
Future Influences and Trends Offer New Opportunities for Parks and Recreation

by Stacy Turner

New trends in Parks and Recreation?

Consider this. Eight hours a day kids are plugged in. We are set to be the first generation to outlive our kids due to obesity. Online learning instead of classroom instruction. Staycations, not vacations. Precycling, not recycling. Sustainable energy and green roofs.

If you have not heard about these trends, you most likely will in the near future.

In 2009, many new opportunities will come to the progressive parks and recreation professional.

As parks and recreation professionals, we focus on the world in which we work. If we look outside the box, we discover that what we do is influenced by continuously changing demographics, marketing, real estate markets, educational systems, economic conditions and facility designs. These factors directly impact one another and create patterns of change.

As the economic climate becomes more challenging, agencies should not be fearful of diminishing budget re-

sources. Change represents opportunity for those who are prepared to take advantage of it. Understanding influences that lead to future trends opens the doors of opportunity. This article presents examples of what we will see more of in the future.

Online Learning

As behavioral influences change around us, education also changes. More students are learning online. The park and recreation professional should be aware of opportunities that

exist as a result.

As of September 2006, 38 states offered online learning programs, with an estimated annual growth rate of 25 percent. Judy Bauernschmidt, director of secondary education for the Colorado Virtual Academy suggests that we have just begun to see a rise in this trend. "We will soon see hybrid programs, which will allow students enrolled online to connect with others of similar values and needs through a physical location." In 2006, the Sloan consortium reported

700,000 enrollments in K-12 online learning.

Shaping this trend are the number of kids that are not successful in traditional brick and mortar schools, including specialized athletes, actors and actresses, accelerated and gifted students, children affected by illness and rural students who may require more challenging academic curricula. These influences will strengthen in future years.

Children today are plugged in up to eight hours a day. With additional enrichment programs and gym or classroom space, students can benefit through socialization, as well as through fitness and wellness activities. Parks and recreation agencies have an opportunity to form collaborations by providing recreation centers and park activities during daytime hours to generate revenue through rental fees or usage agreements with educational entities.

Tourism

With the plummeting economy comes a new buzzword: “staycation.” Due to high gas prices, food prices, and lodging costs, more Americans are spending their two-week vacations right at home, looking to their own communities for fun and interesting experiences.

According to Destination Manager Tara Kuglan, with Boston-based Smart Destina-

tions, individuals, families, and tourist groups are looking for economical vacation options. Collaborations with park and recreation agencies are an option for tourist groups, as there is a need for multi-purpose rooms to host evening events due to expensive hotel prices. Kuglan also indicates that such collaborations allow tourists to focus on health and fitness needs while traveling. Park and recreation agencies can promote their facilities and programs through tour passes or a card that offers travel passes to pay admission fees up front to area destinations. These collaborations can benefit agencies by generating revenue from groups or individuals visiting their local communities.

In 2008, staycations resulted in a four to six percent rise in the use of campgrounds. Staycationers seem to participate in low or no cost activities such as camping, hiking, biking and running, as well as other activities.

Festivals are also emerging as a component of community-based tourism development, adding vitality and enhancing the appeal of a destination. Community festivals offer diverse cultural and recreational experiences to residents and visitors while providing strong positive economic impacts. In recent years, we have seen a rise in community and cultural-based festivals.

Preventative Health Care

Obesity is not a new trend in the United States. However, the social and economic influences that lead to obesity may provide new opportunities for park and recreation professionals to focus on recreation as a form of preventative health care. Family budgets are tight. Buying healthy food, as well as paying for fuel to drive around town to participate in activities, can be expensive. Consequently, sports and recreation programs are often cut from budgets. Health systems, social services, corporate entities and community service agencies are looking to share programs or services with park and recreation agencies.

Public parks and recreation structures are changing, and new methods of delivering services are emerging. Certain services are contracted out, and cooperative agreements with non-profit groups and other public institutions are being developed. The relationship with health systems is vital in promoting wellness. Traditional relationships with education facilities are evolving into cooperative planning and programming aimed at addressing youth inactivity levels and community needs for all ages.

As subsidies for programs decrease and more “enterprise” activities evolve, staying current on legislation is critical for funding. The No Child Left Inside Coalition, a result of the No Child Left Inside Act, is

becoming a popular partner for park and recreation agencies. It is a fact that children are plugged in to computers and televisions longer after school than in the past, either because both parents work, because it is safer inside than outside, or because children think they would rather play virtual games than real ones. This trend has resulted in direct implications for childhood obesity. Recent legislation authorizes new funding for states to provide high-quality, environmental instruction. Fran P. Mainella, the former director of the National Park Service, highlights in the April 16, 2007 issue of *Newsweek*: "There's a direct link between a lack of exposure to nature and higher rates of attention-deficit disorder, obesity, and depression."

