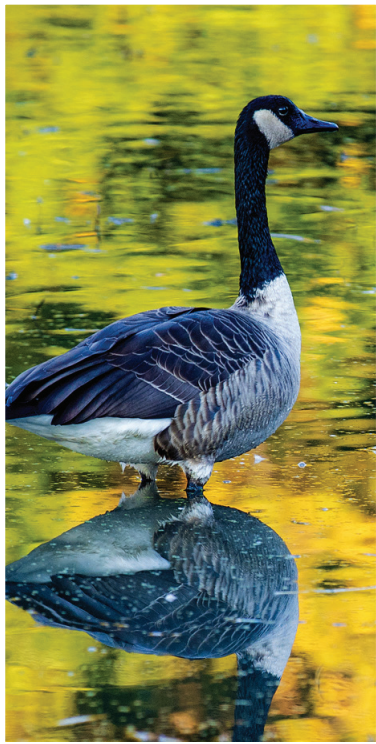




POSITION PAPERS

FROM THE ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF PARK DISTRICTS

APPROVED BY THE IAPD BOARD OF TRUSTEES, SEPTEMBER 2023





Dear Members and Friends of the Illinois Association of Park Districts,

The Illinois Association of Park Districts has been serving park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies since 1928. As a grassroots organization, IAPD's voice for parks, recreation and conservation is strong and respected throughout Illinois and the United States.

IAPD represents more than 2,100 locally elected and appointed citizen board members and is comprised of nearly 400 park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies and associate members.

Our mission is to advance our member agencies, their citizen board members and professional staff in their ability to provide outstanding park and recreation opportunities, preserve natural resources and improve the quality of life for all people in Illinois.

These position papers were created as a proactive approach to dealing with the challenges faced by communities, families, park districts, conservation and recreation agencies throughout the state. We strongly believe that the programs and services our agencies offer make Illinois a better place to live. Families become closer. Children develop safe, healthy lifestyles. Seniors find purpose and camaraderie. Natural areas and wildlife are preserved and protected. And, communities thrive.

Sincerely,

Peter M. Murphy, Esq., CAE, IOM
President and Chief Executive Officer

IAPD

Illinois Association of Park Districts

ILparks.org

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About the Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD)

The Illinois Association of Park Districts, headquartered in Springfield, has been serving park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies since 1928. It is the oldest and most successful statewide association of its kind. As a grassroots organization, IAPD's voice for parks, recreation and conservation is strong and respected throughout Illinois and the United States. IAPD represents more than 2,100 locally elected and appointed citizen board members and is comprised of nearly 400 park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies and associate members.

Mission Statement

The Illinois Association of Park Districts is a nonprofit service, research and education organization that serves park districts, forest preserves, conservation, municipal park and recreation, and special recreation agencies. The association advances these agencies, their citizen board members and professional staff in their ability to provide outstanding park and recreation opportunities, preserve natural resources and improve the quality of life for all people in Illinois.

Vision Statement

As a national leader, IAPD will provide superb association services to its members.

IAPD will achieve our vision by:

- Strengthening our alliances with environmental, economic and human service agencies throughout Illinois and the nation.
- Maintaining a strong relationship with state and national governmental leaders.
- Establishing grants and other new revenue streams for our members.
- Addressing the problem of decreasing open spaces and natural areas in Illinois.
- Assisting our members in the promotion of healthy lifestyles for all ages and abilities.
- Assisting our members in their ability to meet community challenges, such as youth-at-risk, obesity and the demands of increasingly senior and diverse populations.
- Helping our member agencies thrive in spite of limited tax-based revenues.
- Educating elected and appointed officials to work in cooperation with fellow board members to promote a stronger community through public parks, recreation and conservation.

IAPD's organizational strengths will include the creation and delivery of:

- Orientation and training programs for citizen board members;
- Citizen advocacy initiatives that direct and draw on the power of our individual members to educate policymakers on issues of vital importance to the mission of park, recreation and conservation agencies;
- Educational materials such as the Illinois Parks and Recreation magazine, books and newsletters, a dynamic association web site, in-depth and challenging educational seminars, and an annual conference;
- Technical assistance that helps member agencies increase their efficiency, meet their goals or acquire more funding;
- More opportunities for member agencies to save costs on such budget items as utilities, insurance and other operational expenses.

The IAPD will continue to achieve these results in a fiscally responsible manner that assures the association's viability and makes membership a cost-effective necessity for all members.

Before and After School Programming - The Role of Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agencies



The Issue

The Illinois Association of Park Districts' member agencies are providers of critical before and after school programming for countless Illinois youth. This programming, which can occur before-school, after-school, and/or during the summer months is sometimes collectively referred to as out-of-school time or OST. This includes athletic, educational, and recreational programs that are designed to support children's educational, social, and physical development outside of regular school hours, and provide a range of benefits to children, parents, and entire communities. IAPD supports its member agencies in the provision of these services by securing financial and technical assistance, developing and sharing best practices and guidelines, and seeking to remove regulatory and administrative barriers.

Background

School-age children and youth spend 80 percent of their waking hours outside of school, while 1 in 5 young people in the U.S. are alone after the school day ends.¹ Research shows that "this time period of life is ripe with opportunity for learning, growth, and development, which can be utilized not only to launch extraordinary career trajectories but also to remediate previous developmental setbacks during childhood."² Quality after-school programming is associated with a benefit to communities by decreasing violent crime committed by youth.

IAPD member agencies facilitate this learning, growth, and development by providing programs that keep children engaged and supervised in the hours before and after the school day ends through enrichment classes that include sports, arts, music, dance, homework clubs, tutoring, workshops, cultural and educational programs, and many other opportunities. Statewide, these programs vary greatly depending on how they are funded, where they are located, the types of services they offer, and their setting. In Illinois alone, park and recreation agencies offer more than 71,000 programs, many of which include after-school programming for youth. Additionally, these agencies report having more than one million youth registered for after-school and summer programming.³

Benefits to Youth

Research shows that youth that participate in after-school programs demonstrate increases in their self-perception, positive social behaviors, improved school grades and levels of academic achievement, and significant reductions in problem behaviors.⁴ Park district after-school programs often include academic supports such as homework assistance and academic enrichment activities. These programs, conducted in a structured and supervised setting, help children develop social skills, build friendships, and learn cooperation and teamwork.

Additionally, the scope and variety of after-school programming that park districts offer allow youth to engage in various activities that promote skill development such as sports, arts and crafts, music and more that enhance their talents and foster a love for learning. Finally, many park district programs incorporate physical activities and intramural leagues, which encourage children to stay active and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Benefits to Families

Many park district programs offer flexible programs that serve children of all ages, which provides a convenient option for working parents that need care for their children outside of regular school hours. This

flexibility makes it easier for countless Illinoisans to balance work and family responsibilities. Additionally, because state law requires all park district personnel to undergo mandated background checks prior to being employed with a park district, parents of children enrolled in these programs have the peace of mind of knowing their children are in a safe environment.

Benefits to Communities

In Illinois, over 280,200 youth in Illinois are left alone and unsupervised after school.⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, data indicates that the incidence of violent crimes committed by youth peaks in the after-school hours following the end of the school day, with nearly one-fifth of violent crime committed by youth occurring in the four hours between 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. on school days.⁶ Consequently, “efforts to reduce offending by youth after school would appear to have greater potential to decrease a community’s violent crime rate.”⁷

After-school programs offered by park districts help mitigate these troubling statistics by providing a safe, convenient, and affordable environment that helps youth avoid risky behaviors and reduce the likelihood of children getting involved in negative peer influences. Additionally, many of these programs foster a sense of community and belonging by bringing together children and families from different neighborhoods, communities, ages, and backgrounds.

The Problem

Although park districts are diligent in enrolling as many youth as possible in these programs, demand far exceeds supply. In Illinois more than 280,000 youth participate in after-school programs. However, for every child in an after-school program in Illinois, four more are waiting to get into a program with more than one million children stating they would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them.⁸ Additionally, park districts are experiencing the same issues as other employers in the private and public sectors in finding and retaining qualified staff members, including educators, counselors, coaches, and activity leaders.

Funding for after-school programs also remains a challenge. In a recent survey, 56% of parents reported that after-school programs are too expensive, with the average Illinois cost being \$159 per week.⁹ Although IAPD seeks to alleviate this burden by making financial assistance to our agencies available through our Power Play grant program - funded from the proceeds of sales and subsequent renewals of the Park District Youth License Plate, additional help is needed.

Conclusion

Studies and academic research demonstrate that participation in after-school programs have an invaluable positive impact on youth, their families, and the communities in which they live. IAPD supports its member agencies in the provision of these services by sharing best practices, technical assistance, and guidelines, and by advocating for expanded funding availability and the removal of unfunded mandates, and administrative and bureaucratic barriers that hinder our member agencies in providing safe and quality programs.

¹ Afterschool Alliance. June 2019. This is Afterschool – Inspiring Learning, Providing Safety, Promoting Smart Choices, and Supporting Working Parents.

² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

³ Illinois Association of Park Districts. October 2018. “Statewide Results of Agency Facility and Program Usage.”

⁴ National Library of Medicine. June 2010. A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescence.

