

A CRITICAL, BUT OFTEN-OVERLOOKED ELEMENT
OF OUR ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE:

OUR PARKS



DEFINING INFRASTRUCTURE

Addressing the gap

When policymakers outline the need for investment in infrastructure at the local, regional, and national level, heads typically nod in a bi-partisan way. Both major political parties can readily agree that a well-maintained system of infrastructure is essential to both our *day-to-day* lives and to our *quality* of life.

But when it comes to defining “infrastructure,” the natural tendency is to gravitate toward roads and bridges, water and sewer utilities, and stormwater control. All those infrastructure investments are critical without a doubt, but so too is an investment in our parks, trails, and recreation infrastructure.

Studies on a local and national scale typically demonstrate that parks are essential to improving air quality, increasing property rates (15-20 percent is the norm), attracting retailers and small businesses to community hubs, selling houses, improving health outcomes and making communities more livable and desirable. Yet when it comes to *funding*, parks infrastructure typically gets the short end of the stick. *In fact, the infrastructure report card gives local parks a D+ rating.

The recent Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) passed by the U.S. Congress and signed into law by President Biden is a great example of this dynamic. The \$1.2 trillion package, hailed as a game-changer for infrastructure upon its passage, includes \$550 billion in new investments in our nation’s infrastructure. But of that total, \$284 billion is transportation-related, \$240 billion is for utilities, and another \$21 billion is for pollution remediation. Only a \$1 billion slice of the package for “reconnecting communities” *has potential* to go toward parks-related infrastructure. There had been efforts to include a \$100 million allocation for parks and recreation through the Great American Outdoors Act, but that allocation is now being targeted for a “Build Back Better” package with questionable odds of passage.

In our state, the Legislature has done a good job of investing in the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) as well as targeted parks infrastructure programs such as the Youth Athletic Facilities (YAF) and Aquatic Lands and Enhancement Act (ALEA). Further, through federal action in 2020, the stateside Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is seeing additional investment. But there has long been a recognition that these investments comprise only a small fraction of what is actually needed to build and maintain parks and recreation facilities at the local level. When facilities age without reinvestment, they begin to have a negative effect on communities and contribute to disparities in low-income areas.



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Exacerbating the problem is a double-whammy that has afflicted local parks and recreation facilities – one spread over years, the other heavily influenced by the coronavirus outbreak. Parks and recreation spending has lagged far behind expenditures for public safety, public works, and general government in the years since the Great Recession, and the gap has only worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic. When the economy lags or global risks arise, people turn to stay-cations and local public resources for all elements of health and quality of life, increasing demands on a system with a deferred maintenance backlog.

WRPA performed a comprehensive survey of its members in 2020, showing that just as demand on our local parks and recreation facilities was increasing 65 percent, average budget reductions for local parks averaged **23 percent** and drops in earned revenues average about **60 percent**. Parks are more reliant on earned income than most other public services, with earned income providing 30-80 percent of operating resources. The survey concluded that "COVID-19 has significantly drained operating resources while triggering a heavy increase in demand on the public spaces that offered Washingtonians a safe, healthy respite during the pandemic."

To address this gap in infrastructure investment in our local parks and recreation, WRPA urges legislators to include the following:

- Give parks and recreation a deserved seat at the table for discussions about infrastructure and how and where to invest;
- Provide tools for local parks and recreation agencies to address their maintenance backlogs and their capital needs, such as passage of **House Bill 1025/Senate Bill 5006** by State Rep. Emily Wicks (D-Everett/38th Dist.) and Sen. Kevin Van De Wege (D-Sequim/24th Dist.);
- Use the upcoming 2023-25 Capital Budget to examine ways in which infrastructure funding toward programs benefitting local parks and recreation can be both sustained and expanded.
- Provide more resources to historically oversubscribed Recreation and Conservation Office grant programs.

References:

<https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2021/september/park-and-recreation-infrastructure-is-critical/>

City parks aren't luxuries. They are critical infrastructure. | TheHill

*<https://infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Public-Parks-2021.pdf>



Washington Recreation
& Park Association