

Strategic Planning Committee
Research Initiative Final Report and Recommendations
March 5, 2010

Overview

In 2009, MPRA initiated a research initiative which would assist us in repositioning parks and recreation services. Our goal was to create outcomes whereby we are understood, appreciated, supported, valued, and protected thereby gaining greater community and political support. Our intent has been to position parks and recreation so it is perceived as integral to addressing the prevailing needs and concerns of our communities.

As the process unfolded, it became apparent that this effort was closely tied to concerns and needs of other similar organizations and that partnering would provide a greater benefit in understanding the values and perceptions the public places on parks, recreation and open space. It was with the support of the Mo. Dept. of Natural Resources, Division of State Parks; the Conservation Federation of Missouri; The Open Space Council of the St. Louis Region and the Missouri Parks Association that the project was completed. During the development of the survey, MPRA was also privileged to participate in the Missouri Outdoor Leadership Summit hosted by the Conservation Federation of Missouri. The outcome of the Summit indicated a strong need to educate Missourians about the importance of the outdoors. The need for partnership amongst agencies and organizations who are involved in the providing outdoor recreation services was never more prevalent then through the outcomes of the Summit.

The Research

The study included two surveys, a random-digit telephone survey of 800 Missouri residents and a multi-modal survey of recreation professionals and public officials. MPRA provided email lists for the professionals and the Missouri Municipal League provided an email list for state and municipal officials. The survey had questions exploring the value of recreation, perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of the parks and recreation profession, and residents' participation in recreation in Missouri. A copy of the survey results has been made available to MPRA and all of its partners.

Key Findings include the following:

1. 93% of Missouri residents indicate that recreational activities are important to their overall quality of life. Further, 78% of respondents indicated that they visit their local community parks "frequently" or "sometimes" despite that half indicated that they don't participate as much as they would like.
2. Missourians are strongly committed to conservation and environmental protection. On several questions, including importance and support for government tax being spent, conservation and environmental protection efforts were highly rated and ranked.
3. Missouri's parents support tax dollars being spent to provide parks and recreation services to children. In an era in which children have been described as "nature deficient," 92% of parents responding to the survey rated government spending on recreational services for children as important. Moreover, half of Missouri's parents would make educating their children about the outdoors a higher priority next year than it was last.
4. Parks and recreation service providers scored high marks for both availability of facilities and quality of service statewide. More than 4/5 of respondents reported that they felt the quality (82%) and availability (80%) of parks and recreation facilities in Missouri were either good or excellent. Residents' ratings of local facilities and services were slightly lower, but still highly positive.

5. When compared to all types of government services, conservation/environmental protection efforts scored with other social services in the second tier of important services, just behind education, public safety, and public works functions. Even in the second tier, more than 60% of Missouri residents felt that these were very important government expenses. Support for these efforts as a governmental expense rose to over 90% when both “very important” and “somewhat important” responses were combined. The third tier of important services included parks and open space and recreational facilities (like ball fields) along with economic development efforts.
6. Missouri residents want parks in their neighborhoods. 84% of respondents indicated that having a park or open space nearby would be an important criterion in their purchase of a home.
7. Surprisingly, support for trails and connectivity between neighborhoods is not as strong as other government services and is rated lower than other parks and recreation services. Typically a strong desire over other park amenities in local community surveys, 25% of respondents rated communities connected by sidewalks and trails as a service “not very important” or “not at all important” as a government expense. Still, trail systems should be considered important as 63% of residents reported that having community connections was important to their quality of life.
8. Missouri’s government agencies should strive to maintain a balance of indoor and outdoor recreation facilities and services for their residents. The majority of Missouri residents (53%) enjoy indoor and outdoor recreation activities equally. Of those who have a preference, a greater number prefer the outdoors.
9. Cost of services is not a barrier to recreational participation in Missouri. Among those residents who indicated that they did not participate in recreation activities as much as they would like, very few stated that cost was the reason for their non-participation. Most indicated work obligations or time constraints were barriers to participation.
10. Agencies should strive to appeal to residents by highlighting the services provided by the agency which match residents’ stronger values. In an open-ended question, respondents were asked what they thought of when they thought of parks and recreation. The most common answers were of physical facilities, places, or programs. Residents are not connecting parks and recreation agencies efforts and services to more highly supported benefits.
11. Although all benefits listed in the survey were rated “important” by more than 84% of the respondents, the benefits of parks and recreation most highly valued by Missouri residents are cleaner air and water, healthy childhood development, and positive family activities. Professionals in the field rated benefits differently, including more strongly valuing health and fitness, while valuing the provision of employment opportunities much less than residents.
12. Missouri residents understand that parks are beneficial to our wellbeing. 95% agreed that spending time in the outdoors leads to happier and healthier lives. 88% agreed that local communities in Missouri have a responsibility to preserve and maintain open space.
13. Missouri’s parks and recreation agencies should be properly funded even in difficult economic times. 56% of respondents agreed that parks, open spaces, greenways, and conservation areas should be budget priorities even in difficult economic times.
14. Despite strong support for government funding and all identified benefits having been rated as important, over 1/3 of respondents agree that parks and recreation facilities and programs are a luxury and not a necessity. In support of parks, recreation, and conservation, nearly half of the respondents disagreed with this statement.