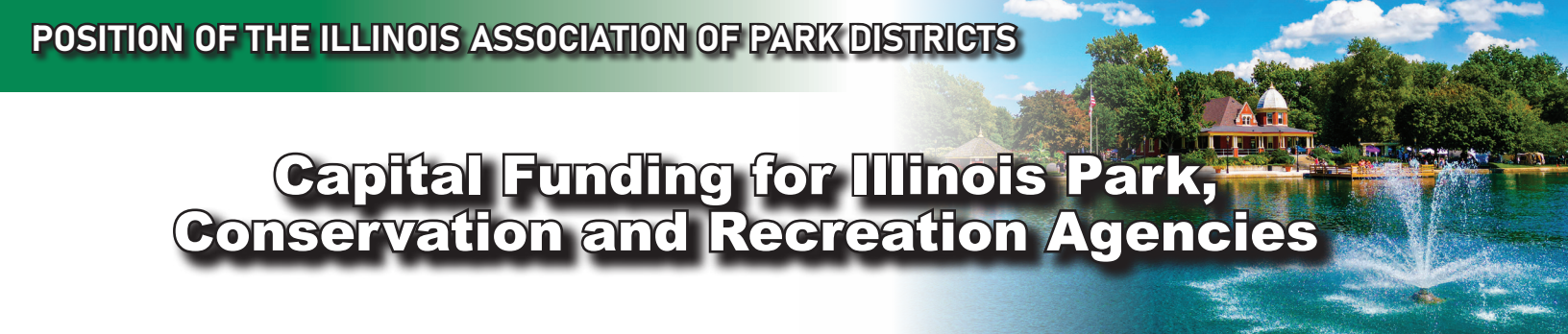
⁵ Afterschool Alliance. 2020. America After 3pm: Illinois

⁶ U.S. Department of Justice – Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. April 18, 2022. Statistical Briefing Book – Offending by Juveniles.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Afterschool Alliance. 2020. America After 3pm: Illinois

⁹ Ibid



Capital Funding for Illinois Park, Conservation and Recreation Agencies

The Issue

Illinois' park districts, forest preserves, and conservation districts rely upon state and federal grants and appropriations for capital improvements, including infrastructure development and equipment purchases. This continued funding supplements the limited operational revenue available to these agencies and enables them to provide programs, facilities, and recreational opportunities that residents depend upon. Efforts to curtail these funding mechanisms through fund sweeps or insufficient state and federal funding levels jeopardizes the ability of park, recreation, and conservation agencies to provide quality programs and services.

Background

Although Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) member agencies are adept at providing the highest quality programs and services to residents as efficiently as possible, the provision of state and federal dollars for capital improvements and investments allows these agencies to expand and enhance their offerings in ways that would not otherwise be possible. This includes funding from designated sources, and one-off, special purpose grant funding. Often, these state and federal funding sources require a local match, which more than doubles the return on investment in local communities.

State and Federal Funding

Chief among State-administered programs is the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) grant program, which is funded by dedicated, non-General Revenue Fund (non-GRF) dollars through a portion of the real estate transfer tax. OSLAD provides critical matching funds to park and recreation agencies to acquire open space and to develop and improve recreational facilities. Established more than 38 years ago as an IAPD initiative, the OSLAD program administered by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) has awarded more than \$530 million to member agencies, and because local agencies must provide at least half of the funding through a match, the State is guaranteed at least a 100% return on investment.

Another critical IDNR-administered program includes the Park and Recreational Facilities Construction (PARC) program, which provides grants to eligible local governments for park and recreation construction projects. This includes the acquisition, development, construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation, improvements, architectural planning, and installation of capital facilities. Other important IDNR-administered capital grants include the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), Boat Access Area Development Program, and the Recreational Trails Program.

Other key state agencies that administer valuable funding programs to Illinois' park and recreation agencies include the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA), which oversees the Illinois Green Infrastructure Grant Program for Stormwater Management, and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), which administers the Illinois Transportation Enhancement Program (ITEP).

Illinois' park and recreation agencies also qualify for limited federal funding opportunities. Of particular note, the Federal Great American Outdoors Act was passed and signed into law in the summer of 2020, which makes the aforementioned LWCF program permanent and will provide much needed resources for park and protected areas.

Funding Needs Continue

Statewide surveys of park, recreation, and conservation agencies, as well as agency funding requests that exceed available grant levels, demonstrate a continued need for assistance. A 2019 assessment of park and conservation funding needs demonstrated that these agencies would need more than \$3 billion in funding over the next five years just to meet land acquisition and capital needs.¹ Although the State Fiscal Year 2023 budget included a record \$56 million appropriation for new OSLAD grants, the continued funding need of IAPD member agencies is reflected in the fact that the IDNR received 219 grant applications totaling \$104.3 million in requested funding – nearly twice the amount available.

Additionally, Illinois voters consistently demonstrate support for investment in these agencies. Between 1998 and 2022, voters approved more than 60 ballot measures in support of parks, recreation, and conservation agencies. A recent statewide citizen satisfaction survey demonstrated that, among various units of state and local government, park districts, forest preserve districts, and conservation districts continue to receive the highest esteem rating from Illinoisians and are considered to be a top driver behind one's perceived quality of life in their community.²

Conclusion

The ability to secure adequate and reliable funding for current and future capital needs remains a significant challenge for Illinois' park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies. State and federal grant programs are critical to enabling IAPD members to provide open space and parks and recreation, and to protect natural resources. Any attempts to reduce or reallocate these dedicated grant funds must be stopped to ensure the integrity of these established and worthwhile programs.

IAPD is committed to securing funding opportunities for our member agencies and will tirelessly advocate on their behalf to ensure adequate and flexible funding options for park, recreation, and conservation purposes. We also encourage state and federal lawmakers to expand applicant eligibility for current programs in place. We maintain our commitment to working collaboratively with our members, lawmakers, and all interested parties to ensure that legislators and the general public understand the benefits of parks and recreation and the importance of providing sufficient and reliable funding for current and future needs.

¹ "Illinois Assessment of Parks and Conservation Funding Needs and Economic Benefits," The Trust for Public Land, The Illinois Association of Park Districts, The Nature Conservancy, March 2019.

² "Research Findings: 2022 Statewide Survey for the IAPD," aQity Research and Insights, December 2022.

The Economic Impact of Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agencies in Illinois



The Issue

Illinois' park districts, forest preserves, and conservation and recreation agencies play a vital role in the economic health and vitality of the state. Citizen surveys routinely demonstrate that a majority of Illinois residents believe their local park and recreation agencies provide a benefit to themselves and their communities, and research shows that these same agencies are a significant segment of business activity for state and local economies.

Background

Since its inception, the Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) has gathered empirical knowledge and quantifiable data to demonstrate the value, needs, and programmatic offerings of park and recreation agencies in Illinois. Additionally, we have partnered with other organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land to jointly examine areas of interest, including funding needs and economic benefits.

Park districts, forest preserves, and conservation and recreation agencies throughout the State provide the people of Illinois with publicly funded parks, nature preserves, trails, greenways, recreational programs, facilities, and a host of other places for healthy recreation. Data collected demonstrate that these agencies provide a tangible return in value to residents and the communities in which they live.

Employment

Park and recreation agencies serve a vital economic role as local employers and job creators throughout the State. In 2016, IAPD engaged aQity Research and Insights, Inc., to further investigate this role and to provide quantifiable data on these agencies' employment trends. Data from a survey of IAPD member agencies, and from the Office of the Illinois Comptroller, shows that these agencies employ more than 67,000 Illinois residents statewide, which represents nearly \$720 million paid in wages and compensation.¹

Roughly half of these jobs are early work experiences for younger adults aged 25 and under, and one in ten are older adults over age 60. These two segments represent a third of the agencies' overall payroll. Importantly, the research demonstrated that park and recreation agencies are significant local job creators, with a majority of employees residing and spending their wages within the employer's district. In addition to salaries and income to employees, these agencies generate nearly \$110 million in compensation to contractors.²

Economic Activity

In 2015, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) partnered with the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University to examine the economic impact of local park and recreation agencies. This research was updated in 2018, 2020, and 2022 and includes state-level analysis of the direct, indirect, and induced effects of local park and recreation agencies spending. In Illinois alone, public parks and recreation agencies generate more than \$9.8 billion in economic activity and add \$4.9 billion in GDP value.³

In 2019, an assessment of Illinois parks and conservation funding needs and economic benefits demonstrated that residents and nonresidents of Illinois spend \$25.8 billion each year just on outdoor

recreation, which generates \$1.7 billion in state and local tax revenue.⁴

The open spaces and facilities maintained by IAPD member agencies also generate significant revenue and value through increased tourism. In 2018 alone, IAPD member agencies reported nearly 29 million visitors, with one in four families and individuals using pool/aquatic facilities and two in five golfers coming from outside communities.⁵ As an example, in 2019 the Schaumburg Park District sought to quantify the economic value that just one of its facilities, Olympic Park, provided to neighboring communities through spending associated with hotels, restaurants, shopping, entertainment, and concessions. The final report illustrated that more than 91,000 attendees visited the facility that year and contributed an estimated \$6.2 million in economic activity in the neighboring communities.⁶ This is just one of the countless examples that illustrate the valuable economic impact of these agencies.

