

# CHAPTER 7

## Some Resources, Ideas & Information

This chapter closes the SCORP by examining resources for parks-and-recreation stakeholders, including a free park-system benchmarking database from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and a discussion of the timely and difficult topic of funding. The last portion of this chapter lists options, resources, and ideas for park boards, superintendents, and concerned citizens who want to improve the financial situation for their park departments.

### **“PARK METRICS” (NRPA’S FREE, PARK AND RECREATION DATABASE)**

The NRPA has a free benchmarking database for use by local government parks-and-recreation departments of all sizes. “Benchmarking” is an informational analysis/planning method that allows a community to compare “apples to apples” by taking community information (such as data about a parks system) gathered from similar communities and comparing it directly. The website for this database is: [nrpa.org/publications-research/ParkMetrics/](http://nrpa.org/publications-research/ParkMetrics/). This database offers the opportunity for local government parks departments to complete an extensive online data gathering process. The newly entered data are hosted for free on servers at NRPA and can be accessed by communities to cross-compare themselves against more than 900 other public parks and recreation

agencies nationwide. In the Oct. 31, 2019, issue of NRPA’s Parks and Recreation Magazine, Melissa May wrote the article “NRPA Park Metrics Replaces NRPA Area and Facilities Standards.” In it, May discusses the importance and potential impacts of using park metrics: “There is not a single set of standards for parks and recreation that could possibly encompass the uniqueness found in every community across the country. Communities vary greatly by size, needs and desires; so too should their park and recreation agencies’ offerings ... When agencies are being placed between ‘a rock’ (of finite budgets) and ‘a hard place’ (of meeting the needs of a growing jurisdiction), knowing your peer data provides a more accurate picture of best practices for your agency. Successful agencies tailor their offerings to meet the needs and demands of all members of their communities. Nearly a decade ago, NRPA replaced the single set of standards with the creation of the nationwide benchmarking tool for parks and recreation. Today, NRPA Park Metrics is the most comprehensive source of data benchmarks and insights for parks-and-recreation agencies. Each spring, we publish the ever-popular NRPA Agency Performance Review, an annual report summarizing the benchmarking data contributed by nearly 1,100 parks-and-recreation agencies to the Park Metrics Database. These benchmarks, however, do not happen

without the participation of more than 1,000 parks-and-recreation agencies across the nation. Entering your agency's data will take only a few minutes but will help to inform the decisions of your colleagues across the industry. So, don't continue to rely on standards that have not been updated for more than two decades. Take a closer look at the NRPA Park Metrics and the NRPA Agency Performance Review to see how your agency compares to its peers. Blending the knowledge of your agency's unique needs with the starting point of custom benchmarking data will allow for more robust, informed decision-making. Your agency is not one-size-fits-all, and the data you use to make strategic decisions should not be either."

## PAYING FOR PARKS AND RECREATION

We already have discussed the effects that the recent nationwide economic situation has had on the citizens of Indiana, its local governments, and

on parks-and-recreation departments in particular. Tough financial times bring up the question, "Given our tight budgets, how do we pay for this?"

In reality, tight budgets are nothing new; just ask any parks director who has been in the job for more than 10 years. As previously mentioned, many communities use innovation to find solutions. The good news is that no one has to re-invent the wheel financially; there are many previous examples of successful financing for all aspects of parks and recreation.

The list below offers a few ideas and options for financing or funding parks and recreation or saving money that can be used elsewhere. Each option has a short description to give interested parks professionals or stakeholders a head start on researching more details. We strongly suggest researching local communities that may have used some of these strategies. Modeling after a proven strategy helps ensure success. Some of these options are new, and some



have been in use for decades. All have the potential for fiscally helping parks and recreation. If a nearby community has tried one or more of these methods and succeeded, ask them what worked. Many will happily share their ideas and tactics with anyone who asks.

