

2018 Recreation and Conservation Leadership Summit

Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society and
Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Being Our Best Selves: A Call to Action for Park Maintenance and Infrastructure

“It may not seem fun or sexy, but maintenance is radically progressive, sustainable, and even subversive—challenging our societal preference to value new things more than things we inherit” (Mason & Greenspan, 2018).

There’s no ribbon cutting ceremony when it’s time to pick up the trash. Over the lifetime of a park, maintenance represents 75% of the total cost (Lay, 1978). That’s right, the least celebrated task is the most important. A well-maintained park system is a source of pride, an economic asset, and central to the health and quality of life in a community. A poorly maintained park becomes a liability. No councilman, commissioner or supervisor wants to hear complaints about the park system. Yet the people charged with caring for parks seldom have the resources—people, budget and expertise—to do the job.

The full extent of the maintenance backlog for Pennsylvania’s 340 public park and recreation agencies, 121 state parks, and 6000+ local parks is undocumented, but likely reaches \$2 billion. The two agencies that fund parks, the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), report spending more than \$500 million over the past decade, for 3,000 local park improvement projects (S. Hoover, personal communication, October 2018). When you consider that the municipality provides at least a 50 percent match, the park projects represent \$1 billion in public infrastructure investment at risk due to deferred maintenance. And, these are not the only investments in parks and recreation. In the public realm alone, DCNR estimates an additional \$500 million *each* in deferred maintenance for state parks and state forests, comprising a second billion dollars in public infrastructure at risk.

Resources at Risk: Why the Time is Right to Address Maintenance

The condition of park and recreation assets affects health, safety, property values, access to recreation, and the economic vibrancy of our communities. For too long, many municipalities have built and improved parks and facilities without commensurate support for adequate upkeep, causing backlogs of deferred maintenance. In a 2017 PRPS Park Budget and Salary Survey, 38 PA park and recreation agencies reported capital rehab and major maintenance needs with a median of \$400,000 per agency (Kim & Mowen, 2017). Pennsylvania’s Outdoor Recreation Plan (2014) confirms public support, stating, “Maintaining existing park and recreation areas was the most important funding priority across all provider groups, which mirrors the response given by Pennsylvania’s citizens. Eighty-five percent of provider respondents believe maintenance is important or extremely important, and 64 percent said it was their top funding priority” (Leslie, 2014). And, maintenance is gaining attention as a national crisis. Larry Summers, the Harvard economics professor and former Secretary of the Treasury, speaking of maintenance of all civic infrastructure, suggested that a non-governmental agency should help

benchmark the maintenance neglect, likely to “be like the poverty line” and he went on to suggest “...the federal government could make funding for states and localities contingent upon maintenance efforts” (Olson & Wessels, 2017). A July 2017 *New York Times* Opinion observes that maintenance is big business for some, “industrial corporations like General Electric and Boeing make heavy investments in ...predictive maintenance, since their success depends upon the reliability of their products” (Russell & Vinsel, 2017). It’s time we viewed civic infrastructure—including park maintenance—as worthy of public investment.

The Real World of Park Maintenance

At the local level, park maintenance staff may struggle to complete the most basic tasks of trash removal, mowing and ballfield maintenance. Adding to the complexity of park maintenance, an undetermined number of municipalities place park maintenance under the Public Works division, instead of, placing such supervision under a Parks and Recreation division. Absent the rare cases where a Public Works Director has a parks and recreation background, this approach may further diminish park maintenance as a priority. Municipalities that fall under the Clean Water Act MS4 permitting process have further reasons/obligations to maintain parks as the required permit plans rely heavily upon public lands as locations for rain gardens, stream stabilization and other public infrastructure that manage stormwater and reduce pollutant loads into streams. DCNR’s (2015) *DCNR and Climate Change: Planning for the Future* emphasizes that now more than ever, public parkland is critical to mitigating stormwater runoff, extreme weather events and longer term trends due to temperature warming. Park maintenance requires an ever more sophisticated knowledge of maintaining land for multiple purposes and users.

In spite of dire needs for maintenance, municipal leadership abounds in Pennsylvania. In South Middleton Township, Cumberland County, the Board of Supervisors is known to publicly state that it wants its parks to look as good today as they did at the ribbon cutting. When Plymouth Township, Montgomery County held a Community Fair and invited residents to vote for their favorite of 17 services, Schools, and Parks and Recreation, scored first and second. This vote of confidence has given Township Council more reasons to dedicate resources to a well-maintained park system. In Fayette County, economic development staff note that employers want to locate in communities with well-managed parks and public facilities: the key to attracting a workforce. Across Pennsylvania, and the country, communities are collaborating with local non-profits to form volunteer “Friends” groups to assist with park maintenance.

