

Investment in Parks and Recreation is Necessary for Children's Health

By Patti Miller and Marina Kaplan

SUMMARY

State and local policy makers should maintain at least level funding for Delaware's parks, trails, greenways and recreation services in order to provide children and families access to active recreation opportunities.

Funding for parks and recreation should be dedicated to developing more education programs and outdoor recreation programs for children, teens and persons with disabilities, and providing additional information on existing facilities and programs. Public opinion supports these priorities.

Concerned citizens should demonstrate their support for parks and recreation by becoming regular park users, volunteering to assist with maintenance and clean-up activities, and sending the message to policy makers that parks and recreation are not just nice to have, but essential to quality of life.

Introduction

Approximately 37% of Delaware's children and youth are overweight or obese¹ as are nearly two-thirds of adult Delawareans.² Regular physical activity, which can be achieved by running in the park, hiking as a family on nearby trails, or playing on ball fields and playgrounds, helps maintain a healthy weight and prevent heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic diseases.³ Delaware is home to an abundance of state, local, and neighborhood parks, trails and greenways. These outdoor recreation facilities can provide a safe, fun, accessible and convenient location for physical activity, which is critical amidst the growing obesity epidemic both in Delaware and nationally. Although this brief focuses on the benefits of outdoor recreation, it should be noted that indoor recreation facilities and the programming that municipal, county and state parks departments offer also are critical to promoting healthy lifestyles among children and families.

Parks and Recreation Facilities Promote Healthy Lifestyles for Children

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) comprehensive recommendations for reducing the prevalence of obesity identified improving access to outdoor recreational facilities as a key strategy for creating safe communities that support physical activity.⁴ A comprehensive review of more than 100 studies supports the CDC's recommendation. The review found that time spent outdoors and access to recreation facilities and programs near their homes correlated positively with increased physical activity among children and adolescents.⁵ Additionally, an American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) policy statement on the built environment and children's physical activity recommends that government create and maintain playgrounds, parks and open space within communities and provide the means for safe access to these recreation sites.⁶

Public Demand for Parks and Recreation: What do families in Delaware want?

Families in Delaware consider outdoor recreation very important and think that outdoor recreation programs should be a priority for state and local funding, according to the 2008 Outdoor Recreation Participation and Trends Survey (ORPTS).⁷ Residents responding to the 2008 ORPTS survey also believe that there are a number of facilities that should be added to parks.

Usage

The overwhelming majority (91%) of Delaware residents responding to the survey reported that outdoor recreation is "very" or "somewhat" important to them personally. The primary reason given for participating in outdoor recreation is physical fitness (59%). Other reasons include being with family and friends (22%) and for relaxation (18%). Consistent with these findings, almost half (48%) of residents surveyed reported



About Nemours Health and Prevention Services

Nemours Health and Prevention Services (NHPS) is a division of Nemours, one of the nation's largest pediatric health systems, operating the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children and outpatient facilities throughout the Delaware Valley and northern and central Florida. The goal of NHPS is to drive long-term improvements in policies and practices that promote child health, and to leverage community strengths and resources to help children grow up healthy. One of our initial areas of emphasis is the prevention of childhood obesity through promotion of healthy lifestyles, the centerpiece of which is the *5-2-1-Almost None* prescription for a healthy lifestyle:

- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Spend no more than two hours per day in front of a screen (TV, video games, recreational computer time).
- Get at least one hour of physical activity per day.
- Drink almost no sugary beverages like soda and sports drinks.



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About the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation and the Delaware Recreation and Parks Society

The mission of the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation is to provide Delaware’s residents and visitors with safe and enjoyable recreational opportunities and open spaces, responsible stewardship of the lands and cultural and natural resources, and resource-based interpretive and educational services.

