

PROFESSIONAL INQUIRY PARKS SERVICES, USER EXPECTATIONS & COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY

Bench Marking Best Practices: The Department is a nationally recognized leader in Parks and Recreation. In order to maintain this leadership position we must continually look for ways to increase our business intelligence around the work we do. This means using inquiry to investigate areas of innovation, new best practice, park and recreation trends and investigating evolving thinking around a range of seemingly intractable issues e.g., camping in public parks. We will discuss implications for Seattle Parks Recreation related to 2 surveys related to trends and practices in the Parks and Recreation field. Interviews were recently conducted with Dr. Deborah Cohen, a researcher with the RAND Corporation. We will discuss basic expectations by users of the New York City Park system as provided through an interview with Liam Kavanaugh, First Deputy Commissioner, New York City Park Department. The interview questions and response are attached, Christopher Williams will lead this presentation.

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DATE: JANUARY 26, 2016 INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS INTERVIEWEE: LIAM KAVANAGH, FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER, NYC PARKS

BIO: *As First Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Kavanagh oversees efforts to improve the quality and increase the number of well-maintained greenspaces in public parks throughout New York. He traces his involvement in the field to the renovation of the gardens along the Brooklyn Heights Promenade in 1989, where a great gardener and a willing crew of helpers transformed a lackluster landscape into a showpiece. It remains one of his most memorable projects and it demonstrated the tremendous opportunities for growing great gardens in parks throughout the City. "People respond positively to well-maintained greenspaces," Mr. Kavanagh notes, "they've become a hallmark of successful public spaces."*

Park Services, User Expectations and Commercial Activity

Research Focus Questions	Research Focus Responses
What's important to users of New York City Park System: Clean, safe, welcoming parks?	The public wants sufficient confidence in professional parks staff to run and manage the system without worrying about the details, e.g. litter and garbage collection. At the end of the day parks users care more about services, programs and access to open spaces versus "who" the services and programs are delivered by. Effectively run park systems generally have in common a quality control element that provides some level of assurance that objectives are being met to meet customer satisfaction goals. We use a 16 point inspection program to inspect all of our facilities and parks.

<p>Why is the Parks Inspection Program is critical:</p>	<p>The Parks Inspection Program (PIP) is a comprehensive, outcome-based performance measurement system that generates frequent, random, and detailed inspections of our parks, playgrounds and facilities. Administered by the Operations and Management Planning (OMP) division, this program provides Parks & Recreation management, elected officials, and the public with a broad indicator of the condition of NYC parks. The program has been designed to reflect conditions encountered by the public when using Parks facilities. It is, frankly the best way to communicate about outcomes in an otherwise vague area of our work where standard performance metrics are not very meaningful to the public e.g., how many acres mowed, tons of litter collected versus a park consistently receiving a 9.5 score out of 10 point rating scale for 11 months out of the year. We have been conducting and reporting on park inspections for the past 17 years.</p>
<p>What key services do you deliver to park users and how do you measure your success?</p>	<p>We have commoditized clean, safe, welcoming parks- this is what our users expect. We treat our park-cleaning services as a consumptive commodity; cleaning services get used and replenished each day. We measure our effectiveness and user satisfaction through the park and facility inspection program which measures 16 areas. Park employees conduct the inspections – we inspect concession operators, ADA accessibility of structures, recreation facilities, etc.</p>

<p>Which member services make money?</p>	<p>Food, restaurants, snack bars, concessions, sporting activities, golf courses and ice skating rinks. The department is moving into the equipment rental business for special events; tables, chairs, special event tents, etc. Commercial activity in parks should always benefit the park user, this is our only real yard-stick. For agencies that are new to commercial activity in parks, would recommend focusing more on mobile vendors versus revenue generating activities that require permanent infrastructure. The activity must create a benefit for park users with creating conflicts in use or negative competition among other vendors. The commercial activity should not conflict with park values e.g., tobacco sales. The public needs to overcome the fear that someone will make money in a public park -It's "OK", if vendors make money that's the only reason a vendor would chose to operate in a park. Seattle just needs the political will to push on this issue. The New York City Parks system runs on commercial activity, public private partnerships, philanthropy and volunteerism.</p>
<p>What do your users want most?</p>	<p><u>A predictably good experience is what users want.</u> Good, clean, safe, welcoming facilities are key to customer satisfaction. People really want an opportunity to engage and connect with the system whether you're a bicyclist, you enjoy sitting on a bench and reading a book, you enjoy basketball, etc. we have the pressure of serving everyone – in a system as diverse and as large as ours, we need to provide something for everyone. Users want a reliable system to tell us what's working and what's not working.</p>
<p>Do you deliver services including education – digitally/online?</p>	<p>We offer some online programming and classes. However, this is still very new territory even for a system as large as ours.</p>
<p>What is the value of social media – e.g., Facebook page vs. using your own website?</p>	<p>We use extensive social media to expand our reach into the community.</p>

