

Open Space Planning: Improving Citizen Understanding

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There are many important planning efforts engaged in by the parks and recreation department. One critical area is the development of the Open Space Plan. Citizens are frequently confused about the term “open space” and why the parks and recreation department would set as a priority such an unusual planning activity. In an effort to better clarify the concept of open space planning for the citizen, the following set of “typical” citizen questions are posed with a response made by a parks and recreation agency professional.

Citizen: Thanks for spending some time with me. I am a little confused about this thing called open space. What is open space?

Professional: Because the concept of open space is so specific to each region of the country, there is no universally accepted definition. However, most parks and recreation agencies would indicate that open spaces are land or water areas which are not developed for residential, commercial, industrial or institutional use that serve as a protected resource in which the area is generally finite, exhaustible and perhaps vulnerable.

Citizen: That was helpful but what are some specific examples of open space areas?

Professional: Depending on the region of the state and certainly the country there could be great variations in unique open space areas. They range from fragile to rugged, desert to mountain and land to water. Some typical places might be undeveloped land, passive recreation areas, natural areas, historic sites, forest preserves, agricultural land zones, archeological remains, habitat areas, mountains, views, vistas, cliffs and caves, aquifers, marshes, wetlands, water bodies, river ways, water fronts and shorelines, pathways of many types and even flood plains. As you can see there could be great variety of open space areas.

Citizen: Why is it important to have an open space plan?

Professional: There are a host of possible purposes for open space areas, and planning is the best way to yield long term use and protection for these unique resources. Some positive actions that occur from proper open space planning include: creating passive recreation areas, protecting wetlands, establishing needed use linkages, controlling sprawl and growth patterns, establishing or maintaining aesthetic appeal, stimulating economic vitality, creating important buffer zones between developments, water sheds or other areas, flood prevention, reducing soil erosion, improving water quality, prevention or

controlling of natural disasters, elimination of man made hazards, tourism development, business attraction, protecting property values, creating ecological balance, protecting cultural and heritage sites and providing for agricultural use. It seems as if the list is endless.

Citizen: That's interesting. Do open spaces have benefits for the community beyond what you have mentioned?

Professional: Open space planning and concern for the associated areas may be a rather significant part of a community or perhaps will have a more limited impact. But generally open spaces contribute to three broad areas of the community: social quality of life, environmental preservation, and economic vitality. When important open space areas are identified and set aside, it can contribute to a more positive social experience. Open spaces represent places of escape and relaxation, may be locations of beauty, provide a sense of community identity and might even help to define unique aspects of the local lifestyle. In addition, these places may provide opportunities for unusual educational experiences, appreciation for local heritage understanding and even areas for fitness and health. Depending on the specific open space area the environment may be protected and enhanced increasing healthier natural systems. This may lead to the filtering of water, noise and sight barriers, development of natural habitats, stimulating biological diversity and may even impact local temperatures. These areas might even become living museums. Most citizens would not think about the potential economic vitality that attention to open spaces brings. For example, some open spaces will provide for product yield such as wood, food produce, wildlife, fish and fuel. Some types of open space areas attract tourism and travelers, stimulate economic investment of existing companies and attract new business ventures to the community. Depending on the open space, public services may be reduced and property values enhanced.

Citizen: Ok then, so who is involved in preparing an open space plan?

Professional: Certainly the local government agency that has responsibility and oversight for local land and water areas is the key contributor to the planning effort and should be the lead agent. Land owners, lessees or users would want to be invited as a partner to this planning effort. They of course would have important perspectives to share. Interested parties such as conservation groups that advocate for land and water sensitivity could contribute much to the process. The business community and civic organizations have a voice that is important to hear during these types of planning efforts. On occasion, local school districts and non profit organizations may feel that they will be impacted by any decisions made by an open space plan. Lastly but certainly not least is the public. This may come through advisory boards, public hearings, focus groups, charettes or membership on the planning committee.

Citizen: Tell me a little more about the role of the parks and recreation department in open space planning.

Professional: The local government agency, most likely to be the guardian of existing and potential open space land or water, would be the parks and recreation department. Some communities have a specific open space department or rely on other levels of government such as the county or state to drive the open space planning process. The parks and recreation department typically provides structure in four important areas: planning, management, maintenance, and technical assistance. The agency usually has responsibility for oversight of current and future land uses and as a consequence needs to concern itself with planning elements. The agency is also required to respond to and create land use regulations and to provide a process for reviews, appeals and final disposition. As a management arm the parks and recreation department has jurisdiction for the land and water sites and focuses on creating land trusts, creating funding strategies and obtaining land donation. Open space, as a non-developed site, generally requires minimal maintenance. But that is not the same as a no-maintenance site. Fragile areas, passive use sites and undeveloped areas still require necessary maintenance, security, safety and site evaluation. Over time questions will emerge regarding these open space sites and the parks and recreation department is in a good place to provide technical assistance to those concerned with the site. The agency will have staff, experience and resources close at hand to answer the concerns of the public.

Citizen: I know I am asking for a lot of detail here, but is there a standard open space planning process?

Professional: Open space availability, need and demand will impact the differing levels of open space planning. Each community will approach this concept differently but there are probably eight areas that most open space plans would be concerned with. The first would be to establish clear, legal and local definitions of open space. Each community might have a slightly different definition of open space due to development pressures, unique land or water habitats or other highly localized circumstances. A second planning step would be to determine legal authority for open space responsibility. Most local ordinances speak to this and in Texas, The State Parks and Wildlife Department establishes this authority. Legal authority allows for developing plans, use of public funds, authority to control use zones, intergovernmental cooperation and the establishment of boards and commissions such as planning, zoning, historic preservation, environmental advocacy, parks and recreation, trails and perhaps open space. Third, a planning team is established to handle the very process of developing the open space plan. A fourth activity, usually carried out by the planning team is to identify and inventory existing and potential open space land and water sites. This process answers questions ranging from pressures to opportunities. Fifth, an opportunity needs to exist for well informed and thoughtful public involvement and input. It is most effective to have the public engaged from the data gathering phase rather than just the review phase. A sixth step is for the development of open space standards, guidelines, statues and policies. Examples of helpful policies that already exist at the state level can be found at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department web page. Seventh, recommendations and an action plan are created that bring guidance to the process. This is probably the most important component of the plan. Lastly the plan should speak to funding strategies that would support the open space effort. Some methods already in place include the grant assistance

program, General Obligation Bonding, Special Assessments, and various lease-purchase programs.

Citizen: You've shared important information with me, now lastly, is having an open space plan optional?

Professional: Various state laws, agency regulations, valuation rules and grant assistance programs in Texas speak to the importance of these natural resource opportunities. The best source of information for local requirements can be found at the State Department of Parks and Wildlife.

Hopefully this set of questions and answers will prove helpful for the general citizenship, advisory boards, commissions and other citizen based task forces. Open space planning is vital to quality of life and well informed citizens are an important support element.