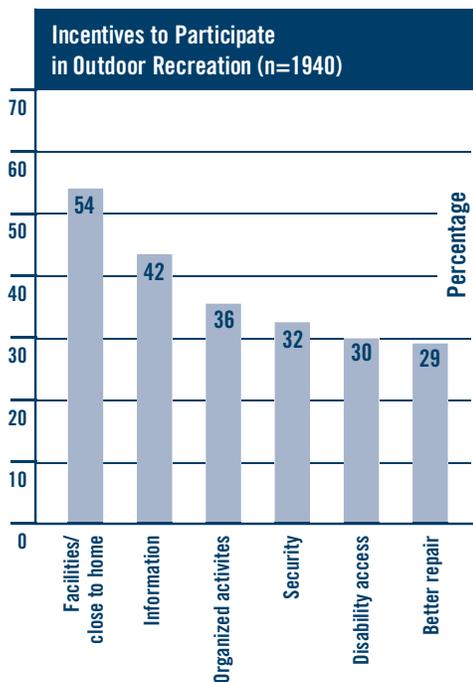
For over 40 years, the Delaware Recreation and Parks Society (DRPS) has provided leadership in fostering the expansion of recreation and parks. The Society unites in one organization all persons responsible for professionally planned leisure time activities, programs and facilities in the State of Delaware that include: recreation; parks; natural, historical and cultural resources; environmental education and interpretation; and conservation.

Special thanks to DRPS members from the parks and recreation departments of the State of Delaware; New Castle County; Kent County; City of Wilmington; City of Newark; City of Dover; City of Milford; and City of Seaford for their input on development of this policy brief.

walking and jogging as the physical activity they engaged in most often within the last 12 months, followed by bicycling (18%) and hiking (13%). Survey results reveal that the proximity and availability of facilities also factor into decisions about use of recreation areas. Most residents responding to the survey reported choosing to visit recreation areas close to home (61%) and sites with facilities designated for their activity of interest (29%).

Figure 1 illustrates what residents said would encourage them to participate or to participate more actively in outdoor recreation activities. Cited most frequently were more outdoor facilities and opportunities close to home (54%), more information about facilities and opportunities (42%), more opportunity to participate in organized activities (36%), and better security at facilities (32%).

Figure 1: Incentives to Participate in Outdoor Recreation



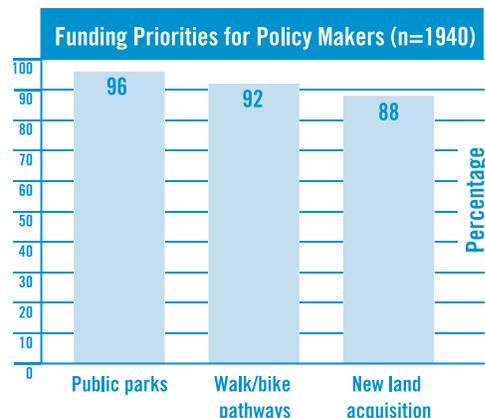
Priorities for state and local funding

The following were the results when survey respondents were asked if funding for parks, bike and pedestrian pathways, and open space should be priorities for state and local policymakers:

- 96% indicated that funding for public parks should be a “very” or “somewhat” important priority
- 92% responded that bike and pedestrian pathways between places of work, schools, shopping areas and neighborhoods should be a “very” or “somewhat” important priority
- 88% stated that acquiring more land for parks and open space in the state of Delaware should be a “very” or “somewhat” important priority (See Figure 2: Priorities for State and Local Funding.)

Additionally, survey respondents offered their opinion on programmatic funding priorities. Nature education programs (91%), historic education programs (87%), outdoor recreation programs for teens (87%), programs for person with disabilities (87%), and programs for children ages 4-12 (86%) were the recreational programs cited most frequently as “very” or “somewhat” important priorities for state and local funding. These results are consistent with the need for “more opportunities to participate in organized activities” expressed by respondents as incentives to encourage participation in outdoor recreation activities.

Figure 2: Priorities for State and Local Funding



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Access

Nearly two-thirds of residents reported visiting recreation areas that are between one and nine miles from home, with the majority travelling to the most visited area by car (76%), rather than by walking or jogging (19%). Distance and traffic or dangerous roads were cited most frequently as reasons for not walking, jogging, or biking to the most visited recreation area. Although just under half of respondents (49%) reported living within a 15-minute walk of a park with recreational facilities, the majority (78%) “strongly” or “moderately” agree that there are parks and recreation areas near their neighborhood that are easy to get to.