Value to Community

Park and recreation agencies are funded through property tax dollars and a combination of programmatic and user fees for services, sponsorships, and grants. Therefore, citizen satisfaction with the services offered is key component of these agencies' economic impact. Nationally, 83% of Americans believe they personally benefit from local parks, 92% of Americans say their community benefit from local parks, and four in five individuals agree that parks are worth the tax dollars spent on them.⁷

This holds true in Illinois, where support for local park and recreation agencies is unparalleled when compared to other units of local government. In fact, these agencies receive the highest overall esteem ratings in community surveys while public opinion for other levels of government has measurably dropped. Roughly two-thirds of respondents to a statewide survey hold a favorable opinion of their local park district and forest preserves – a ratio that has been measured and held steady since 2002.⁸ The same research indicates that a majority of people believe the portion of their property taxes going to their park district represents an excellent or good value given the level of services provided in return, and nine out of ten Illinoisans agree that park districts and open spaces help improve local property values in their communities.

This value is reflected with a commitment at the state level as well through millions of dollars appropriated for open space acquisition, park and recreational facility construction, and pay-as-you-go conservation, recreation, and stewardship grants and projects. Many of these grant programs are matched locally, meaning that the economic return on investment is at least doubled.

Conclusion

IAPD's member agencies have a multibillion-dollar impact on state and local economies each year and are good investments for Illinois residents. In addition to improving the quality of life for Illinoisians, park and recreation agencies are a significant segment of economic activity within the State of Illinois and one that Illinois residents overwhelmingly value. IAPD will continue to conduct research that measures economic impact of park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreations agencies, and we will make the results of this research available to our membership and all interested parties.

¹ "Statewide Results of Agency W-2 and Revenue Data," aQity Research and Insights, October 2016.

² Ibid

³ "Impact and Rank of Local Park and Recreation Agency Spending on State Economies," National Recreation and Park Association, <https://www.nrpa.org/publications-research/research-papers/the-economic-impact-of-local-parks/>.

⁴ "Illinois Assessment of Park and Conservation Funding Needs and Economic Benefits," March 2019.

⁵ "IAPD Agency Usage Data," aQity Research and Insights, Inc., October 2018.

⁶ "Olympic Park Economic Impact," Precision Research, 2020

⁷ "Americans' Broad-Based Support for Local Recreation and Park Services: Results from a Nationwide Study," National Recreation and Park Association, 2016.

⁸ "Research Findings: 2022 Statewide Survey for the IAPD," aQity Research and Insights, December 2022.

Ethical Conduct of Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agency Boards



The Issue

The boards of Illinois' park districts, forest preserves, conservation, and recreation agencies aspire to the highest level of ethical conduct and professionalism. By complying with all applicable state laws, and encouraging civil conduct and respectful, thoughtful debate, these officials ensure public trust and confidence. These agencies continue to meet and exceed the requirements placed upon them through state statute as they endeavor to serve the public with the utmost integrity.

Background

Members who serve on the elected boards of park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies must understand and act in accordance with all applicable state laws, including the Park District Code (70 ILCS 1205 et seq.), the Open Meetings Act (5 ILCS 120, et seq.), the Freedom of Information Act (5 ILCS 140, et seq.), the State Officials and Employees Ethics Act (5 ILCS 430, et seq.), the Illinois Governmental Ethics Act (5 ILCS 420 et seq.), the Public Officer Prohibited Activities Act (50 ILCS 105, et seq.), and a host of other laws that prescribe the proper way for local governments to conduct public business.

Many of these statutes place mandates upon units of local government to adopt ordinances, policies, or procedures that are no less restrictive than those required by State law. Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) member agencies have exceeded these requirements by adopting local codes of conduct and internal policies that provide a framework for civil discourse, fair dealings, and open government.

Each year, State lawmakers introduce proposals designed or intended to strengthen government accountability and transparency by reforming or expanding requirements for state and local officials alike. IAPD is committed to working with all interested parties in developing proposals that enhance government accountability without imposing an undue burden on our member agencies.

IAPD Resources

IAPD promotes open and accountable government by providing resources to our members designed to aid them in performing the public's work with the highest integrity. One resource, the Board Member Code of Conduct, is a 23-point pledge to ethical, business-like, and lawful conduct, including the proper use of authority and appropriate decorum when acting as a board member. It prescribes positive practices such as: making decisions involving the welfare of the agency based only on study and evidence, respecting the board's commitment to work with the executive, participating in community activities, responding to the needs of the entire community, and respecting and listening to the opinions of other board members. It includes prohibitions on such things as nepotism and using privileged information for personal gain.

Another IAPD resource, the Board Member's Creed, is a set of ethical reminders to put commissioners and trustees in the right frame of mind for effective board service. The Creed is a five-part list that reinforces the principles of the Board Member Code of Conduct.

IAPD makes copies of the Board Member Code of Conduct and the Board Member's Creed available to the boards of all Illinois' park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies to adopt or modify to suit their own needs. IAPD also publishes books designed to help our members fulfill their legal obligations, including the Illinois Park District Law Handbook, the Park District Code, the Guide to the Open

Meetings Act and FOIA, and additional resources on the IAPD website.

Additionally, IAPD hosts and promotes educational opportunities and services to its member agencies, including seminars, workshops, and individual board trainings – all designed to provide them with the most up-to-date information and to ensure compliance with applicable state laws.

Conclusion

Park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agency boards embrace the spirit of State and local ethics laws by making honest, civil, open, and accountable public service the cornerstones of terms of service.

IAPD is committed to assisting our member agencies in their efforts to comply with all applicable state laws while serving the public with openness, transparency, and accountability.

IAPD continues to claim a seat at the table to represent our member agencies' interests in legislative discussions each year, and we maintain our willingness to serve as a partner and resource to all interested parties in discussions on the ethical conduct of park, recreation, and conservation agencies.

The elected boards of IAPD member agencies should consult their retained agency counsel questions about their legally prescribed ethical responsibilities and should also feel welcome to contact IAPD for more information.

Healthy Living – The Role of Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agencies

The Issue

Parks, recreational areas, and green spaces have long been associated with positive health benefits. As the primary purveyors of these wellness opportunities in many communities, the Illinois Association of Park Districts' member park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies are uniquely positioned to improve the health of Illinois citizens.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts supports our member agencies in their promotion of healthy living. We are committed to championing their successes, promoting the use of their facilities, open spaces, and programming, and advocating for greater resources to fulfill this mission.

Background

Evidence proves that parks and green spaces substantially contribute to their users' physical, mental, and social health.¹ This role was underscored during the pandemic when people turned to their public parks and open spaces in record numbers for fresh air, exercise, meditation, and stress relief.

Although an individual's access to recreational opportunities may vary based on the programmatic and facility offerings available in each community and on an agency-by-agency basis, Illinois' park, recreation, and conservation agencies are leaders in delivering vital services that advance the health of community members.

Physical Benefits

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about half of all Americans have one or more preventable chronic diseases, and seven of the ten most common chronic diseases can be favorably influenced by regular physical activity.² Nearly 80 percent of adults are not meeting the key guidelines for both aerobic and muscle-strengthening activity, and only about half met the key guidelines for physical activity. This lack of physical activity is linked to approximately \$117 billion in annual health care costs and about 10 percent of premature mortality.³

The open space, facilities, and programs offered by park, recreation, and conservation agencies directly support the physical health of users by providing an ideal venue for physical activity that directly contributes to greater health and help avert future health expenditures. Several studies highlight the link between time spent in parks doing physical activity and the correlation between that activity and positive health outcomes such as improved blood pressure and cholesterol levels and a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, obesity, and heart disease.⁴

Beyond physical activity, use of park services and natural areas is associated with reductions in various negative health outcomes and illnesses. One study suggests that spending just 120 minutes a week in green spaces is associated with high levels of reported good health and well-being.⁵

Mental Health and Social Benefits

In addition to physical activity, overall well-being includes emotional, mental, and social health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one in five U.S. adults lives with a mental illness and over one in five youth either currently, or at some point during their life, had a seriously debilitating mental illness.⁶

Research indicates that time spent in open spaces and parks is directly linked to positive mental health outcomes including increased abilities to cope with stress, mental fatigue recovery, reduced levels of depression and anxiety, greater self-esteem and greater overall life satisfaction.⁷ These benefits yield a significant economic value through reduced mental healthcare costs, improved workplace productivity, and reduced costs of antisocial behavior.⁸

The role of park, conservation, and recreation agencies in cultivating social interactions are a crucial component of their roll in promoting healthy living and is closely linked to mental health benefits. One recent survey showed that more than three in five Americans suffered from loneliness and lacked meaningful social interaction daily. Loneliness is linked to worse immune function, poor mental health, and an increased risk of heart attack and stroke.⁹

Park, conservation, and recreation agencies create opportunities for people to gather and connect with others. They are accessible by all members of a community, regardless of economic status or ability to pay. In one recent national survey, nine in ten park and recreation agencies host community events where community members across generations, backgrounds, and demographics can relax, have fun, and connect with families and friends.¹⁰ Experiences like these improve the social health of a community by strengthening a sense of belonging, social cohesion, and comfort. This benefits both individuals and communities and research indicates a measurable increase in community attachment and public safety is associated with proximity to and use of parks.¹¹ This is reflected in Illinois, where 70 percent of survey respondents stated that “the availability of recreational programs and facilities” and “the amount of open space” rank among the top three attributes having the biggest impact on a community’s perceived quality of life.¹²

Conclusion

A large and growing body of research shows that the positive role of park, recreation, and conservation agencies in promoting healthy living is undeniable. The Illinois Association of Park Districts’ member agencies are critical providers of physical, emotional, and social health and wellness opportunities to individuals and their communities through fitness and recreation programs, cultural celebrations, museums, zoos, and performing arts venues.