Almost by default, park and recreation agencies are becoming the "preferred provider" for offering activity – especially outdoor activity – as preventative healthcare. With current legislation and documented research on health benefits, park and recreation professionals have new opportunities to collaborate and receive funding to support preventative healthcare programs and services.

There are numerous funding sources currently available on the federal level and in your own backyard. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supports programs on childhood obesity, (<http://www.rwjf.org/grants>). NRPA, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control, recently announced a new grant for

"ACHIEVE Healthy Communities," (<http://www.nrpa.org/achieve>). Grants.gov, managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offers subscriptions for grant announcements and the Environmental Education Association of Illinois (<http://www.eeai.net>) funds mini grants.

Sustainability

The concept of sustainability dramatically influences park and recreation agencies. Recreation centers and park maintenance services require a considerable amount of energy and water resources. In future years, many recreation centers will focus budgets on retro-fitting, renovating and building new facilities that include sustainable design. Agencies are moving towards computerized irrigation systems that control water loss and usage based on weather and evaporation rates.

In small agencies, the push is often towards efficiency and cost savings, while larger organizations emphasize minimizing their carbon footprint. In most cases, both reasons for sustainable design justify a need for supplementary funding. The Springwood Youth Center in Kent, Washington was recognized in the May 2007 issue of *Recreation Management* as an Editor's Choice for innovation in architecture and sustainable design. The facility promotes sustain-

The No Child Left Inside Coalition

The No Child Left Inside Coalition is composed of environmental, educational and public health organizations dedicated to ensuring a comprehensive education for all.

With tens of millions of members represented, the NCLI Coalition speaks for a diverse group of Americans who believe young people should receive a strong education about their natural world.

The coalition's focus is passage of the federal No Child Left Inside Act. This legislation would authorize significant new funding for states to provide high-quality environmental instruction. Funds would support outdoor learning activities both at school and in non-formal environmental education centers, teacher-trainings and the creation of state environmental literacy plans.

You can track the progress of the No Child Left Inside Coalition's legislation on its Web page, which is hosted by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation at www.cbf.org.



A rendering of the St. Charles Park District Nature Center. Image courtesy of Williams Architects.

able design and environmental education, introducing youth to the importance of a “green” mission. The same goal is being pursued by the St. Charles Park District in the design of a new nature center, which Williams Architects is designing to be a modern example of sustainable design. Green features include highly insulated wall and roof systems and a geothermal mechanical system. Upon completion, patrons of all ages will see these green techniques

“in action” in a LEED-certified building.

Conferences and workshops that educate parks and recreation professionals on these new sustainability trends are available through Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) and some private firms.

Connectivity

Creating connection means encouraging people in the community to take advantage of recreation and leisure opportunities available not just by car, but via trails, walkways and bike paths. In the community-planning world, this is often referred to as “connectivity,” and attention to this dynamic is increasingly important for park and recreation agencies. Walking and biking

are emerging as some of the most popular fitness trends. Trail systems offer communities a way to recreate and commute to work without having to start up the car. One example of such strategies is a bike library where agencies provide bikes for “check out.”

Trends Affect Actions

Awareness of changing social, economic and environmental conditions will help professionals understand and respond to community needs and trends. The opportunities highlighted in this article are just a sampling of what may lie ahead for you and your community. Whether you are a commissioner, administrator, programmer, planner or parks professional, this information should inspire action for funding, planning and programming at your agency.

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Keep Up with Environmental Trends with the “Green Monsters”

The IPRA Environmental Committee (AKA the “Green Monsters”) has been making it easier for agencies and members to be green by developing resources and providing new educational opportunities. This group meets monthly and provides members with resource support and workshops throughout the year and at the annual conference.

You can join this group online at the IPRA Web site at www.IPRAonline.com. Participants and other IPRA members often post up-to-date resources, such as the committee’s Environmental Report Card, an evaluation tool for your agency’s environmental practices. Also available online is a model environmental policy statement that you can adapt and adopt at your agency, recycling directories, environmental tool kits and more.

To access these resources, go the IPRA Web site (www.IPRAonline.com), log in, click the “Resources” tab at the top of the home page and choose the resource library option. Resources are catalogued by category for easy access.