### **An abbreviated list of fiscal management/financing methods in parks and recreation:**

- **Municipal General Funds and Revolving Funds:** These are the most common taxpayer-funded budget source for many departments. Revolving funds that roll over each budget year help eliminate the spend-it-or-lose-it issue and allow for better fiscal agility over time.
- **Taxes:** These include Local Option Income Tax (LOIT), County Option Income Tax (COIT), County Adjusted Gross Income Tax (CAGIT), County Economic Development Income Tax (CEDIT), Hospitality/Innkeeper Taxes, etc. The proceeds of these tax programs have all been used for parks, recreation and trail-related projects with varying amounts of success.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** These are cooperative efforts between businesses and communities with formal written agreements. These can be either short-term or long-term (single project or ongoing services).
- **Intergovernmental Partnerships and Cooperative Agreements:** These include cooperative efforts between levels of government to provide services for all, using formal, written agreements. One example is for a township to provide some funding to a nearby town's parks system in exchange for free public parks and recreation access to township residents who live outside the town's boundaries.
- **Public and Private Foundations and Endowments:** Examples are the Ball Brothers Foundation, Lilly Endowment, and other well-known foundations. This also includes charitable and community foundations, etc. Many foundations and endowments offer the chance to apply for specialty grants or offer other kinds of assistance.
- **Governmental and Non-Governmental Grants and Funds:** These include the usual parks, recreation, and trails grant programs such as LWCF, ITP, ORLP and RARI, but also can include Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), INDOT Transportation Enhancement (TE), Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), local and regional economic development funds, and others, given the use of some creative thinking.
- **Private Philanthropy:** Private donations from individuals or families is still a common method for people to give back to their community. What better way to have your name live on than to pay for a park?
- **Recreation Impact Fees (RIF):** These are local-level fees paid by developers that are intended to help the community cover the new costs of providing local government services to the added development.
- **Tax Increment Financing (TIF):** TIF uses the anticipated future improvements in an area's tax base to pay for current capital development.
- **Municipal Improvement Districts (MID) or Business Improvement Districts (BID):** Similar to TIF, these target improvements specifically to urban blighted or economically depressed areas to encourage development and use future improvements to the MID/BID's tax base to fund current park development.
- **User Fees and Charges:** These include memberships, dues, subscriptions, entry fees, program fees, events, event sales, etc., used to place part or all costs of providing recreation directly on those who use it most. Best practices use sliding scales, scholarships, "free" days, library checkout park passes and other tactics to avoid being too expensive for use by low- or restricted-income residents.
- **Concessions and Concessioners:** These include vending, gift shops, event food sales, contracting, etc. For example, if Little League draws thousands of hungry kids, friends, and parents, consider using the profit from what they buy from you to help maintain those sports fields. This can be either a public function (in which all the profits go back to the park) or a contracted function (in which a contractor does the concession and pays fees or percentages of the profits by contract).
- **Contractor-Provided Services or Private Operators:** Examples are when a contractor from the private sector leases or licenses portions of public park land for amenities such as golf courses, restaurants, sports facilities, skating rinks, or even ho-

tels. If written carefully, the leases or licenses can be lucrative for a local public parks system, but the local government will want to perform thorough due diligence for legality, context of services rendered, and public trust doctrine.

- **Branding:** A parks department can use the same tactic shoe companies use to promote their product. Selling T-shirts and ball caps can market parks in a community and may even make money.
- **Local Park Foundations and “Friends” Groups:** Locally run park foundations are a way to fundraise specifically for a community parks system. They are targeted to local needs and don’t depend on politics or government budgets. “Friends” groups gather human capital in much the same way, allowing interested people to band together to provide labor and work toward completing improvements and fulfilling needs in parks.
- **Donations, Memorials, Bequests, and Gift Catalogs:** In-kind donations mean virtually anything donated besides money. Examples include manpower, skilled labor, or materials. Memorials and bequests are a great way for people to honor family or friends in a lasting way, especially if the person honored loved some aspect of the parks system. Gift catalogs can effectively spread the word about specific projects, wants, and needs. These tools help a parks system make its needs known, which is often necessary in order for someone to offer such a gift.
- **Corporate Sponsorships and Naming Rights:** That big new car lot or corporation that just moved into town might like to put its name on the new ball fields in exchange for funding a couple of years of maintenance, or it might sponsor the new leagues.
- **Volunteer Programs:** Such activities bring enthusiastic public helpers into parks and programs to assist the staff. Trained, passionate volunteers can free up paid staff to work elsewhere and accomplish more for less labor cost.
- **Zoning and Development Requirements and/or Fees:** Similar to RIF, these basically require new commercial and/or residential developments to either build new parks-and-recreation features into their sites (such as a new bike/pedestrian trail extension into the road/sidewalk network of a new senior assisted living center) or pay a set fee to help the community provide the facilities and services the new development will need. It is much cheaper and simpler to build new recreation-based features during initial construction than to add them later. Many developers readily work with these requirements with an eye toward using these low-cost bonus recreation features to attract buyers/residents. People and businesses often want to move next to parks and trails and often will pay a premium to do so.
- **Municipal Loans, Bonds and Levies:** Special Assessment, General Obligation, and other types of loans, bonds, and levies have been used to successfully fund parks-and-recreation development for decades. Carefully research the various types for their diverse tax advantages, beneficial interest rates, etc.
- **“Green” Bonds and “Impact” Investing:** These are debt instruments similar to municipal bonds but are created specifically to raise funds for projects that have a positive environmental or social impact, such as parks. Some investors specifically seek out investments with an environmental or social improvement theme.
- **Parks and Recreation Special Districts:** Related to both zoning and tax methods, these districts are sometimes used to subdivide a larger community’s parks department into smaller portions that can concentrate in more detail on localized fees and financing options, as well as on programs and services that better benefit their unique neighborhoods and local residents.
- **Cooperation and Joint Use Agreements:** If a nearby county park has a lot of new lawnmowers and the staff to run them, and a city park has a trained arborist who could help the county park improve the health of its trees, perhaps an agreement to share personnel and equipment for mutual benefit could be developed. Such an approach works especially well between parks and nearby schools that might be willing to share the non-school-day use of playgrounds and sports fields/courts in exchange for help with maintenance. Indiana State Code directly supports School/Park recreational “Joint Use Agreements.” (This can be found under: IC 20-26-8-1, 2).
- **Infrastructure Sharing:** This is sharing infrastructure resources among local government departments such as placing a park on top of a municipi-