Facilities

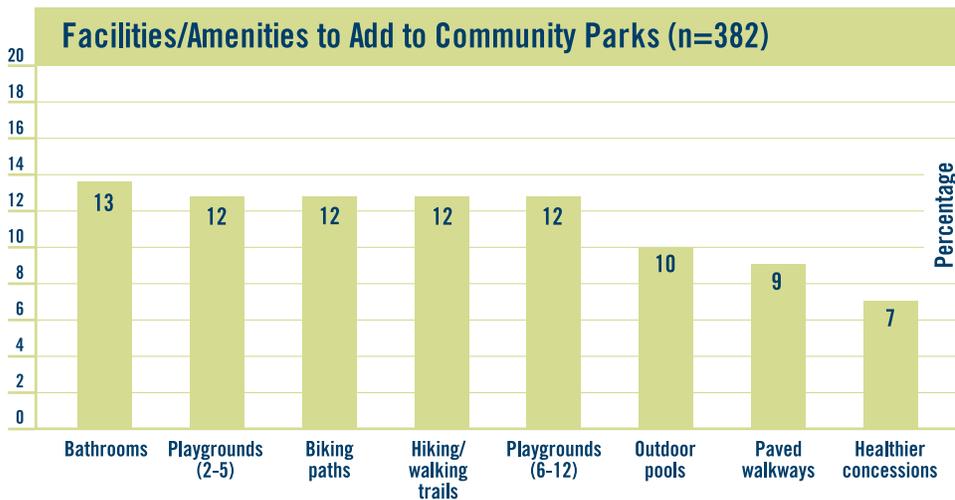
The majority of residents rated the upkeep of existing community parks and outdoor recreation areas as “excellent” (30%) or “good” (48%). When asked what facilities they wanted added to community parks, survey respondents identified a range of facilities including: more, cleaner, better bathrooms (13%); playgrounds for children ages 2-5 (12%); biking paths (12%); hiking/walking trails (12%); playgrounds for children ages 6-12 (12%); outdoor public swimming pools (10%); paved walkways (9%); and concessions/vendors with healthier foods (7%). Figure 3 illustrates the top eight types of facilities mentioned.

Communities Benefit from Parks and Recreation

Studies show that parks, trails and active recreation facilities:

- Provide a space for children and families to engage in outdoor play and be physically active^{8 9}
- Promote economic development by increasing property values for nearby residences^{10 11}
- Assist with land preservation and make compact and sustainable development more attractive¹²
- Contribute to community cohesion and increase social capital^{13 14}
- Enhance quality of life in the community^{15 16}
- Reduce crime, particularly juvenile delinquency^{17 18}
- Offer recreational and educational opportunities that benefit residents of all ages

Figure 3: Facilities/Amenities Respondents Want Added to Community Parks



Conclusion

Amidst competing priorities in tough economic times, parks and recreation programs may sometimes be regarded as a “nice to have,” rather than a necessity. Parks and recreation services are an essential component of the fabric of communities, contributing to quality of life. Both research and public demand underscore their benefits and importance. They provide a safe place for physical activity, promote economic development, aid land preservation, contribute to community cohesion, prevent crime and offer educational opportunities. Amidst a crisis in childhood

obesity, these facilities must also be regarded as a health necessity.

In order to sustain the benefits parks and recreation services provide to individuals and communities, policy makers should make it a top priority to maintain safe and convenient access to these facilities for children and adults throughout the state of Delaware. Data on the usage and recreation preferences of Delawareans, such as those gathered by the ORPTS, should guide policy makers in making their funding decisions. In addition, individual citizens should tell their elected officials how much they value parks and recreation.

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Recommended Action Steps

For Community Members

- Learn more about your state or local parks and recreation department's facilities, programs and funding level so that you can be an effective advocate when the opportunity arises.
- Contact local policy makers to show your support for parks and recreation in your community.
- Become an avid user of parks and recreation programs by visiting Delaware's many state and local parks, joining a local hiking club, participating as a family in organized programs offered by your local parks and recreation department or attending nature education programs. Volunteer to assist with trail clean-up days and park maintenance activities.

For Policy makers

- Maintain at least level funding to ensure Delaware residents continue to have access to safe, convenient and nearby parks and recreation services.
- Allocate funding to parks and recreation services identified as priorities by the general public, such as creation of additional education programs and outdoor recreation programs for children, teens and persons with disabilities and more information on existing facilities and programs.
- When the economic climate improves, allocate funding for the development of more outdoor recreation facilities near residential areas, such as public parks and bike and pedestrian pathways connecting places of work, schools, shopping areas and neighborhoods.

Notes

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