

Key Findings from the 2021-2022 Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society Local Official and Park and Recreation Director Surveys

Background

In 2021, PRPS commissioned Penn State's Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management to conduct a study of Pennsylvania local officials and park and recreation directors to assess their communities' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study included two online surveys: 1). A survey of local elected and appointed officials and 2). A survey of park and recreation directors or senior leaders. Survey topics included community priorities, the role of parks and recreation during the pandemic, as well as budgetary trends, staffing concerns, and advocacy. Data were collected from October 2021 to March 2022. In total, 418 local officials and 136 park and recreation directors completed surveys. Key results from these surveys are presented in bullet and table form below. For more information on these surveys and current work on these topics, please feel free to reach out to the principal investigator, Dr. Andrew J. Mowen at amowen@psu.edu

Demographic and Organizational Profile

- Type of government represented in the Local Officials Survey - 53% township; 35% borough; 11% town, city or county
- Type of official from that survey: 55% appointed 45% elected; average age of 59 years; 61% male; 55% reported their ideology as economically conservative, but only 39% reported being socially conservative
- Type of agency represented in the Park and Recreation Directors Survey: 54% township; 9% borough; 12% multi-municipal authority, commission, or organization; 10% county park agency; 15% other
- Average age of respondents from the Park and Recreation Directors survey was 47.5 years and 52% were male
- From the Local Officials Survey, 57% reported a population less than 5000 with 5% a population of greater than 100,000. In terms of community type, 60% was rural, 30% suburban, and 10% urban
- From the Directors Survey, 92% reported having a paid staff. In terms of community type, was 13% urban; 18% rural, and 69% suburban. Less than 2% reported a population under 5,00, with the largest percentage serving populations between 10,000 and 50,000 (67%), and 10% with a population greater than 100,000

Median Capital and Operational Budgets for Parks and Recreation

- From the Local Officials Survey, the median operational park and recreation budget was \$32,900 while the median capital budget was \$10,000
- From the Park and Recreation Director Survey, the median operational budget was \$618,460 while the median capital budget was 225,000

Tax Funding and Expenditure Trends

- From the Officials Survey - Despite the pandemic, operational tax funding over the last three years were reported to be stable/the same (68%) or have increased (20%). Operational costs also followed this trend with 47% indicating stable/same costs and 46% reporting increased costs. When asked why costs have been stable/remained the same, sound budgetary/purchasing practices, delayed investments, volunteers/partnerships, and reduction of services were cited as reasons. Officials who reported increased operational costs, cited increased labor/material prices, aging infrastructure, impact from high use, costs associated with COVID-19 policies/safety, weather events, and loss of staff and volunteers.
- From the Directors Survey – Park and recreation directors reported that tax-based funding had either remained the same (69%) or increased (22%) over the past three years (2019-2021). However, 70% also indicated that their operational costs (e.g., staffing, materials, maintenance) had increased. Reasons for revenue and expenditure trends were similar to those cited by local officials.

CARES Act and ARPA Relief Funding

- From the Officials Survey – 36% said their organization sought an allocation of *CARES funds* for conservation, trails, parks, and/or recreation purposes. A large majority of these officials (95%) indicated they had or will receive these funds. 57% said that they would seek allocation of ARPA funds for conservation, trails, parks, and/or recreation.
- Intended use for *APRA funds* where trails, playgrounds, support features, addressing inequities in service, open-space preservation, stormwater/environmental mediation, and maintenance equipment to cover COVID-related expenses.
- From the Directors Survey – 53% said that their agency sought an allocation of *CARES funds* and 66% of these said that they did or anticipate receiving an allocation of these funds for conservation, trails, parks, and/or recreation purposes. 73% indicated their agency planned to seek an allocation of *ARPA funds* for these same purposes.

Importance and Performance of Parks and Recreation with Community Concerns

- From the Officials Survey – The importance of parks and recreation to the community was rated an average of 5.56 and while quality was rated an average of 5.3 on 7-point scale (where 1 was the lowest and 7 was the highest level)
- When officials were asked about important issues facing community and the extent parks and recreation provided solutions to those issues, youth development, public safety (i.e., from crime), community health and real estate development were the most important priorities. Parks and recreation was perceived to provide solutions to these issues as well, but less so for public safety priorities. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ranked lowest among these these priorities and parks and recreation perceived contributions to DEI were also perceived as low in contributing to this issue (Table 1).

