

Strategic Planning in Parks and Recreation

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The strategic planning process has been a preferred, well used and significant resource in the field of parks and recreation planning and administration. In fact, for the seasoned manager the process may be second nature as efforts have been established to direct the priorities of the agency and associated staff. However, it may be helpful to revisit, reconsider and freshen up on the fundamentals of this vital and perhaps essential planning tool.

History

Strategic planning as an application tool traces its history to the American military. Efforts were made to create a science to the planning (strategic) and operational (tactical) elements of large scale military maneuvering that would gain a military positional advantage prior to actual engagement. With this beginning, the strategic planning process has a tendency to be top-down driven, time centered, using linear systems and measurement focused. Business and government agencies saw value to the process and, over time, created additional elements such as the SWOT method, the GAP analysis, the Shareholders Values approach and the Strategic Agility model.

Definition

So what is strategic planning? It is difficult to define. There are so many elements, components, shifts and factors to the process. However, the following may be a starting point. Strategic planning is a (1) formalized process of (2) thinking about the future (3) in an effort to control important components of the organization where (4) interdependent decisions are necessary. The significant difference between conventional planning and strategic planning is that of time and place focus. Conventional planning is oriented at the study of the organization's problems using current understanding of the immediate pressures and issues. Strategic planning directs its energies on understanding the organization's future and what projections and anticipations will yield a competitive advantage.

Benefits

There are a number of reasons why the strategic planning process is helpful and worthy of consideration as a time and resource consuming element. It creates a framework or method to redesign the organizations efforts for future directions, priorities, efforts, allocations and even the fundamental structure. It can and actually should establish a way for the organization to have a competitive advantage by being ahead of others yielding better responses to anticipated issues. The process allows for multiple constituency participation engendering a sense of ownership, commitment and involvement to not only the process but the end results. It elevates the new vision to a level of focus so all parties within the organization can more effectively join together in the movement forward. The very process encourages dialogues, intensity of conversation, a sense of creative problem solving and a focus on a common purpose. It also creates an understanding of the organization within the context of both the current and future environment and aligns the needed actions to move from here and now to there and then.

Basic Steps

There are differing strategic planning models that highlight a variety of elements but the following seven components are basic to most methods. Variation from these steps is certainly possible but would be based on unique features of the organization.

1. **Vision and Mission:** A statement is created that articulates the purpose of the organization, its philosophy, goals and objectives and the ideal state that the organization desires to achieve.
2. **Environmental Scan:** The term is used to describe any assessment that the organization undertakes to understand the external and internal environments that exist that impact the organization. The most common tool is the SWOT analysis that investigates the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Usually, weaknesses are internal and threats are from external sources. Other types of assessments, studies, surveys and data gathering mechanisms can be used.
3. **Gap Analysis:** This is a study of the current position of the organization on key elements and the differences from the current status and the desired future state of affairs. This analysis alerts the organization to some of the strategies that need to be put in place to close the gap.
4. **Benchmarking:** It is useful for the organization to compare the organization, again on key components, to reasonably similar other organizations on these same key elements. This effort creates a reference point of best practices or at least the current practices of others and to what extent there are differences.
5. **Issues:** What emerges from the environmental scan, gap analysis and benchmarking are a series of issues or conditions that are either in line with the vision and mission statement or that represent statements where actions need to be taken to better position the organization. These issues should be fundamental, clear and essential so the organization knows its direction.

6. **Action Plans:** This is the heart of the strategic plan. Identified are the specific actions that need to be taken to address the issues that move the organization into the future, addressing the important components that yield the competitive and optimal position. The action plans need to be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time and cost sensitive.
7. **Evaluation:** The action plans may consist of both short term and long range strategies. Periodic evaluations assist in monitoring if the actions are being achieved and if adjustments need to be made. It is typical for strategic plans to reach out to five and ten year efforts and semi-annual to annual evaluations help to keep the process crisp and focused.

Conclusion

Strategic planning has been a well used and adopted method of long range thinking in the field of parks and recreation. Taking time to refresh ones awareness of the process is helpful and perhaps will regenerate interest in this process. Early strategic planning efforts emerged from the military system that highlighted a model based on top-down thinking, with time sensitive elements, linear directions and significant measurement devices. Many different models have been developed over time but most include vision and mission statements, environmental scans, gap analysis, benchmarking, issue identification, action plans and evaluation efforts. Strategic planning has many benefits ranging from organizational design to priority setting, from involvement to commitment, and from initial dialogue to futuristic planning.

If further information concerning strategic planning is of interest, please contact PlaySafe, LLC at www.play-safe.com.