

Opinion-Editorial

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Billions of reasons Pennsylvania's parks are good for us

Parks draw people. We visit for recreation, refreshment and renewal. We go to play sports or cheer our teams. We breeze through to walk our dogs and improve our health. We drop in to swim, bike, eat, golf, birdwatch, sail, sled, read, ride, hunt, ski, paddle, snorkel and a thousand other important reasons.

But the full value in our parks isn't found in our fun and games alone. Parks are vital contributors to our livability and civic connectedness, our personal and environmental health, as well as our collective bottom lines.

In fact, we've more than a billion reasons why Pennsylvania's parks are good for us.

In a recently released study, researchers at George Mason University documented that the economic impact of Pennsylvania's local and regional parks annually produces more than \$1.6 billion in economic activity, generates nearly \$600 million in salaries and wages, and supports more than 12,000 jobs.

And when we also consider consumer spending for tourism and outdoor recreation product manufacturing in Pennsylvania, that economic impact dramatically compounds to include 219,000 jobs, \$7.2 billion in wages, and \$1.6 billion in state and local tax revenues, according to the Outdoor Industry Association.

Nationally, America's local and regional parks generated nearly \$140 billion in economic activity and supported almost one million jobs from their operations and capital spending in 2013.

That's no chump change. Such an economic driver in the private sector would be well-prized for its contributions to the public good. But because parks aren't usually recognized for the jobs and goods they create, they're often underappreciated for the indispensable value they afford the community.

"Oftentimes parks are patted on the head and people think they are nice things to have," says Barbara Tulipane, President and CEO of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). "But the reality is that they [tend to be] drivers of economic activity in their communities."

This is the first time a definitive economic impact has been documented in the local and regional public park industry. The findings add to the growing body of evidence that the impacts of local parks extend well beyond their role as taken-for-granted public spaces.

The study focused exclusively on the direct, indirect and induced effects that local and regional park agencies have on economic activity, with analysis based on data compiled from both the U.S. Census Bureau and NRPA.

The Comprehensive Report and Executive Summary of the study with state-by-state data can be accessed at www.nrpa.org/ParkEconReport.

What the study definitively shows is that spending at local and regional park agencies ripple to all areas of their communities beyond the actual spending of the agencies themselves. This is important for the public, lawmakers and other leaders to realize as they consider priorities, legislation, funding and other ways to invest in local parks and recreation, and in turn, the prospering of their own communities.

“We’re not just providing playgrounds or places to play, or a swimming lesson or class,” declares Neelay Bhatt, NRPA’s treasurer, of recreation and park providers, “We’re making a difference in the lives of a generation and impacting communities everywhere we are.”

Undeniably, the power of our local parks extends far beyond their mere property lines. Pennsylvania cities, boroughs, townships and counties with strong, vibrant park and recreation systems benefit from improved health, a closer connection to nature and a greater civic engagement. This leads to lower health care costs, higher property values, thriving communities and an overall boost in our standard of living.

Find your personal connection to more than 5,600 local parks in Pennsylvania at www.GoodForPA.com through an interactive statewide map, searchable by name, county or distance—and start exploring more of the billions of reasons that parks are good for you—and good for all.

Tim Herd is a Certified Park and Recreation Executive and the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society, the principal statewide association providing professional leadership, development, advocacy and resources for those working and volunteering in the parks and recreation field. www.prps.org