

# *California*

## **PARKS & RECREATION**

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### **Special: Skate Park Issues**

## **Developing a Parks & Recreation Masterplan Seven Important Factors For You To Consider**

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A seasoned parks and recreation professional recognizes the significance of their agency's parks and recreation masterplan. The document, which has been prepared on behalf of the agency, charts the growth, direction and agency agenda for the next few years. It is hopefully binding through regulation in an effort to keep the agency current with the needs of its citizenry. It is the recommendations found in a well-prepared and bias-free masterplan, which allows the agency some level of autonomy, so that changes in elected officials do not necessarily mean changes in agency emphasis. Additionally, each member of the parks and recreation staff can visualize which facilities, resources and programs should be emphasized in the future and what type of fiscal resources have been pledged toward those activities.

### **Masterplan Outline**

A typical, yet comprehensive, parks and recreation masterplan will consist of at least seven (7) sections, each lending logic and understanding to the document. Though additional sections may be added to a masterplan to add strength or adjust for local needs, rarely should a masterplan consist of less than the following key factors.

#### **I. The Parks and Recreation Agency**

This first section is introductory in nature and should include a section dealing with the history of the community, the parks and recreation movement and any other piece of information, which places the agency in the historical context of the community. Also included in this section should be the mission, goals and objectives of the parks and

recreation agency and the department organizational structure, which is in place to help reach this agency mission.

## **II. Parks and Recreation Resources**

The second section should be a report on the amount, type and condition of the park and recreation program, facilities and resources provided to the citizens by the parks and recreation agency. This up-to-date inventory should identify all of the recognized and used resources, as well as those which are available for future development.

It is generally an easy task to identify the parks, playgrounds, ball fields, pools and picnic tables provided; and likewise, it should be easy to collect information on the types of programs, such as sports, arts, tournaments and the like that the agency provides. The reason for this inventory is rather obvious. How can an agency make recommendations for future resources if the agency is not clear as to their current offerings? A slightly more difficult task, however is to also collect information regarding the resources and programs that other agencies provide, which might impact on your agency's need to provide similar offerings in the future.

Certainly government agencies, such as city, county, state and federal agencies provide items which overlay this resource and program base and are available to your citizenry. Further, public schools, private businesses, volunteer and church-related organizations might also have significant offerings.

## **III. The Target Population**

A third section of the masterplan should consist of a report, which analyzes the population the agency is obligated to serve. Once again, the reason for detailing information about the target population would seem rather clear. It is this ground whose needs the agency attempts to meet. The types of information needed about the target group would include the past population growth pattern (has it been gradually or perhaps rapidly increasing or decreasing); the current distribution of the population (in what geographic areas of the community do the residents live and are there pockets of these residents); and what is the projected growth pattern for the population (is the community expected to grow, slow down, plateau, and at what rate). Also needed is the demographic profile of the residents. What is the current and projected ages, incomes, ethnicity, education levels and gender of the population? These demographic patterns are very helpful in understanding the type of current and future user base.

## **IV. Parks and Recreation Demand**

A fourth section of the masterplan, and in many plans, the most significant element deals with what demand there is for certain parks and recreation resources and programs. The demand is a reflection of citizen interest, desire and generally speaking, assumed need. The demand for current and future programs and resources is usually developed from one of all of the following measures: a random citizen survey is

conducted throughout the community querying residents regarding the key items of current and future participation and desires; a second approach is gathering information from public input meetings, where the citizens may come and verbally express their desires; the third approach is to tally the participation statistics of the current provided programs and resources and to observe what trends the statistics suggest. Each of these approaches offer value. The random citizen survey gives all residents an equal mathematical chance of expressing their views. The public input meeting, though not random in the type of attendees, does focus on needs of great community interest. The participation statistics should serve as some indicator of desire for a specific activity.