Table 1. Importance of Community Issues; P&R Contribution to the Issues

Community Issue/Priority	Mean Importance (%)	Mean Contribution (%) of Parks and Recreation**
1. Youth Development	4.4 (87.5)	4.2 (77.2)
2. Public Safety	4.2 (77.3)	3.8 (53.8)
3. Community Health	4.0 (70.8)	4.1 (73.2)
4. Real Estate Development	4.0 (62.6)	4.1 (64.6)
5. Environmental Stewardship	4.0 (61.4)	3.9 (56.3)
6. Managing Growth	3.9 (56.1)	3.6 (35.9)
7. Economic Development	3.9 (52.2)	3.7 (45.4)
8. Civic Engagement	3.8 (52.0)	3.7 (37.8)
9. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion	3.6 (48.9)	3.2 (25.3)
* 5-Point Scale – Very Unimportant to Very Important Community Issue		
** 5-Point Scale – Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree that P&R Provides Solutions to this Issue		

Officials' Funding Allocation under Hypothetical Surplus/Deficit Scenarios

- From the Officials Survey: When asked to hypothetically allocate budget dollars across a series of community services during budget deficit and surplus, parks and recreation realized the highest average amount added (18.8%) during a budget surplus, but also had the greatest amount taken away (15.7%), suggesting that while parks and recreation are important to officials, they are considered a non-essential amenity. Officials who reporting that parks and recreation were important or very important

where more likely to allocate fundings in surplus and less likely to reduce budgets during deficit (Table 2).

Table 2. Hypothetical Changes in Local Services Spending

Local Services ¹	Average (%) Amount Added (Rank)	Average (%) Amount Taken Away (Rank)	Net Allocation*
Fire Protection	18.1 (2)	8.3 (3)	9.57
Police Protection	14.8 (3)	8.3 (4)	6.69
Parks & Recreation	18.8 (1)	15.7 (10)	2.9
Transportation	13.3 (4)	12.3 (9)	1.21
Education	5.8 (7)	6.7 (2)	-.72
Housing & Community Development	10.0 (5)	11.3 (8)	-1.09
Hospitals & Health	4.2 (9)	6.1 (1)	-1.88
Public Welfare	8.0 (6)	9.8 (5)	-2.01
Libraries	5.4 (8)	10.5 (6)	-5.30
Corrections	1.6 (10)	11.1 (7)	-9.39
<i>*Net allocation = Amount Added – Amount Taken Away</i>			

Officials' Working Relationship with Park and Recreation Leadership, Personal/Family Use of Park and Recreation Services, and Community Vocalness

- A majority of local officials (and/or their family members) have used local parks (87%) or have participated in organized recreation programs (77%).
- In terms of community vocalness, 48% said their constituents *were moderately to extremely vocal* in their support for parks and recreation, with 27% being somewhat vocal, and 25% reporting that their community was not at all vocal in their support for parks and recreation.
- When asked about vocalness *with regard to racial inequalities* in parks and recreation, local officials generally reported their community members (60%) and local institutions (57%) *were not at all vocal* about racial inequalities with respect to parks and recreation in their community. Directors were also asked to rate their communities' DEI vocalness. Here, directors reported their community members (48%) and local institutions (52%) to be *not at all vocal* on racial inequalities in parks and recreation.

Importance and Essential Nature of Parks and Recreation during COVID-19

- From the Local Officials Survey – 78% said parks and recreation was important to very important to their community during COVID-19 while only 6% said parks and recreation was unimportant. Reasons why parks and recreation were important related to healthy and safe recreation activity and nature connection in the outdoors as well as places/programs to support mental well-being and reduce stress/anxiety due to the lockdowns. When asked if parks and recreation services were just as essential as other community services, a majority agreed (44%) or strongly agreed (39%) with this statement.
- Park and recreation services were statistically more important to officials who a). believed they help solve important community problems, b). had a more vocal constituency in support of parks, c). personally use these services, and d). had a good/excellent working relationship with their park and recreation leadership.

Directors' Perceived Impacts of COVID-19 on Park and Recreation Agencies

- When asked whether their agency had experienced various impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, park and recreation directors were more likely to report increased use of parks (92%), programs being canceled and/or cut (76%) and new programs being developed (73%). They were less likely to report hiring freezes (21%), loss of full-time staff (20%), and permanent closure of facilities (9%).

Directors' Perceived Effectiveness of Advocacy for Park and Recreation Funding

- Directors were asked to indicate their opinions regarding effective advocacy strategies for park and recreation funding, direct engagement with local officials and data were the top strategies cited. For example, one-on-one conversations with officials (60%) and park visitation/facility usage data (51%) were believed to be “very effective.” Strategies perceived to be less effective were community petitions (16%), story-telling (28%), and charts/infographics (30%).