IAPD supports its members in fostering health and wellness opportunities by promoting their facilities and programs, coordinating public awareness campaigns on healthy living, encouraging people to maintain healthy and active lifestyles, and advocating for additional resources.

¹ Mychal Cohen, Kimberly Burrowes, Peace Gwam. February 2022. “The Health Benefits of Parks and their Economic Impacts.” Urban Institute.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2018. “Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd Edition.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ National Recreation and Parks Association. “Parks and Recreation is Essential.”

⁵ Mathew White, Ian Alcock, James Grellier, Benedict W. Wheeler, Terry Hartig, Sara L. Warber, Angie Bone, Michael H. Depledge, and Lora E. Fleming. 2019. “Spending at Least 120 Minutes a Week in Nature is Associated with Good Health and Wellbeing. Scientific Reports.

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April 25, 2023. “About Mental Health.” National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health.

⁷ Kevin Roth and Kelby Rose. December 27, 2022. “4 Dimensions of Health in Parks and Recreation. National Recreation and Parks Association.

⁸ Ralf C. Buckley and Paula Brough. March 16, 2017. “Economic Value of Parks via Human Mental Health: An Analytical Framework.

⁹ Elena Renken. January 23, 2020. “Most Americans Are Lonely, and Our Workplace Culture May Not Be Helping.” National Public Radio.

¹⁰ National Recreation and Parks Association. 2021. “Advancing Community Health and Well-Being.”

¹¹ Kevin Roth and Kelby Rose. December 27, 2022. “4 Dimensions of Health in Parks and Recreation. National Recreation and Parks Association.

¹² Illinois Association of Park Districts. 2023. “Statewide Citizen Satisfaction Survey. aQity Research and Insights, Inc.

Local Government Consolidation in Illinois

The Issue

Proponents of local government consolidation maintain that Illinois has more units of local government than any other state and that this multiplicity of governments is a primary contributor to high property tax rates. Academic research on this issue finds little, if any, evidence that consolidation can provide meaningful tax relief.¹ The consolidation of park districts should not be determined by the State through a one-size-fits-all approach and should instead be left to residents based upon the unique recreational needs of each community.

Background

Depending on the definition used, and the counting methodology, the State has between 6,918 and 8,529 units of local government. This includes general purpose units of local government such as counties, municipalities, townships, and school districts, and special districts such as park districts, forest preserves, and conservation districts.

In Illinois, state law empowers citizens to create park districts by referendum when they feel that specific needs are not being met or higher needs of service will enhance the quality of life in particular areas. Taxpayers are also statutorily authorized to dissolve a park district through a citizen-initiated referendum process (70 ILCS 1205/13 et seq). Though rare, citizens have successfully utilized this process, which demonstrates the sufficiency of existing park district law. Currently, there are 363 park districts, 11 forest preserves, and 5 conservation districts that are collectively governed by more than 2,100 elected officials and employ more than 67,000 Illinois citizens.

Legislative Actions

Throughout the past decade, a handful of state legislators in the Illinois General Assembly have introduced dozens of proposals and formed commissions and task forces aimed at decreasing the total number of local governments.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) has willingly served as a partner and resource to all interested parties in these efforts. This includes the Local Government Consolidation Commission, created through Public Act (P.A.) 97-0316, which noted in its September 2013 report that consolidation and dissolution must be addressed on a case-by-case basis to ensure the best interests of residents are considered. The commission also noted that “when the goal is improving the efficiency of service while maintaining service quality and controlling costs, cooperation proves much more successful than efforts focused on reducing the number of local governments in an area.”

In 2015, Executive Order 15-15 created the Task Force on Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandates, which emphasized in its December 2015 report that “significant progress can be made on the topic of consolidation through the promotion of shared services and intergovernmental agreements.” Neither the Commission nor the Task Force recommended the consolidation of park districts, forest preserves, or conservation districts, and the governing statutes for each entity are not cited as being a hindrance to consolidation efforts.

In 2022, as an alternative to ill-advised consolidation, P.A. 102-1088 requires most units of local government to form a committee by June 10, 2023, and at least once every ten years thereafter, to study local efficiencies and report recommendations regarding efficiencies and increased accountability. IAPD prepared a model template for member agencies to utilize after forming their committees and encouraged members to use this opportunity to showcase the efficient and effective manner in which they deliver park and recreation services to their communities.

Costs and Intergovernmental Cooperation

Because most legislative attempts at local government consolidation stem from the perceived benefit to taxpayers, it is important to contextualize that conversation as it pertains to park districts, forest preserves, and conservation districts. According to data from the Illinois Department of Revenue, park districts account for only

3.5% of all property taxes in Illinois. Many of these agencies supplement the costs of their operations through a combination of other non-tax sources. A survey of IAPD member agencies demonstrated that more than one-third of these agencies' operating revenue comes from sources other than taxes, including revenue generated through user fees, memberships, and non-tax sources such as grants and sponsorships.

As previous local government consolidation task forces and commissions have indicated, considerable progress can be made on the topic of consolidation through the promotion of shared services and intergovernmental agreements. In Illinois, units of local government are empowered to pool resources to better serve their shared constituencies through the Illinois Constitution, the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act (ICA), and the Governmental Joint Purchasing Act.

For example, the ICA enables two or more park districts or municipalities to form intergovernmental cooperatives called Special Recreation Associations (SRAs) that establish, maintain, and manage recreation programs for people with disabilities. There are currently thirty such programs throughout the State representing 158 park districts, 44 municipalities and one township. These programs exercise joint authority to approve budgets, share expenses, authorize expenditures, acquire real estate, hire employees, and provide transportation to participants. Intergovernmental cooperation is an area where Illinois parks, recreation and conservation agencies excel and serve as a model for other government units.

Accountability and Transparency

Park districts are governed by a locally elected and non-partisan board of park commissioners that serve either four- or six-year terms without compensation. Park commissioners are motivated residents of the district with a vested interest in strengthening the park, recreation, and conservation mission of their respective communities by setting goals, formulating policies, and establishing services that will meet citizens' present and future needs.

Because park districts are a separate, special purpose unit of local government, the revenues they generate can only be used for park district purposes. This assurance is contrasted with general purpose governments that provide a multitude of services such as fire, police, public works, economic development, etc., where revenues that are generated specifically for parks and recreation can be shifted and expended on these other services with limited, if any, input from voters. Additionally, public parks and other real property owned by the park district is held in trust for the residents of the park district, and, subject to very limited exceptions, can only be sold or transferred if residents approve through referendum. This is contrasted with general purpose units of government, which have authority to sell or dispose of property by a vote of the governing board.

Conclusion

IAPD supports the integrity of park districts, forest preserves and conservation districts as independent units of local government and champions their mission of preserving natural areas and providing the people of Illinois with places for play, exercise, and recreation.

These agencies have existed for more than a century and continue a proud tradition of serving as responsible stewards of communities' open spaces and recreational facilities. The dissolution or consolidation of these agencies should be evaluated locally, on a case-by-case basis, and based on the recreation needs and desires of affected communities. IAPD will continue to aid park districts, forest preserves, and conservation districts by initiating legislation that offers flexibility, promoting best practices, and providing other tools and resources that allow these agencies to continue to provide outstanding services to their communities and improve efficiency.

We maintain our willingness to actively participate in discussions regarding consolidation and local government efficiency in Illinois and report the outcomes of such discussions to our membership. IAPD supports the advantages of park districts remaining independent units of local government.

¹ "Studies show Consolidating Local Governments Exposes Taxpayers to Many Risks with No Guaranteed Reward," Megan C. Kuhlenschmidt, PhD, University of Illinois - Office of Recreation and Park Resources.

² "An Inventory of Local Governments in Illinois," The Civic Federation, February 25, 2021.

³ "Local Government Consolidation Commission Final Report," September 2013.

⁴ "Delivering Efficient, Effective, and Streamlined Government to Illinois Taxpayers" Task Force on Local Government Consolidation and Unfunded Mandates, December 17, 2015.

⁵ "IAPD Key Metric Agency Data Results," aQity Research & Insights, Inc., November 2021.

⁶ "SRA Directory," Special Recreation Association Network of Illinois (SRANI), March 25, 2021.

Operations Funding for Illinois Park, Recreation, and Conservation Agencies



The Issue

The Illinois Association of Park Districts' member agencies, including park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies, play a crucial role in providing recreational opportunities, open spaces, facilities, and community services to residents. These agencies are funded through limited revenue sources, including a relatively small share of the State's property tax base. Although these agencies make up a fraction of the average property tax bill, this amount serves as a critical portion of their operations funding and helps ensure that local parks, recreational programming, conservation, and other services are available to the entire community.

Because their revenue options are limited, the ability of these agencies to secure adequate and reliable funding to meet the demands of local residents is an ongoing challenge that would be decimated by one-size-fits-all legislative proposals that would thwart local control and freeze or otherwise diminish property taxes.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts is committed to working collaboratively with our member agencies, lawmakers, and all interested parties to ensure that legislators and the public understand the benefits of parks, recreation, and conservation and the importance of sufficient and reliable funds for current and future needs.