pal parking structure whose fees pay much of the park's costs (like Post Office Square in Boston) or building a stormwater retention pond that doubles as a public lake (like the Historic Fourth Ward Park and Reservoir in Atlanta).

- **Special Events:** Consider using a popular event as a fundraising tool. If a park hosts all or part of a community's biggest local festival, and 50 vendor booths each contribute a \$200 vendor fee, there is a \$10,000 revenue added to the park's budget in exchange for minimum opportunity cost (mowing and trash pickup will have to happen to some degree anyway). The larger the event's scale, the greater the potential for fundraising.
- **Economy of Scale/Bulk Purchasing:** If parks, the community's public works department, and the county's maintenance department need to buy grass seed or fertilizer, lawnmowers or trucks, consider banding together and making a bulk purchase of enough for everyone, which could save everyone money. Coordination is not easy, but the savings can be considerable.
- **Privatization/De-privatization of Maintenance and/or Services:** Consider doing the math about what it costs to do some maintenance and services in-house in terms of labor, materials, training, insurance, etc., and compare those with the costs of contracting them to carefully researched, qualified private firms. Sometimes the reverse is true, and in-house workers may be cheaper in the long run compared to using private contractors. The trick is to do the homework. Make sure to include all possible costs when making comparisons.
- **Aggressive Preventive/Planned/Scheduled Maintenance:** Smart maintenance supervisors know the cost effectiveness of taking care of equipment and facilities. New trucks are expensive compared to the cost of a few oil and fluid changes and tune-ups. Plan equipment and facility maintenance in advance and follow a carefully laid-out schedule. Train all levels of staff to habitually monitor and maintain all equipment, including taking it out of

service when necessary. The same approach can be just as valuable in facilities. For example, air conditioning systems in buildings function longer and use less energy when filters are changed on time, coils are cleaned regularly, and the refrigerant and oil levels are kept full.

### **Other Financing or Funding Resources**

A helpful online resource for any federal grant is [www.grants.gov/](http://www.grants.gov/). The fully searchable website offers access to 26 federal grant-making agencies and their 800 grant programs and even has downloadable or Web-based grant applications available for some programs.

Another helpful website is that of the Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) [www.in.gov/ocra/](http://www.in.gov/ocra/). This website features a number of different state and federal grant programs sometimes used for parks and recreation, such as Community Development Block Grants and Indiana Main Street. Contact the OCRA community liaison for any given area to get assistance directly targeted to a specific community's needs.

As mentioned earlier, local community foundations sometimes offer many kinds of specialized grants or can help create a new donation account for a specific park department. Start at [www.cof.org/community-foundation-locator](http://www.cof.org/community-foundation-locator) to find a nearby foundation.

All of the DNR's outdoor recreation grant programs are listed at [www.in.gov/dnr/state-parks/recreation/grants/](http://www.in.gov/dnr/state-parks/recreation/grants/). The grants cover nearly every aspect of natural and cultural resources, and the website includes full details for each, plus contact information.

The NRPA has a website specifically devoted to its competitive grants and fundraising: [www.nrpa.org/our-work/Grant-Fundraising-Resources/](http://www.nrpa.org/our-work/Grant-Fundraising-Resources/). The site even offers free fundraising educational materials and other links, too.