A Call to Action

At the 2018 ASLA national conference, NRPA President Kevin O’Hara led a session, *Returning to Our Roots: It’s Time for a 21st Century Parks and Recreation Movement*. Among the findings that support park maintenance, an observation that parks are one of the few government functions that receive consistently high public approval ratings. As stated by Robert Garcia, City Project in Los Angeles, at the national ASLA Conference, “where our Nation is hurting, parks heal” (R. Garcia, personal communication). From the late 1890’s rise of parks during the City Beautiful Movement, to the early 1900’s Playground Movement, to the 1930’s Urban Reform and the 1960’s beautification efforts, led by Lady Bird Johnson, it’s time to stop our parks from crumbling before our eyes. The public and private sectors need to advocate for maintenance, as was done for the Americans with Disabilities Act, now a staple of every public design. As Pennsylvania’s Keystone Fund celebrates its 25th anniversary, it’s time to honor those investments with the level of care that went into conceiving them in the first place.

Statewide Strategies and Recommendations

1. **PA Park Maintenance Institute.** While PA DCNR or another state agency *could* take on the role of park maintenance expertise, it is not realistic for these agencies to add maintenance to already over-burdened agendas. The most promising strategy for effectively addressing park maintenance resulted from a 2018 PRPS grant from DCED and DCNR to carry out a priority recommendation of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Recreation Plan to explore the establishment of a Maintenance Institute. The Institute would be a statewide resource to help local community parks and recreation agencies with the latest tools, techniques and strategies for efficient park maintenance. Four major findings from this project emerged: 1) investment at risk; 2) maintenance information is available, but disparate; 3) no one organization exists with the sole mission of park maintenance; and, 4) there's a positive public and practitioner response to the formation of a park maintenance institute.

The study concluded that in order to maximize the existing grant programs, one statewide organization should be established, dedicated to park maintenance. It is important to note that the study also concluded that such an Institute could be housed within PRPS and become financially sustainable within five years. The business plan projected that after raising \$300,000 in start-up funding, the Institute would be able to support a director, part-time support staff and intern primarily through membership, certification and conference sponsorship revenue. The business plan for the Institute, also called for a professional organization, housed within PRPS that would provide maintenance training, technical assistance and certification; host regional information exchanges; lead a behavior modification initiative around a critical issue such as plastic water bottle trash elimination; and, provide advocacy at both the legislative and potential funder levels. The Institute would also be well-positioned to lead the way with new technology, such as robotic mowers.

While a statewide institute, housed at non-profit PRPS and dedicated solely to maintenance, appears the ideal solution, additional, albeit disparate, strategies could be employed.

2. **State Grant Incentives.** Specifically, DCNR could allocate a percentage of all park improvement grants to a three year, post construction maintenance contract, implemented by the municipal grant recipient. [Editor note: Without a change to the Legislative Authority that created the Keystone Fund, DCNR is not permitted to fund maintenance.] DCNR could also fund maintenance plans and training for park maintenance professionals, on a regional or local level.
3. **Advocacy Campaigns.** The Pennsylvania Park Maintenance Institute, or a state agency, are ideal advocates for changing behavior around issues critical to maintenance, such as plastic water bottle debris. On the national level, one of the most successful campaigns, Don't Mess with Texas, reported a 34 percent decrease in visible roadside trash between 2009 and 2013.⁵ A Pennsylvania campaign, perhaps around plastic water bottle trash, or another critical issue, can be underwritten by state agencies, or ideally by the Institute, and address the more systemic problem of maintenance by changing behavior.

Local/Personal Strategies

1. **Friends Groups.** Contact three to five organizations or individuals to help start a Friends Group to maintain a local park (for example, a park that you manage or consult for).

2. **Contribute.** Volunteer to teach or help in the planning of the PA Parks Maintenance Exchanges.
3. **Develop/Review Plans.** Initiate the development of a new Parks Maintenance Plan for your agency, or annually review or update your existing plan.

Further Reading/Viewing

- Mason, R. & Greenspan, E. (2018, July). Innovation is sexy but maintenance is what Philly needs right now [opinion]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Retrieved from <http://www2.philly.com/philly/opinion/commentary/innovation-maintenance-public-spaces-urban-design-planning-philadelphia-20180706.html>
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