Background

According to data from the Illinois Department of Revenue (IDOR), park districts account for only 3.49% of all property taxes in Illinois, while nearly 90% of property taxes go to schools, community colleges, and general-purpose governments such as municipalities, counties, and townships.¹ Most Illinoisans believe their local park, recreation, and conservation agencies are good stewards of the property taxes they collect, that the portion of their property taxes going to these agencies represents an excellent or good value, and that parks and open space help improve local property values.² Citizens also continue to express a willingness to pay for maintaining existing parks and recreational facilities in their community. They also support acquiring land to restore and protect natural areas and wildlife habitats, acquiring land for more trails, and building or expanding new recreational facilities.³ This support is reflected at the ballot box as well, with Illinois voters consistently demonstrating support for investment in these agencies by approving more than 60 ballot measures in support of parks, recreation, and conservation agencies between 1998 and 2022.

For park, recreation, and conservation agencies, revenue sources other than property taxes are much more limited than those of other units of local government. For example, they do not receive any portion of the Local Government Distributive Fund (LGDF) or Motor Fuel Tax (MFT), and they do not have the authority to impose local sales taxes, despite their role in helping to generate substantial sales taxes for the State and other local governments through tourism and other activities. Unlike school districts, they also do not receive any general state aid from the State's General Revenue Fund, nor did they qualify for direct federal assistance during the pandemic through programs such as the Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, or the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA).

The Role of Property Taxes

Property taxes provide a stable stream of revenue that allows park, recreation, and conservation agencies to provide a consistent level of programs, services, and facilities to their communities, even

during economic downturns. This allows agencies to engage in long-term planning for infrastructure improvements and projects that benefit the residents of entire communities, regardless of income level or background.

Although park, recreation, and conservation agencies account for a tiny fraction of all property taxes collected, slightly more than half of their operating expenses are funded by these revenues on average.⁴

It is also important to note that property taxes are subject to legal limits and regulations. In Illinois, there are property tax caps and rate limitations on the amount a tax levy can increase annually, which further constrains an agency's ability to raise additional revenue through property taxes.

Additionally, because these agencies serve the entire community, not just those who can afford to pay, they must strike a balance between generating sufficient revenue for their operations and minimizing the burden of property taxes and user fees. Because agencies have carefully studied the amount of user fees that their community will support, raising program registration or user fees is typically not a realistic option to offset diminished property tax revenues. In other words, attempting to increase fees to make up for lost property tax revenue would likely have diminishing returns due to a drop in participation.

Efforts to Diminish Property Taxes

During the past decade, some legislators have introduced proposals that would freeze property taxes or thwart local control over the tax levy process. Such proposals would substantially limit the ability of locally elected officials to meet local demand for programs and services particularly given inflationary pressures. These one-size-fits-all proposals to diminish or freeze property taxes on a statewide basis that treat all local governments the same despite their vast differences in available funding options would be particularly catastrophic to park, recreation, and conservation agencies.

While these proposals claim to provide relief to taxpayers, they would hinder the financial stability and operation of park, recreation, and conservation agencies.

For example, freezing this source of revenue would prevent these agencies from keeping up with rising costs of maintenance, operations, and development. This would, in turn, necessitate cuts including the elimination of programs and services to stay within constrained budgets and defer necessary investments in facilities leading to more extensive repairs or replacements in the future.

Conclusion

It is important for policymakers to understand the critical role of property taxes to the ability of park, recreation, and conservation agencies and to provide critical programs, facilities, and services to Illinois citizens. The Illinois Association of Park Districts is committed to working with all interested parties to understand the role of property taxes for park and recreation agencies and will vigorously advocate to protect these revenues. This includes defending the portion of property taxes dedicated to these agencies and opposing efforts that take away control from locally elected officials to make this important decision.

¹ Property Tax Extensions by District Type. 2021. Illinois Department of Revenue.

² Illinois Association of Park Districts. December 2020. "Research Findings: 2022 Statewide Survey for the IAPD." aQity Research and Insights, Inc.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Illinois Association of Park Districts. November 2021. "IAPD Key Metric Agency Data Results." aQity Research & Insights, Inc.

Partnerships and Intergovernmental Cooperation for Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agencies



The Issue

The Illinois Association of Park Districts' member agencies, including park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies are uniquely capable and empowered to leverage their resources through formal and informal partnerships with the State, other units of government, non-profit organizations, businesses, community groups, and educational institutions to provide quality park and recreation programs, facilities, and services to residents.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts supports our member agencies in these efforts by promoting best practices, celebrating our members' accomplishments, advocating for legislative proposals that enhance cooperation and against those that would hinder our members' ability to work collaboratively for the benefit of their residents.

Background

Park, recreation, and conservation agencies – perhaps more than any other forms of local government – have been able to seize upon their considerable goodwill to attract partners and sponsors from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in ways that not only help the agencies, but also the communities they serve.

These agencies are also able to utilize broad authority conferred through the Illinois Constitution to enter into intergovernmental agreements in furtherance of these goals. Specifically, Article VII, Section 10, grants all units of local government the authority to contract or otherwise associate among themselves to obtain or share services. Additionally, they may jointly exercise, combine, or transfer any of their powers or functions in any manner that is not prohibited by law. This authority extends to cooperation with the State of Illinois, the United States, and with other states and their local governments, and allows agencies to utilize their resources in activities related to intergovernmental activities.

This authority is also reflected in statutory law such as the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act (ICA), the Governmental Joint Purchasing Act, and the Local Government Property Transfer Act.

IAPD member agencies, empowered through these state statutory laws, have developed hundreds, if not thousands of innovative partnerships within their communities to provide services that range from shared facility use arrangements, police protection services, stormwater management, and construction.

Leveraging Resources

Although the types of partnerships will vary based upon local factors, the most common motives typically include providing more non-tax revenue for the agency, preserving natural resources and historic sites, creating new opportunities for the community, building better facilities for the public, and working for more efficient and effective local government.

More Non-Tax Revenue for the Agency: When an agency enters a partnership in hopes of deriving a new revenue stream, the result is not profit, but a de facto reduction in user fees or taxes. Every dollar earned from a partnership is one less dollar that needs to come from tax revenues. For example, many park, recreation, and conservation agencies form charitable foundations to provide philanthropic support to the agency, and to enhance the use, growth, and preservation of the district. In one recent survey, more than 59% of respondent agencies have formed such a foundation and reported raising anywhere from \$100 to more than \$2.5 million annually.¹

Agencies also generate non-tax revenue through partnerships with local entities, including businesses and private foundations. For example, the Champaign Park District received donations from two local hospitals, OSF

Healthcare Heart of Mary Medical Center and the Carle Foundation, to financially support the creation of the Martens Center – a new facility featuring a gymnasium, fitness/wellness rooms, and more. The addition of this facility puts every Champaign resident within a ten-minute walk to a park district facility.

Preserving Natural Resources and Historic Sites: While some groups partner out of a sense of philanthropy or a desire for profit, other partner with park, recreation, and conservation agencies out of a sense of shared mission for the benefit of residents. For example, the Barrington Park District, Village of Barrington, and Barrington Community Unit School District 220 entered into an intergovernmental agreement to restore Flint Creek and develop the Dreamway Trail, which extends across adjacent properties owned by the three organizations.² After collaboratively securing an IEPA Water Quality Grant, the three organizations executed stream and riparian area restoration, planned for long term native plant maintenance and improved water quality, wildlife habitat, flow regime, and aesthetics for people recreating along the trail. The Creek and Trail are now integral pieces of the neighborhood fabric and connect the district's Langerdorf Park, the Village's Public Works Facility, and Barrington High School.

Creating New Opportunities for the Community: One unique arrangement authorized by the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act allows two or more park districts or municipal recreation departments to form special intergovernmental cooperatives called Special Recreation Associations (SRAs) that establish, maintain, and manage recreation programs for people with disabilities. There are currently thirty such programs throughout the State representing 158 park districts, 44 municipalities and one township.³ These programs exercise joint authority to approve budgets, share expenses, authorize expenditures, acquire real estate, hire employees, and provide transportation to participants.⁴

Building Better Facilities for the Public: Park districts, forest preserves, conservation, and recreation agencies are often the sole units of local government responsible for building recreation facilities for the public. In the pursuit of that mandate, these agencies take advantage of local partnerships to share both the risks and the rewards of creating state-of-the-art facilities. For example, the Westmont Park District acquired a 5-acre parcel near its Ty Warner Park with the goal of developing a swimming pool. Ultimately, a referendum to fund the project failed during trying economic times. Nearly a decade later, when the owners of a private corporation sought to create an aquatic facility, the Village of Westmont and Westmont Park District joined forces to work with the FMC Aquatic Opportunities Foundation to use park district property to create the FMC Natatorium. The facility now hosts local, regional, state, national, and international swimming competitions and provides a location where all people can learn to swim.

Working for More Effective Local Government: Park districts and other units of local government often share similar missions in providing quality services and programs to their constituencies. Time and again, units of local government have worked through political and legal impediments to serve the public by ensuring that their offerings efficiently use public facilities and are not duplicative of each other's efforts. In 2022, the Elmhurst Park District and the City of Elmhurst brought higher visibility and access to programs for seniors in the community by unanimously approving a Memorandum of Understanding to offer services through the Centennial Recreation Center. The Center, which opened in June 2022, houses the park district's senior programming and Metropolitan Family Services DuPage (MFS). The City contracts with MFS to provide counseling and other support services to seniors and senior caregivers, which was previously located at City Hall. The collaborative effort between the Park District and the City provides seniors easier access to both recreational and social services under one roof.

Conclusion

IAPD member agencies lead the way in leveraging their resources to better serve residents. The broad powers conferred through state statutes allow park, recreation, and conservation agencies to efficiently and effectively develop innovative solutions to overcome challenges, leverage resources, meet the recreational and leisure needs of communities and, ultimately, enhance the quality of life for residents. IAPD supports our member agencies in this task and will continue to promote the benefits of partnerships and intergovernmental cooperation.

