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PLAN YOUR WORK, WORK YOUR PLAN

Master Planning for Rural Communities: A Tool for Community Organizing

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On any given day, America's rural communities are challenged with circumstances they are hard-pressed to control. Many rural economies are in decline, losing residents and tax revenues. Urban and suburban sprawl changes rural demographics. And urban professionals choosing to live in rural areas demand the same lifestyles they leave behind in the city. These changes to rural communities affect the quality and quantity of local public services – including public recreation – and the ability of communities to deliver such services. Enter the citizens.

The townspeople of rural communities are coming together to form nonprofit organizations as a way of filling isolated recreation service gaps in such areas as baseball and softball, for example. But the best intentions don't always balance with adequate expertise. In rural areas, recreation service delivery is often patched together, making recreation and park master planning overwhelming, inconsistent, devoid of leadership from any one agency, and generally problematic. A drastic need exists for community organization as well as focused master planning. But to achieve that goal, local leaders must be able to successfully organize their communities by identifying critical issues, gaining public participation, fostering solidarity, implementing programs, and evaluating their progress. Just as important, elected officials, developers, and urban and suburban community planners must work with rural planners to understand the nature of community organization and recreation service delivery in rural areas that are urbanizing.

In 1997, [Craig Kelsey](#) and Howard Gray published *Master Plan Process for Parks and Recreation*, the premiere handbook for writing master plans, since updated by Kelsey, with [Sam DeFillippo](#). If used properly, a good master plan can bring communities together to increase quality of life, enhance tourism, and achieve a number of additional benefits.

But master planning in rural communities presents issues that are unique to rural communities. The following guidelines will help rural planners recognize the nuances of writing a master plan and offer strategies to overcome them.

Not All Plans Are Alike

In any profession and in any sized community, inconsistent use of terminology causes communications problems. The variety of language used in different disciplines and professions makes it important to review what we mean by a master plan.

A master plan is a planning document for a specific community service – such as recreation and park services – that functions as an independent tool for decision-making. It can ultimately become part of a community-wide comprehensive plan that includes decision-making for all community services, such as public safety, roads, and sanitation.

Some professions, such as landscape architecture, often use the term master plan when referencing a building or park site design and plan. For our purposes, a master plan is a community decision-making document related to the *delivery* of recreation and park services. Indoor and outdoor site design and plans are developed after a community recreation and park master plan is completed. The goal of a master plan is to develop the top 10 or the next five to 10 years of park and recreation projects, including program development or indoor and outdoor facility development. The facility development projects that come out of the master plan would then go into planning processes where an architect or a landscape architect would develop a site design and plan for each project.

The Patchwork Effect

Challenges develop quickly when multiple organizations from the public, nonprofit, and private sectors come together to fill a single recreation gap in a community. For example, it's very common for rural communities to have a nonprofit youth baseball association that operates a summer league and maintains a few fields at the park. The problem is compounded by the lack of a single entity, such as a strong town or city park and recreation department with a full-time professional staff member who can lead and organize the master planning process in partnership with nonprofit agencies, private businesses, and multiple layers of governmental organizations. It is difficult to determine what community group should be designated as the decision-maker or even the central leader / project manager for recreation development since most elected rural officials are part-time, unpaid, and untrained. It is even more difficult to develop a master plan in rural communities because they often move away from providing only recreation service delivery. Instead, they tend to grow into a plan for all social services that can be delivered through a community center. That's what's happening with the R.E.I.N. Center Coalition in Clay City-Harrison Township, Indiana.

R.E.I.N. stands for Recreation, Education, Information, and Nutrition. Established in 2006, it is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization that consists of board members from the township trustee's office, the township park board, concerned citizens, and other recreation association boards such as the Youth Softball Association. The coalition – in partnership with the Harrison Township Park Board – has commissioned a master plan that will affect the long-term facility and program development at the township park, where as many as 10 other nonprofit recreation providers offer programming. It is

striving to develop a new community center that will serve as the dominant service provider for the residents, offering recreation, public health, a library, senior citizen nutrition services, and meals.

Building Local-capacity

It's inherent in rural communities: A lack of trained park and recreation professionals means that the responsibility of providing recreation services falls to untrained local volunteers, who are often limited by lower socioeconomic status and education level. Such community building, or local-capacity building, is a central component of master planning. It boosts local citizens' individual skills so that they can work together to establish relationships that create synergy and networks that build social capital.

Local individuals need training in technical skills related to park and recreation development, but the cost of travel and the absence of high-speed broadband Internet service in most rural areas – which limit access to online training opportunities – make training difficult. Building volunteer forces, then, should initially focus on sustainable organizational structures and funding mechanisms to offer recreation services, risk management and related insurance, and visible programming that can demonstrate progress to volunteers and residents.