City of New York, Liam Kavanagh --Drill down beyond signature park partnerships to find what they are doing at the neighborhood level. How do municipalities make decisions on how their parks and rec people get trained?

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DATE: JANUARY 25, 2016 INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS INTERVIEWEE: DEBORAH COHEN, RAND CORPORATION

BIO: Deborah Cohen is a senior natural scientist at the RAND Corporation. She is the author of “A Big Fat Crisis: The Hidden Influences Behind the Obesity Epidemic—and How We Can End It”. Her areas of interest include how structural environmental factors—social and physical—influence health. She has studied how neighborhood parks influence physical activity and how community characteristics affect health disparities and health. She is working on interventions to promote healthier diets and more physical activity at the population level. Cohen has directed numerous projects on sexually-transmitted diseases, HIV screening and prevention, and alcohol policy. She has served on technical and advisory panels for the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Cohen received her M.D. from the School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania.

Research Focus Questions	Research Focus Responses
<p>What are key research areas in cities right now around public space?</p>	<p>The primary focus is on urban design and the built environment. The greatest gap in making a cogent argument for funding parks is the lack of research and evidence-based documentation on the impact urban parks have on social behaviors in urban areas. There has not been adequate investment in research to fully develop the sciences behind strong, healthy urban parks systems and their impact on behaviors. A lot of theory, but no hard scientific data.</p>
<p>Are parks viewed as community/economic contributors?</p>	<p>This can go both ways, of course well maintained parks contribute to the economic vitality of cities. On the other hand, poorly-maintained parks are a magnet for a whole range of anti-social behaviors.</p>

<p>Can parks play a better role in the debate on equity, health?</p>	<p>The greatest disparities in parks exist where dense urban areas have limited open spaces, particularly if these areas are small and are located in low income inner-city neighborhoods. This problem is compounded by “pay-to-play” economic drivers which further reduce and limit access for underserved groups. Smaller inner-city parks need to be programmed more to serve the public good and to reduce anti-social behaviors. In inner-city areas where there is greater demand for public recreation, more should be done to create free access and programming that attracts positive uses.</p>
<p>Who are the new leaders in cities?</p>	<p>Los Angeles is cited as a leader. LA County is spending \$3 million to survey residents in 85 cities to assess public demand and uses for the park system. This is seen as a precursor to a bond measure.</p>
<p>How can we support research in the field of Parks and Recreation? What can we do to begin building a body of evidenced-based knowledge around our work?</p>	<p>Park agencies, provided the resources are available, should focus annually on some area that strengthens the understanding between built environment and human behavior. Graduate-school interns could be hired to conduct basic research. Several large urban park agencies could agree to jointly fund some level of behavior based research related to the special role urban parks play in big cities in fostering access and reducing disproportionality around obesity, education and impact on high school drop-out rates. Park agencies need to build stronger relationships with local colleges and universities and other science- and research-based organizations.</p>

What research might help make a stronger case for parks and funders?

Park agencies should look for program opportunities that build on the contributions urban parks make in the lives of young people. There have been many studies on the impact parks have on obesity, social connectedness for seniors, diversion programs for inner-city teens, etc. Urban park agencies should focus resources in program areas that are supported with evidence-based (science-based) outcomes. Park agencies need to be clear when offering programs that are purely for recreation versus when programs are being offered to meet personal growth and development outcomes and objectives. More energy should be invested in marketing and designing brochure and online registration systems. Programs should be categorized in brochures and online by the benefits being offered by the program area. More clarity around when parks and facilities are being used purely for recreation purposes versus when parks and facilities will be used as classrooms should be part of internal discussions.