¹ Illinois Association of Park Districts. September 2022. 2023-2024 Legislative Survey.

² Lisa Stamos. "A Watershed Moment of Environmental Stewardship." Quintessential Barrington.

³ Special Recreation Association Network of Illinois (SRANI), March 25, 2021. "SRA Directory."

⁴ Illinois Association of Park Districts. 2023. "Inclusion and Recreation Access at Park, Recreation, and Conservation Agencies."

Preserving Open Space and Protecting Natural Resources in Illinois – The Role of Park, Recreation, and Conservation Agencies

The Issue

Illinois' park, forest preserve, conservation, and recreation agencies serve as the stewards of hundreds of thousands of acres of open land and green spaces throughout the state. These areas play a vital role in protecting and preserving natural resources and providing recreation and wellness opportunities to Illinois citizens. Despite public support for these areas, natural land is being rapidly lost to development, and many agencies lack adequate financial resources to further their land acquisition efforts. New land is not being made. Once it is gone, it is lost forever.

Background

Illinois' park districts, forest preserves, and conservation districts play a critical role in the state's land conservation and outdoor recreation framework. This "green infrastructure" includes neighborhood and community parks, forest preserves, conservation areas, dedicated nature preserves, open space, grasslands, prairies, golf courses, trails, greenways, ponds, riparian habitat, streams, lakes, wetlands and significant fish and wildlife habitats. These natural areas are crucial to public and environmental health and provide the people of Illinois with places for play, relaxation, and recreation. Importantly, statewide surveys routinely demonstrate that residents value these outdoor recreation resources and opportunities.¹ Despite this widespread support, the protection and preservation of natural areas run counter to the goals of commercial and residential development, and the lack of available funding challenges agencies' land acquisition goals.

Benefits to Residents and the Environment

A growing body of research indicates that green spaces have a demonstrable positive effect on residents, including social, psychological, and physical health. Greater access to green environments yields better cognitive functioning, and greater proactivity, self-discipline, impulse control, overall mental health, and resilience in response to stressful life events. People with less access to nature are more prone to stress and anxiety, as reflected in measures of pulse rate, blood pressure, and stress-related patterns of nervous system and endocrine system anxiety, as well as physician-diagnosed anxiety disorders.²

These same studies indicate that green environments are associated with positive physical health outcomes by enabling and supporting higher levels of physical activity, improving immune system functioning, and improving functional health status and independent living skills among older adults. By contrast, communities with fewer green environments are associated with greater rates of childhood obesity and higher rates of 15 out of 24 categories of physician-diagnosed diseases.³

Open land and green spaces also serve a vital role in the preservation of natural resources, which, in turn, provide an economic benefit to residents. In 2018, the Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) partnered with The Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land to assess the agency needs and the economic benefits of park and conservation agencies. The final report, issued in March of 2019, addresses the role of conserved lands in water quality protection, wildlife habitat, air pollution removal, and carbon sequestration. For example, conservation lands help maintain and improve water quality by providing vegetation and pervious soils that can capture runoff, enhance filtration, and remove sediments and pollutants.

Conserved lands in floodplains, wetlands, and natural areas near rivers and streams can help prevent costly property damage by storing and absorbing floodwaters.⁴ Similarly, trees and other vegetation reduce air pollution and sequester and store carbon. Statewide, Illinois has an estimated 77 million trees, which store about 14.7 million metric tons of carbon worth \$335.2 million, and annually remove 13,560 metric tons of air pollution, valued at \$107.9 million.⁵ Additionally, nearly nine out of ten Illinoisans (88%) agree that parks and open space help improve their property values.⁶

Land Availability and Agency Needs

The amount of land needed for conservation and recreation varies by community. Some agencies have adopted the general guideline of having at least 10 acres for every 1,000 residents. This standard, which was adopted by the National Recreation and Parks Association in 1981, helps meet the open space needs of citizens. Other agencies have employed a “systems approach,” whereby agencies work with residents and community groups in an ongoing, dynamic process to acquire and maintain recreation and conservation space based upon environmental, social, economic, and demographic trends and needs.

Regardless of the metrics used, open land and green space needs often run counter to the goals of commercial and residential development in growing communities. In the Chicago region alone, between 2000 and 2015, 40,000 acres of natural areas and 100,000 acres of farmland were developed. That represents a 12 percent addition to the region’s overall development footprint during a time when employment remained flat, and population increased by only 4.6 percent.

An assessment of agencies’ acreage and capital funding needs over a five-year period demonstrated that local agencies projected a need for 15,978 additional acres and nearly \$3 billion in funding. The associated costs of this acquisition far exceed the availability of funds for individual agencies. One recent study found that approximately 80% of total spending on land conservation from 1998-2018 in Illinois comes from local jurisdictions.

Although state and federal appropriations are essential, they too are often insufficient to address agency needs. For example, the Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) grant program has served as the bedrock of conservation and recreation funding for more than 30 years. Despite a record \$56 million appropriation in State Fiscal Year 2023 for new OSLAD grants, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) received 219 grant applications totaling \$104.3 million in requested funding – nearly twice the amount available.

To ensure adequate access to open space for residents across the state, additional, dedicated funding for public parks, recreation, and conservation agencies and purposes is needed.

Conclusion

Preservation of the natural environment is essential to maintaining community sustainability. Illinois park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies are responsible stewards of significant natural resources and are entrusted with the responsibility to ensure these public assets are protected and preserved in perpetuity.

IAPD supports our member agencies in the acquisition and preservation of open space before development encroaches on available land. We support measures to aid in agency land acquisition, including a stable, statewide funding source for continued open space acquisition, cooperation between local governments to establish park or open space acquisition policies, and the adoption of parkland dedication ordinances at the local level.

¹ “Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) 2021-2025,” Illinois Department of Natural Resources, May 5, 2022.

² “Parks and Other Green Environments; Essential Components of a Healthy Human Habitat,” Frances E. Kuo, National Recreation and Parks Association, 2010.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Illinois Assessment of Parks and Conservation Funding Needs and Economic Benefits,” The Trust for Public Land, The Illinois Association of Park Districts, The Nature Conservancy, March 2019.

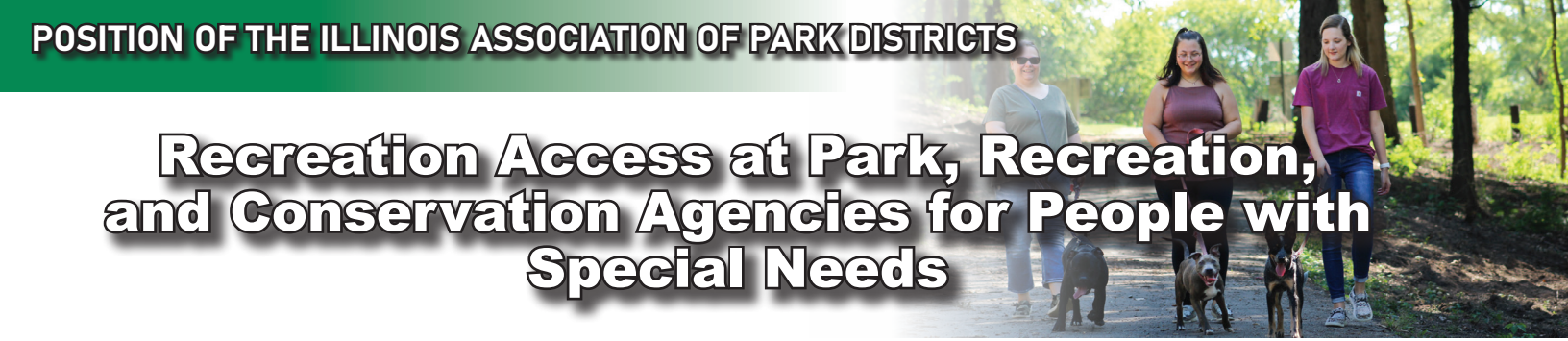
⁵ “Urban and Community Forests of the North Central East Region,” David J. Nowak and Eric J. Greenfield, U.S. Department of Agriculture General Technical Report NRS-54, September 2009.

⁶ “Research Findings: 2022 Statewide Survey for the IAPD,” aQity Research and Insights, December 2022.

⁷ “Integrate Land Preservation into Strategic Growth Efforts,” CMAP.

⁸ “Illinois Assessment of Parks and Conservation Funding Needs and Economic Benefits,” The Trust for Public Land, The Illinois Association of Park Districts, The Nature Conservancy, March 2019.

⁹ “Conservation Almanac,” The Trust for Public Land, 2022.



Recreation Access at Park, Recreation, and Conservation Agencies for People with Special Needs

The Issue

People with special needs deserve access to, and inclusion in, the many benefits that park, recreation, and conservation agencies offer. The Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) champions the development of inclusive recreational programs and facilities for these individuals. IAPD supports the commitment of monetary resources at the state and federal levels so that park, recreation, and conservation agencies may develop or update their programs, facilities, places, and spaces without undue financial strain on their budgets or local taxpayers.

