



A CALL to ACTION: Public Parks & Recreation

Why do we avoid addressing vital issues when we know the consequences of inaction? For example, choosing not to exercise leads to declines in our personal fitness levels, and in an extreme scenario, being ill-prepared for a global pandemic leads to health and economic catastrophe.

Having served as a public park and recreation administrator when the last recession hit, I can empathize, to some degree, with what those of you practicing in the field are facing right now. Managing immediate challenges like securing staff and public safety, facility and park closures, and other “boots on the ground” issues are top of mind and rightly so. However, effectively rebounding from this global pandemic and subsequent economic crisis will require advanced thinking and exceptional effort.

We need to get to work today on the critical issues that will make or break systems across the country. Ultimately, people will expect activities to start again and facilities to re-open, however, many agencies will have to manage the aftermath of this current crisis with less or in some cases, finite human and financial resources. This will require being smart with what we have rather than storytelling with hopes of getting more of what does not exist.

And likely we will begin to see the re-distribution of financial resources to emergency response services like police, fire and even health and human services in municipalities with the potential that there may be interest in scrutinizing special district funding. If this happens it will further provoke conversation about the essential or non-essential nature of parks and recreation.

This will leave public parks and recreation in a position to have to think bigger, more boldly and focus on what is mission critical. Where to begin? Here are a few suggestions.

Action: Understand your fiscal reality. This is not just your bottom line or what may be left of it. It is about having a complete understanding of your new financial truth. To start, be prepared to respond to potential directives to shutter services and facilities. Can you identify your high cost and low-cost services? And, how do your investment/spending choices compare in relation to community impact? What operating scenarios can be developed to illustrate budget reduction impacts? And how much lost revenues will result from reductions? If you have reserves, do you know how long they will last in various scenarios? And so on...

Action: Don't wait to collaborate. Good chance that local NPOs and private sector recreation providers have reduced their service menus and shut their doors so no better time to initiate conversations about how you may be able to best use your collective resources and work together to offer services to the community – in both the near and longer term. The benefits of collaborative efforts can be immeasurable. Remember, if a local private-sector business ceases its operations, this will further affect your tax base so anything you can do to help them keep their doors open is a very good thing.



Action: Be aware of the MUST HAVES in your community and how this will translate to future demand. As one example, families who have one or two working parents are currently at home with their children. However, we can with a high level of confidence predict that the pandemic will subside allowing people to return to work. And if this happens before school is in session, the floodgates will open with requests and intense demand for children's activities and services. Think Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs - and revenue generating opportunities.

Action: Reductionism & revenue. If you are realizing budget impacts, you may wish to consider doing two things in the immediate. First, let go of services that provide for the few with little to no community benefit, especially if they are being subsidized by tax dollars (you know, the yoga class for the Mayor and her three best friends). There is no better time than right now while services are in hibernation and doors are temporarily closed to make these changes. As the old saying goes, out of sight, out of mind. And secondly, think about offering fall/winter programming at reduced rates to incentivize those who can afford it to register today and benefit from discounting. While this may be counter intuitive to sound pricing strategy, this can be an "exception to the rule" pricing practice generating much needed revenues in the short term.

Action: Place firm moratoriums on new development. This is meant to ensure that existing infrastructure (facilities and parks) is the investment priority. While the decision to postpone new build may not be popular, it will minimize any chance that the agency will assume additional maintenance backlog during what has already been termed a recession and an extended time of economic uncertainty.

These actions can be the amongst the most important things you do to help your agency and community beginning right now. We are in the midst of a historic milestone and what we do or choose not to at this very moment in time will be felt for years to come. Once the dust settles it will be time to re-write the narrative and re-prioritize.

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NOTE: We will be hosting an online virtual huddle to discuss this *Call to Action* during the week of April 6th. If interested please message me on LinkedIn or email jsabbach@110percent.net