

Tough Times Require Leadership !

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During the Great Depression of the 1930s, it was estimated that over 25 percent of the American workforce was unemployed. In response to the forced leisure time that this economic upheaval created, municipalities were faced with three choices: cut funding to their parks and recreation agencies to save money, increase funding to provide recreational services to fill the forced leisure time, or leave funding alone.

In 1934, when the DeKalb, Ill., City Council decided to leave funding alone, the League of Women Voters decided to act. They initiated a referendum to create a park district to build a new swimming pool, which passed. When given the choice of what to do, the public chose to increase spending.

Many states do not have the laws creating special districts to provide parks and recreation services. Most are dependent on general purpose governments like counties, cities, villages and towns to provide them.

Given the choice, even in good economic times, elected officials do not always support parks and recreation. Many believe that services such as police, fire and public works are more important to the community. And during tough economic times they often cut funding to parks and recreation first.

The problem with this fiscally conservative strategy of cutting funding to parks and recreation is that it is not what the public really wants. What parks and recreation professionals need to do is prove what the public wants. They need to use scientific techniques such as polling, surveying and public meetings to make the will of the public heard.

In late 2008, a county park system in Wisconsin did just that. They performed telephone and mail surveys, and held public meetings to show the county supervisors what the public wanted.

The results helped convince the supervisors to reverse a decision to divert substantial impact fee money to the proposed county jail capital project and allocate that money into the much needed park improvements the public desired.

In January 2009, a Massachusetts parks and recreation department conducted extensive mail surveying and showed the town selectmen the results. The results persuaded the selectmen to not cut the parks and recreation department's budget.

Even in Illinois, a state with a history of award-winning park districts, park board members often are concerned that during tough economic times there is little appetite for tax increases to fund parks and recreation initiatives.

But in mid-2009 one park district allayed the board's concerns by conducting traditional mail and telephone surveys coupled with online and e-mail polls. Online and e-mail respondents were younger, and their households more likely to have children. The results showed that, in general, more people favored a tax increase to improve the parks than opposed it, especially younger households with children. (See figure.)



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The three studies show that fiscal conservatives are far from correct in their assumptions that during tough economic times the public always favors cutting taxes. Research shows there is substantial evidence that funding to parks and recreation should not be cut during periods of forced leisure.

Park and recreation professionals should take heart that the public knows their agencies provide an outstanding return on investment for quality-of-life gains within a community. A goal for each agency in these tough economic times is not to cut funding, but to evaluate major decisions a bit more closely than in past years and understand the value of research to gain an understanding of the public's will.

With that said, now is the time for strong leadership from park and recreation professionals to encourage elected officials to act in favor of parks and leisure services. The comfort of making decisions will stem from the political cover research provides.

The ability to grow leisure services offerings within an affordable fee structure has led many agencies to find untapped markets. Capital construction costs have been at near record lows for the past 18 months with projects delivered under budget and ahead of schedule.

All of this is made possible by the valor to act. Now more than ever it is time to build upon our industry strength, to do what we do best: deliver quality of life. The public has tough questions, and research can provide a solution for getting the right answers.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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