Background

The National Recreation and Park Association defines inclusion as removing barriers, both physical and theoretical, so that all people, including those with physical and cognitive disabilities, have an equal opportunity to enjoy the benefits of parks and recreation. Recent data suggests that more than 2.3 million adults in Illinois have a disability, including mobility, cognition, independent living, hearing, vision, and self-care disabilities.²

These individuals are guaranteed the same right to park and recreation opportunities as people without disabilities through the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, enacted in 1990. Title II of the Act, which took effect in 1992, guarantees people with disabilities equal opportunity of access to local government programs, services, and activities, including but not limited to, sports, arts, music, social skills, venue participation, fitness, and leisure.

In 2010, revised regulations through Chapter 10 of the 2010 Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines impacted several recreation areas, including boating facilities, exercise equipment, fishing piers, golf and mini-golf facilities, play areas, and swimming pools. New policies were required as well, in particular, a Service Animal Policy and Other Power-Driven Mobility Devices (OPDMD) Policy, which relates to the use of devices other than motorized wheelchairs and electronic convenience vehicles (scooters) for mobility in public areas.³

Park, recreation, and conservation agencies have long excelled at providing services, programs, and facilities to persons with disabilities, and are perhaps uniquely enabled to do so through state statute. Specifically, park districts are empowered through the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act and the Park District Code to form cooperatives called Special Recreation Associations (SRAs) that establish, maintain, and manage recreation programs for people with disabilities. There are currently thirty such programs throughout the State representing 158 park districts, 44 municipalities and one township.⁴ Participating agencies in these programs exercise joint authority to approve budgets, share expenses, authorize expenditures, acquire real estate, hire employees, and provide transportation to participants.

Benefits of Inclusion

Parks and green spaces provide a variety of physical, mental, and social health benefits by creating environments that encourage active lifestyles, improving access to exercise opportunities, and encouraging social engagement and cohesion. Additionally, in some instances, nature-based programs can even be prescribed by health care providers as part of alternative, cost-effective treatment plans.⁵ Illinois park, recreation, and conservation agencies lead the way in building and maintaining diverse and inclusive programs and facilities to the benefit of everyone in their neighboring communities.

Commitment to Funding

A component of the ADA with a significant impact on park and recreation agencies is the requirement for agencies to develop an ADA Transition Plan, which identifies existing programs, services, facilities, and policies, and outlines steps necessary to make them ADA compliant. Despite being a requirement for more than 30 years, many standards under the ADA have been updated throughout that time, and therefore, require agencies to revisit, update, or create new Transition Plans. The ADA mandates that any renovated facilities or buildings must ensure the renovations comply with ADA accessibility requirements. The cost of implementing these plans can be significant and has presented unique funding challenges for many agencies.

In a recent survey of IAPD membership, respondent agencies reported \$38.5 million in total expenses for making reasonable modifications to agency facilities in order include people with disabilities in programs and facilities.⁶

Conclusion

The benefits of park, recreation and conservation agencies are critically important to people with disabilities. Illinois park districts provide many of these services through the nationally recognized special recreation association model. Park district-based therapeutic recreation services have changed the quality of life for Illinois residents with disabilities for more than 35 years, and with continued support from the General Assembly, will do so for decades to come.

IAPD is committed to serving its member agencies by keeping them informed of the latest developments and resources, encouraging the formation of new SRAs, and by advocating for monetary and other assistance in developing inclusive programming and facilities for all.

¹ "Disability Inclusion in Parks and Recreation," National Recreation and Park Association.

² "Disability Impacts Illinois," CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, May 18, 2022.

³ "Recreation and the Americans with Disabilities Act," National Recreation and Parks Association Magazine, August 1, 2016.

⁴ "SRA Directory," Special Recreation Association Network of Illinois, March 25, 2021.

⁵ "Nature-based Pathways to Health Promotion: The Value of Parks and Greenspace," Lincoln R. Larson and Aaron Hipp, North Carolina Medical Journal, March, 2022.

⁶ "2023-2024 Legislative Survey," Illinois Association of Park Districts, September 2022.

Safety in Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agencies

The Issue

Americans are increasingly concerned about crime and violence in their communities. A 2022 Gallup Poll indicates that for the first time since 2016, a majority (53%) say they personally worry a great deal about crime, which places the issue near the top of the list of national concerns.¹

The Illinois Association of Park Districts' member agencies, including park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies are charged, in part, with assuaging these concerns about crime by providing safe recreational areas and opportunities for all members of a community. IAPD helps facilitate this goal by providing best practices, sharing successes between agencies, and advocating for additional resources and opportunities that guarantee the safety of all park, conservation, and recreation agency patrons, from the youngest child to the oldest adult.

Background

Green spaces and natural areas offered by recreation agencies help mitigate crime and illegal activities by relieving mental stress and the associated inattentiveness, irritability, and impulsivity that are precursors to violence, and by supporting frequent, casual contact among neighbors and the formation of neighborhood social ties.² Additionally, studies show that recreation programming offered park agencies equip youth with the tools that develop positive social and cognitive skills, self-confidence, and a sense of community and deter juvenile crime.³

Parks also present a unique safety challenge because their boundaries are complex and ill-defined when compared to streets and buildings, and they are also difficult to lock-up or close, patrol, or install an alarm system. Additionally, natural vegetation often inhibits surveillance, and closed-circuit television is unlikely to be able to cover an entire park.⁴

Experts in the field of recreation recognize that the issue of safety in parks cannot be solved by one single action or solution, and, instead, requires an integrative strategy involving design, programming, maintenance, and citizen involvement.⁵ Illinois park agencies are rising to this challenge by adopting innovative and comprehensive solutions to address safety concerns within parks to ensure the well-being of patrons.

What Agencies are Doing

Security Measures: Illinois statutory law vests park districts, conservation districts, and forest preserve districts with the authority to organize and maintain police departments. Although smaller agencies may not need a separate police agency and, instead, contract directly with another local county or municipal agency to provide additional security to the park district, larger agencies may utilize this special type of law enforcement to greatly enhance the park experience.

For park districts, state law provides a special funding source for a park police system through a separate park police tax. In 2023, IAPD successfully advocated for changes to the park district police levy (Public Act 103-0235) that now grants significantly greater flexibility to utilize this levy authority for additional public safety and security measures such as additional security personnel, special events staff, safety audits, safety drills, active-shooter trainings, and security upgrades to buildings and facilities such as security lighting, video cameras, metal detectors, and emergency call boxes.

Park Watch: Many park districts have adopted a park watch program, by which community residents are encouraged to assume more responsibility for activities taking part in their neighborhood. This can include reporting suspicious or illegal activity and partnering with a neighborhood watch to periodically check a local park

for litter and damage. Some park watch programs provide a special telephone number to report criminal activity or maintenance problems that need attention and also post signs explaining that the park is protected by a park watch program. IAPD promotes the deployment of such programs to our membership through the Eagle Eye Park Watch program, which can save them thousands of dollars in equipment repair and vandalism costs through deterred criminal activity.

Design: Another proven strategy in crime prevention is the deployment of a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) plan. CPTED is a multi-disciplinary approach for reducing crime and fear of crime by using architecture, urban planning, and facility management to reduce victimization, deter offender decisions that precede criminal acts, and build a sense of community among inhabitants so they can gain control of areas to reduce crime opportunities while positively impacting the image and usage of an area or facility.⁶

Although using CPTED in public spaces is not new – having been practiced in municipalities since the early 1970s – its application to park and natural settings is more recent. By incorporating the four main principles of CPTED (access control, surveillance, territorial reinforcement, and maintenance and management), through the design and upgrade of park facilities and spaces, park agencies provide a balance between perceived safety threats and maintaining a peaceful, natural environment.⁷

Conclusion

The widely accepted definition of a “safe” park is:

“A dynamic place where the design, maintenance, and policing of the park work together so that the general public perceives the park as a safe place, wants to go to the park regularly, and spends their optional time in the park engaged in valued activities. Crime and disorder is limited, and diverse usage of the park by different groups is tolerated. Legal activities are the dominant activities in the park. Because the local community values the park, it has a sense of “ownership” of it, and there are sufficient numbers of users who act as “natural guardians” to ensure informal social control. They also support formal interventions by park management and police when such interventions are necessary.”⁸

The Illinois Association of Park District’s member agencies work daily to facilitate these types of safe natural areas and parks for the benefit of all Illinois citizens. IAPD is committed to assisting our members in this effort by advocating for increased flexibility to perform this duty, sharing best practices, and facilitating communication between agencies.

¹ Megan Brenan. April 7, 2022. Gallup. “Worry About Crime in U.S. at Highest Level Since 2016.”

² American Planning Association. 2003. “How Cities Use Parks to Create Safer Neighborhoods.”

³ David Kurtz. September 1, 2015. “Structured Recreation Programming Can Help Reduce Juvenile Crime.” National Recreation and Park Association.

⁴ Jim Hilborn. 2009. “Dealing with Crime and Disorder in Urban Parks.” Arizona State University Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, Response Guide No. 9.

⁵ National Recreation and Park Association. “Creating Safe Park Environments to Enhance Community Wellness.”

⁶ Michael Cannavino, CPRP. March 1, 2016. “Using Design to Reduce Crime.” National Recreation and Park Association, Park and Recreation Magazine.

⁷ Crime Prevention in Public Spaces. Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation.

⁸ Jim Hilborn. 2009. “Dealing with Crime and Disorder in Urban Parks.” Arizona State University Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, Response Guide No. 9.