15. Missouri residents feel safe in their parks. 72% rated safety in the parks in their community as good or excellent. Those who reported feeling safe also rated highly the availability and quality of their local parks, the quality of services of park, recreation, and conservation agencies at all levels of government, and have visited parks frequently in the past two years. Those who reported that their local parks were not safe also rated the availability and quality of those parks as fair or poor, rated agencies lower in quality, and do not visit parks regularly.

Implications of the Study

1. Citizens love their parks. Perhaps they don't value them as much as we think they should.
2. Certain aspects of what we ask about scored lower than expected based on secondary questions. Example –trails scored low, but they want parks near their homes when looking for a new residence. There is a disconnect there.
3. The study proved that we don't communicate very well about the importance of our work and of parks/recreation.
4. Conservation and environmental protection are high in importance, but the connection is missing in that we are not communicating that parks and open space provide the green efforts.
5. Support for recreation was lower than support for parks/open space/environmental protection, but was still relatively high.
6. Some social services scored higher than parks and recreation items on the importance question for citizens.
7. Clean water was used in the campaign for the Great Rivers Greenway District and still is used today to promote the district. This is what the survey showed strong support for. Citizens do not see parks as environmental protection efforts.
8. Support for services for children is very strong. Perhaps our limited resources could be focused on children to help "move the needle".
9. Key words to work on/use:
 - children
 - health
 - conservation/natural resources
 - clean air and water
 - employment opportunities
 - economics
10. There is an access issue and is it reported as not having enough time. Cost is not rated as a barrier to participation.
11. The values haven't changed much in 20 years (looking at the overall government expense importance item). Might it be time to publicize the effects of the improvements we have added thanks to the sales tax over the past 20 years?
12. The study has provided several ways to look at the effects/impacts we have and can use the ones that are most important to our residents
13. Cross roads –how do we best spend our tax dollars? Does anything here change the way we do business in the future? Perhaps not yet...but with future studies it may.

Recommendations and Actions

The Strategic Planning Committee met on January 15, 2010 and based on a review of the key findings of the study and discussion related to how best to use, develop and communicate the results of the study we recommend the following actions be taken:

Immediate Actions

1. This committee shall sunset at the end of the MPRA March Board meeting. A new committee/committees should be formed to address the actions.
2. Develop a simple, easy to use Executive Summary in tri-fold pamphlet that incorporates supporting facts from the study.
 - a. The pamphlet should be developed in such a way that it can be used for meetings with legislators, city officials and other organizations who benefit from the knowledge gained from the study.
 - b. The pamphlet should be made available to all MPRA members, and our partner organizations
3. Develop a toolkit, similar to the one developed by MML incorporating the following:
 - a. kit for measuring the impact of parks and recreation services
 - b. action steps to publicize the info in the study by our partner and member agencies
 - c. pieces for marketing that measured information as well as the results of the study
 - d. plan to budget in the next fiscal year for this tool kit (ask MML what they paid for the development of theirs)
4. Develop a power point presentation for use at commissions/council meetings with data from the executive summary.
5. Retaining and enhancing the partnerships created during this research project is vital to communicating the message to the public about the importance of parks and recreation. MPRA should consider working closely with CFM to host a second Leadership Summit.
6. MPRA should be available to assist DNR, Missouri State Parks with the development of the SCORP and to the extent possible work closely to use the data to support a SCORP that has meaningful value to our professionals.

Long Range Actions

1. Focus groups could be held with professionals in regions to go deeper into topics with residents.
2. Studying the effects of the changing demographics in Missouri –increasing African American, Asian, and Islamic populations.
3. Can this values study be elevated to the national level? Make it available, discuss it, and share our results on a national level. Shall we sell the model?
4. When presenting the data/results be sure to show how we used the data and what has resulted.
5. Follow up studies on the progress and impacts from construction projects built through the sales tax.