## **V. National comparisons**

The fifth section provides a reflection of whatever relationship exists between the currently provided resources and programs and generally accepted state, regional or nation benchmarks, measures or comparisons. The National Recreation Parks Association (NRPA) has prepared “space standards” or a recommended number of facilities per population per distance. A community can compare their offerings against this standard to obtain some idea of relative standings. For example, a community has a population of 30,000 residents and the city parks and recreation department provides twelve tennis courts. Twelve tennis courts may be a lot or very little for the population. One way to get a focus on this issue is to compare the tennis court offering to national space standards. The NRPA recommended standard is one tennis court per 2,000 residents; therefore, this community is at 80% of the national standard (30,000 divided by 2,000 = 15, 12 is 80% of 15). This process can be followed for virtually all resource-based facilities, but not for programs. One way to get a relative measure of program offerings is to interview communities of similar size and demographics and to obtain and then compare program offerings. Programs are offered as a very sensitive measure of local interest; and, therefore, national comparisons are very difficult to make.

## **VI. Agency Action Plans**

The sixth section of the masterplan is one of a significant shift. The previous sections have been data gathering in nature and the agency action plan section is one of data interpretation and analysis. Here the masterplan provides specific recommendations for what resources and programs are needed in the future, based upon the goals of the agency, what resources and programs are currently provided, what the population user-group future is, the populations desire for current and future resources and how the offerings compare to national, or local standards. This section is difficult to prepare, as it should be based on the realized factors of the community, not political agendas or special interest group pressure and should reflect the realistic direction for the future. The more specific the action statements, the more measurable the achievement of the action, but also the more direct pressure on appointed and elected officials of the community.

## **VII. Cost and Funding**

The seventh and last section of the masterplan should consist of an analysis of the cost of the recommended actions suggested in the action plan. It is important to know what a specific project will cost, the cost in the future and what funding mechanisms seem appropriate to meet the costs of the actions. This section has a particular purpose because the governing authorities of the community, if they adopt the masterplan resolution, will have bound the budget to the cost identified in this section. If a recommendation is for a new city outdoor swimming pool, then cost estimates can be rendered from the city engineers office, from local construction companies, sister communities which have just completed a similar project, and from national sponsorship organizations such as the American Aquatic Association. Also important is to determine what types of funding strategies could be utilized to defray the costs of the project. Typical sources include general funds, special taxes, mill levy's, grants, bonds, use fees and the like.

### **Trends**

- 1. Public Involvement:** the desire and need to involve a greater variety of citizens, user groups and perspectives have both improved the quality of the decision making process but has increased the time and effort to connect in meaningful ways with all constituent groups.
- 2. Cost Elements:** as Master Plans are increasing in their likelihood of adoption by governing bodies, a more comprehensive cost analysis has become necessary and important for quality of decisions and commitments.
- 3. Sub-department Plans:** the department wide plan is still the primary thrust of the Master Plan but sub-department Master Plans have increased in importance and use. A Master Plan for just the athletic unit or the aquatic unit, for example, has become popular.
- 4. Out-Sourcing:** increasing, as an option, is the use of more consultants or out-source groups to complete the time consuming Master Plan. With in-house personnel committed to existing work, outside consultants are in high use.
- 5. Finish Project:** there has been a shift from reducing the finished document size from lengthy reports to executive summaries. Now, agency specific power point prepared packages ready to present to the public seem to be the new finished project.
- 6. Frequency Plans:** once a process to chart the course for ten years, five year plans are the norm with annual updates to clarify elements of completion and new annual goals.
- 7. Management Plans:** in some cases, the Master Plan has introduced the idea that a five year plan should be developed for management issues, policy reviews and other administrator specific elements.
- 8. Linking of Plans:** the value of Master Plans have encouraged agencies to add feasibility studies, environmental assessments, cost-revenue studies and other kinds

of information inputs. These various plans are linked together to provide a more comprehensive prospective of the agency and its mission.

9. **Website Resources:** the Master Plan is being placed on agency websites as one of the significant contributions in communicating to the public, with the government agency and with other professional sources.
10. **Comprehensive Plans:** traditionally, the Master Plan concerns the physical resources of the parks and recreation agency. But, increased interest has been placed on the program resources as a significant part of the plan.