions. Staff and stakeholders of the Bourbonnais Township Park District were invited to attend the student presentations on campus. A question and answer session with the administrators followed the presentation to allow students the opportunity to network with professionals and obtain feedback. Following the presentations, the instructor debriefed the students on the project while explaining the impact of their work as it related to the community's recreation parks, programs, and facilities. As one student, Lindsay Woods concluded, "This was the most "real-life" project I have done in college. It made my effort and work so much more worth the time knowing that the final product was a key component to the agency's planning process. I really enjoyed working on this project. It has made me really appreciate the role of research and evaluation in the field of recreation."

Following the conclusion of the academic semester, the course instructor finalized the data analyses and worked with the Bourbonnais Township Park District's administrators in the development of a final report that was delivered to the park district. In addition, a presentation of the final results was delivered to the park district during one of their board meetings.

Conclusion

The strategic planning process recognizes and begins with an awareness of need for a better-defined future and a desire to invest in that future. Strategic planning positions the park and recreation agency toward creating a process that takes the agency from its currently existing state to a more desirable and responsive state. Although it is not assumed that strategic planning will address each of the agency's needs, or that it will adequately respond to every demand, the planning process does utilize past history and current knowledge to anticipate a future the agency can embrace for itself and those it serves. The information gathered from the community-wide recreation interests survey is a key piece in the strategic planning process and can assist an agency to more easily identify a desired future and provide the resources to effectively move toward that future.

Despite its importance, many agencies lack the resources to adequately identify and assess their community's current and future recreation needs. Responding to this challenge, the Department of Recreation Administration at Eastern Illinois University partnered with the Bourbonnais Township Park District to conduct a community-wide recreation interests study. This partnership led to the development of a community-specific needs assessment instrument that assessed the current supply and demand, leading to the identification of leisure related issues within the community. Taken collectively, the results of the needs assessment were used in the planning and decision-making processes to fully utilize facilities and park areas, identify programming areas that were lacking, and determine areas of future development for the Bourbonnais Township Park District. According to Hollice Clark, "Through the partnership with EIU we, the Bourbonnais Township Park District, were able to obtain valuable information regarding the thoughts, feelings and ideas of our residents. Now, we are using those ideas to improve the quality of the park district."

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