In many rural communities, a few motivated residents pull together a committee of seven to 10 people who share a dream of building a large recreation or aquatic center (which is usually so audacious that lack of funding makes it impossible to achieve). Typically, when it comes to project scope, timeline, and funding, these committed and dedicated residents have terribly unrealistic expectations. That can be devastating at the beginning of a project because the planning process can take anywhere from six to eight years. It can be a long time before any tangible success is seen or before a facility is even open for business. All of this causes volunteers – particularly those who are ill prepared – to lose momentum.

Maintaining the commitment of volunteers at a sustainable level to endure the long planning process can be very difficult. When a rural community starts the development process, they typically do the following:

- Form a committee and then struggle until they locate outside technical assistance.
- Work with external community organizers.
- Conduct a needs assessment.
- Form a nonprofit corporation, and secure federal tax-exempt status.
- Write a master plan.
- Locate and write grants to fund the top-priority project derived from the master plan.
- Complete a project or facility site design and planning process.
- Begin the first recreation development project, such as building an indoor or outdoor facility or starting a new program.

By the time a core group of volunteers goes through these steps, they are usually 2 ½ to three years into the planning and development process, leaving them exhausted. That's when their commitment becomes more sporadic and unreliable. Many volunteers commit to a recreation development process because they want to have better programs, services, and facilities for their children. Unfortunately, by the time a new facility is up and running, their children are often past the age of needing the services.

Community organizers must simultaneously plan development, work with a recreation development group to plan and implement programs and special events, and keep volunteers motivated by celebrating early successes.

Tailoring the Format

Master Plan Process for Parks and Recreation provides an excellent format to help communities develop master plans, but tailoring the process for rural communities can improve the document's use. You'll need a copy of the book to follow these steps.

Chapters 1 and 2

- Instead of providing the goals and objectives of the agency, include a thorough summative history of park, recreation, leisure, and human services provision as well as a summary of any previous master plans, needs assessments, or other related planning documents. This will allow the community to gain a better understanding of their eclectic, patched-together – but sometimes effective – service delivery system, and intermittent planning that has been completed.
- Remove agency goals and objectives, and move to Chapter 6.
- Do not include the organizational chart of the sponsoring agency in Chapter 1. It can be very difficult to develop because of the complex nature of providing leisure service in rural communities. You can continue moving your agency toward a community development model by transforming Chapter 2, the Supply Analysis, into a community development asset map. Use the concepts outlined in “Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets,” by John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight.

Chapter 5

- When interpreting results, take this chapter with a grain of salt. Basing planning and development decisions on the Standards Analysis alone can lead to poor decisions by miscalculating community needs and service accessibility. This concern is magnified in rural communities because of the low population skewing the need for facilities and programs and the distance from urban and suburban areas that offer recreation and park opportunities.

Chapter 6, 7 and 8

- Combine chapters 6 to 8 into a single Chapter 6, where the master plan writer should clearly develop a list of 10 to 12 major facility or program development

- projects for the next five to 10 years and attach associated cost estimates and priority-ranking.
- Restate the agency's mission, and develop the ranked priority projects and their cost estimates into well-defined agency goals and SMART objectives – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Trackable/Timetable – that clearly connect to the agency's mission. The goals and objectives should be divided into the four categories that state the benefits of community park and recreation services: individual, community, economic, and environmental.
 - Coordinate goals and objectives that address individual benefits in the areas of physical, emotional, social, cognitive, vocational/economic, and spiritual health with the World Health Organization International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2001). This is a key strategy to coordinate and implement global, national, state, and local public health policy to promote health and prevent disease – such as childhood obesity – via community parks and recreation. It is critical that the park and recreation profession continue to refine our master planning processes to connect global issues about the benefits of parks and recreation at the most local level and to articulate leisure and recreation's connection to individual benefits through balanced, holistic, human development.

Problems and Pitfalls

As rural volunteers and community leaders work through the master planning process, be on the lookout for a few other issues that can damage the overall process.

Low citizen participation, waning energy and enthusiasm by the sponsoring organization, and low response rate to the needs assessment and focus group processes can be harmful to collecting useful data for decision-making.

Lack of high-speed Internet in rural America limits opportunities for developing recreation and park services, collecting data effectively from residents, and providing information to the community about upcoming programs and services.

Rural communities must also pay attention to the lack of racial diversity as well as updating older facilities in the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The absence of professional park and recreation administrators limits the knowledge of such standards and makes it difficult for communities to meet them. But as rural communities become bedroom communities and suburbs on the fringe of urban areas, local leaders can make their townships attractive to a more diverse pool of potential residents by openly accepting and accommodating minorities and adapting facilities to be more accessible to people with disabilities.

Regardless of how a community's master plan is developed, the most important lesson is this: If you have a master plan, use it, manage from it, and live it every day to achieve individual, community, economic, and environmental benefits for your community.

If further information concerning Master Planning for Rural Communities is of interest,
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