Senior Services – The Role of Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agencies

The Issue

The Illinois Association of Park Districts' member agencies, including park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation, and special recreation agencies, bring together people of all ages and abilities, from the youngest child to the oldest adult. With a growing percentage of the population comprised of senior citizens, it is critical that these agencies meet the needs and desires of this demographic through wellness, exercise, and leisure activities that support healthy aging in communities.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts encourages our member agencies to plan for the growing senior citizen demographic. We champion and promote the senior services, facilities, and programs they currently offer and we are committed to sharing best practices and advocating for additional resources for our members.

Background

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 55.8 million senior citizens in the U.S. currently comprise 16.8% of the total population.¹ By 2030, this number will swell to 72.1 million and more than 20% of the population – more than double the number of seniors in the U.S. in the year 2000.² In Illinois alone, more than two million seniors comprise 16.6% of the State's population.³

According to a national survey, park and recreation agencies are vital service providers to older adults, with more than nine in ten agencies reporting that they offer facilities, activities, and programming that cater to seniors. These activities and programs include opportunities for older adults to socialize with others, stay healthy and active, and serve others in their communities.⁴ The breadth of these services offer a sustained, positive impact on the lives of older adults.

The Benefits of Senior Services

Many park and recreation agencies offer senior fitness and wellness programs specifically tailored to older adults such as yoga, low-impact aerobics, strength training, water aerobics, wellness seminars, health screenings, and workshops on topics like nutrition and stress management. These programs, combined with physical recreational activities geared towards seniors such as hiking, walking clubs, cycling groups, and dance classes reduce the risk of noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, and some types of cancer.⁵

In addition to physical activity, park and recreation agencies are critical providers of social interaction opportunities for seniors by hosting arts and crafts programs, educational workshops, social gatherings, day trips, travel programs, and support groups. These occasions provide mental stimulation that keeps the mind active and can help offset feelings of social isolation and loneliness which studies suggest is linked to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental conditions, including high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, depression, and cognitive decline.⁶

The services and programs offered by park and recreation agencies can also offset increasing demand on the public health system including medical and social services. According to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 31 million adults aged 50 or older are considered inactive. This same sector of the population spends an estimated \$860 billion annually on health care. Yet, studies also show that 4 in 5 of the costliest chronic conditions among adults in this age group can be managed or prevented with physical activity.⁷

Public Agencies as Providers

Park and recreation agencies are a major provider of services for older adults in their communities and are frequently one of just a few organizations in their area that directly serve this population.⁸

A recent national survey of park and recreation agencies found that these agencies are in a unique position to meet the needs of underserved older adults and are a critical lifesaving resource to those with lower incomes by providing affordable nutritional meals, fitness programs, and transportation to and from senior centers, recreation centers, and other needed service providers.⁹

Despite the positive impact of these agencies on the lives of older adults, many agencies report significant challenges, including inadequate resources, facility space shortages, insufficient funding, and inadequate staffing.¹⁰

In Illinois, a recent survey indicated that many park and recreation agencies have increased their offerings to senior citizens.¹¹ Another recent survey showed that nearly four out of five respondents felt that older adults and seniors were adequately represented at their agency.¹²

Conclusion

Park and recreation agencies are one of the leading providers of recreational opportunities, services, and programs for older adults. As the nation ages, the demand for park and recreation agencies to serve older citizens will continue to grow. It is critical that our member agencies plan for the growing senior demographic to ensure that they can meet the needs and desires of older adults. IAPD is committed to securing resources and sharing best practices for our member agencies so that they may continue to provide convenient and affordable health, fitness, and recreational programs for the seniors in their communities.

¹ Zoe Caplan and Megan Rabe. May 2023. "2020 Census Briefs: The Older Population: 2020" United State Census Bureau.

² Travis Smith. May 1, 2014. "Making Room for Seniors." National Recreation and Park Association.

³ Administration for Community Living – U.S. Department on Aging. November 2022. "2021 Profile of Older Americans."

⁴ Kevin Roth. July 1, 2017. "Parks and Recreation: Serving a Growing, Older Population." National Recreation and Park Association.

⁵ Birgitta Langhammer, Astrid Bergland, and Elisabeth Rydwik. December 5, 2018. "The Importance of Physical Activity Exercise Among Older People." BioMed Research International. National Library of Medicine.

⁶ National Institute on Aging. April 23, 2019. "Social Isolation, Loneliness in Older People Pose Health Risks.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. March 16, 2022. "Adults 50 and Older Need More Physical Activity.

⁸ 2017. "Healthy Aging in Parks Survey." National Recreation and Park Association.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Illinois Association of Park Districts. October 2018. "Statewide Results of Agency Facility and Program Usage."

¹² Illinois Association of Park Districts. December 2022. "Research Findings: 2022 Statewide Survey for the IAPD."

Youth Employment at Park Districts, Forest Preserves, Conservation and Recreation Agencies



The Issue

The Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) member agencies, including park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation and special recreation agencies, are leading providers of first-time employment opportunities for Illinois youth and young adults. These opportunities offer critical personal and professional development skills to Illinois youth and represent a valuable return on investment to local communities and citizens. IAPD supports its member agencies in their efforts to safely and affordably maintain a vibrant youth workforce.

Background

When it comes to labor demographics, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics defines young people as persons between the ages of 16 and 24. Studies consistently show that this age range is marked by critical transitions as youth begin to make decisions about the future.¹ Early employment is a formative experience that can have a significant benefit for youths' trajectory into adulthood by teaching responsibility, organization, time management, and establishing good work habits, experience, and financial stability. Studies show that part-time and seasonal work by young adults translates to future career benefits that include higher hourly wages, increased annual earnings, and less time spent out of work.²

As of July 2022, 55.3% of young people, more than 21 million individuals, were employed nationwide. For this demographic, "arts, entertainment, and recreation" serves as the third largest summertime employer behind only accommodation/food services and retail.³ In Illinois, park, recreation, and conservation agencies employ more than 67,000 people statewide, which represents nearly \$720 million in paid wages and compensation. Nearly half of these jobs, some 33,000, are filled by younger adults, typically in a part-time and seasonal capacity.⁴

Value of Youth Employment

Park districts, perhaps more than any other public employer, utilize a significant number of part-time and seasonal employees due to the nature of programs and facilities offered. Recent data from an IAPD survey demonstrates that member agencies rely heavily upon part-time and seasonal staff annually, and that converting part-time hours of employees to Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) more than doubles the actual number of full-time staffing.⁵ Positions typically filled with youth employees include camp counselors, afterschool assistants, lifeguards, umpires, referees, and grounds maintenance. IAPD member agencies rely on these talented individuals to provide the highest quality park, recreation, and conservation programs and facilities to all Illinois citizens.

A survey of IAPD member agencies showed that, for these younger employees, satisfaction with their agency work experience is extremely positive with virtually all survey respondents stating they would recommend agency employment to friends who were seeking a job.⁶ When asked about the critical skills and capabilities learned from agency employment, survey responses included communication, leadership, responsibility, accountability, time management, customer service, patience/conflict resolutions, organization, and teamwork as top skills that will serve them well in future careers. Moreover, the same survey indicated that young agency employees spend most their wages within their employer's district, translating into nearly \$72 million statewide returning to agencies' local economies.

State Actions

Park, recreation, and conservation agency efforts to maintain a robust work force for young adults can be simultaneously hampered or helped by actions at the State level. For example, each year state legislators introduce proposals that would place unfunded mandates upon park, recreation, and conservation agencies in their capacity as employers. These measures, if enacted, drive up agency operating costs and hamper the ability of agencies to deliver services and programs effectively and efficiently. Because park districts operate on fixed budgets, any such mandates ultimately have the effect of reducing the number of available jobs for youth.

Conversely, State legislators are also empowered to assist these agencies. For example, IAPD has long advocated for funding for the Youth Recreation Corps program, which allows member agencies to provide more first-time job opportunities and experience for youth. Specifically, the Illinois Youth Recreation Corps, administered by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, was established for making grants to local governments to provide wages to youth operating and instructing in recreational and conservation programs. In State Fiscal year 2014, this program supported 1,501 youth jobs throughout the State with a \$4.51 million appropriation. Despite this success, the State has not provided any subsequent appropriations to the program. However, it continues to serve as an excellent model for the future.

State lawmakers are uniquely equipped to enhance and promote the value of youth employment at park, recreation, and conservation agencies by partnering with their local agencies.

Conclusion

The Illinois Association of Park Districts champions employment opportunities for youth at park, recreation, and conservation agencies. These experiences help young people develop critical personal and professional skills that benefit them throughout their working lives and are a proven benefit to local communities. We are committed to securing funding and other assistance for our member agencies that enables them to maintain a vibrant workforce. We will continue work with legislators and all interested parties to ensure our members' interests are represented in any discussions concerning youth employment and labor at park, recreation, and conservation agencies.

¹ "What Rigorous Evidence Has to Say About Summer Youth Employment Programs," Mera Cronbaugh, J-PAL North America, May 24, 2022

² "The Lasting Benefit of Early Work Experience," Employment Policies Institute.

³ "Employment and Unemployment Among Youth Summary," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic New Release, August 17, 2022.

⁴ "Statewide Results of Agency W-2 and Revenue Data," aQity Research and Insights, October 2016.

⁵ "IAPD Key Metric Agency Data Results," aQity Research and Insights, November 2021.

⁶ "Statewide Results of Agency W-2 and Revenue Data," aQity Research and Insights, October 2016.



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Illinois Association of Park Districts

211 E. Monroe St., Springfield, IL 62701

(217) 523-4554 | ILparks.org