Community Park Investments

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According to the American Heritage Dictionary, an “indicator species” is defined as one “whose presence, absence, or relative well-being in a given environment is indicative of the health of its ecosystem as a whole.”

Park improvements: How do we demonstrate their value? Photos Courtesy City of Allentown, Pennsylvania, Department of Parks & Recreation

This label is a fitting taxonomy for public parks. Parks are the indicator species of a community ecosystem. In most cases, an excellent place to live includes a community whose leaders prioritize their park system.

For years, the value of parks was intuitive and accepted on the basis of faith and personal experience. Nineteenth-century British parliamentarian Lord Hobhouse once proclaimed that parks are “the constant source of health and innocent enjoyment to all within their reach ... it is difficult to conceive any lapse of time or change in circumstances which shall take away from their value.” (Gould)

In the century since that proclamation, most people still want to believe in the value of parks, but their faith is being tested. Today’s economic climate has made it extraordinarily difficult for communities to financially support parks. The resources to invest in park-improvement projects have become increasingly scarce, and often compete with other essential community services (e.g., education, police, roads, etc.).

Policy-makers are now questioning whether parks merit public tax support, and are demanding more credible evidence to justify the support. Where is the proof that park projects (such as major capital renovations) address critical community needs better than other potential uses of those dollars?

Make A Compelling Argument
For many, the value of park-renovation projects is intuitive and just makes sense. Why do we need
studies to show such projects are good for the community? Such studies offer only a “penetrating
glimpse into the obvious.”

Those people who think this way certainly have a valid point, but, unfortunately, today’s decision-
makers (e.g., board of directors, legislators, foundations) don’t make tough budgetary decisions based
solely on faith or anecdotal evidence. They support the projects and services that offer the greatest
economic, social, and environmental return for the community.

Is the park-value proposition compelling? Yes, but there is a dearth of evidence that demonstrates, in a
scientific manner, that park-renovation projects work. There is a need to move beyond the excitement
of ribbon-cutting ceremonies and feel-good anecdotes, and systematically evaluate whether park
renovations make tangible gains.

A range of important questions need answers:

- Do park renovations improve the condition of the community ecosystem?
- Do they make parks more attractive and appealing to residents, resulting in greater visitation and
  health?
- Do they enhance social cohesion?
- Do they provide economic benefits for the broader community, including non-users?

In essence, do they provide a positive return on the investment?

Addressing these questions through formal studies is at once ambitious and brave. Field experiments
are a notoriously messy business, and it’s difficult to isolate the true effects of the renovation while
dealing with confounding explanations beyond the researchers’ control.

When you ask for input, you might get more than just positive reviews.

Also, study outcomes are not guaranteed to be favorable, or may yield mixed results (e.g., good news,
bad news scenarios).
It should come as no surprise, then, that few studies have empirically demonstrated whether park renovations actually deliver on their promises. Despite these challenges, this type of research enterprise must be prioritized to successfully acquire park funding in the future.

**Amass The Evidence**

There is a growing movement afoot to gather such data, and the several positive findings should be used to lobby for park capital-improvement funds. For example, studies assessing the impact of park renovations have found that visitation and physical activity improve health for certain populations, such as children. (Colabianchi, Kinsella, Coulton, and Moore; Tester and Baker)

While these results are encouraging, additional research, considering a broader range of outcomes, would provide a more comprehensive picture of a project’s value to the overall community. All signs suggest that this is happening with increasing regularity.

For example, the city of Allentown, Penn., recently commissioned a multi-year study, funded by the Pennsylvania Recreation and Parks Society with technical support from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, to examine the impact of a major park renovation at its Cedar Creek Parkway.

The $2.3-million project encompassed a wide variety of activity, support, aesthetics, and safety improvements, as well as a new destination playground for children of all abilities. Pre- and post-renovation studies indicated a majority of visitors supported the renovations, resulting in increased enjoyment, more frequent use, longer visits, more activity variety, and improved perceptions of quality and user satisfaction.

Moreover, visitors at the renovated park gave the playground high marks, and believed the renovation benefited the overall community by providing youth a safe place to play and by reducing youth crime/delinquency.

Key focus groups (e.g., older adults, parents, younger adults) indicated the new playground increased a sense of community cohesion by providing a place for people of different backgrounds to bridge their differences.

The economic activity generated during and after a park-renovation project is one possible area to further explore. There is also a need to assess whether successful park projects increase the public’s support for future park investments and if that factors into voters’ political decisions.

**Involve All Process Participants**

Park professionals, policy makers, and other constituents are encouraged not only to use existing evidence when making their case, but to conduct their own assessments using goals tailored to their projects.

Funding agencies and grant-providing foundations can require evaluation as a pre-requisite for receiving funds, although after acquiring the needed resources for the projects themselves, there is often little in
the way of “leftovers” from which to fund evaluative work. To address this gap, grantors could provide a small evaluation budget as part of the award or allocation.

Look for help from academics and consultants when trying to “sell” capital improvements to funding agencies.

Academics and consultants also have a role to play in this endeavor; they can develop easy-to-implement and low-cost tools, methods, and services that can be immediately used by professionals for evaluation. These study findings should be conveyed to the audiences that matter most—advocacy groups and legislative bodies.

Investing in park-renovation projects can be a wise decision, but there is much work to do if we are to preserve the integrity of this community indicator species. A critical mass of compelling evidence is needed to convince non-believers that parks are an essential service, worthy of public/private investment. We need to move beyond faith alone.

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