



Wasaga Beach Sports Park  
Photo: Town of Wasaga Beach

**OTS HIGHLIGHT**  
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# How to Influence the Sports Field Maintenance Budget

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Why is this topic important? Securing budget resources for sports field and parks infrastructure and maintenance needs strong evidence-based arguments to warrant investment by decision-makers.

## **Current and Past Fiscally-Based Service Reviews**

More than ever, in the midst of the European debt crises that influence government policies across the world, public and private organizations are reviewing their mandates, their scope of operations as fiscal resources become ever more stretched. The days of “silo-based thinking” and protecting budgets and resources solely for defined and specialized interests are coming to an end.

How can turf managers provide proof that their work provides “value for money”? Successive citizen reform movements and questions raised by California’s “Proposition 13”, the Ontario NDP’s “Social Contracts and Rae-Days”, the Ontario Conservative government’s “Common Sense Revolution” and now even the frustrated 20-something’s “Occupy Movement” frame some fundamental shifts in societal perceptions about services and

trust in large multi-national corporations and government.

Parks services have enjoyed relatively high levels of citizen support in recent years. Consistently, parks and trails are considered to be amongst the most appreciated municipal services with citizen approval survey ratings topping 80-90%

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*(Ref: polls by Environics, Pollara, and 2005 City of Calgary), equivalent to or higher than fire services, libraries and police services.*

## **Moving to an Experience-Based Economy and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

Society has moved from an agrarian to the industrial/manufacturing age, then to a service-based economy, and now we may be moving into yet another phase, the “experiential economy”, where citizens, beyond making a living through traditional means, want opportunities to “experience” a variety of opportunities accessible to them.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs reinforces the concept that beyond basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, society desires moving “up the hierarchy” toward self-fulfillment and expression of their ultimate desires. So how does this relate to turf budgets?

Parks, outdoor sports, trails and open spaces have many advantages in relating toward societal self-fulfillment and new experiences. They are generally accessible at the time and place an individual desires. People have an innate need for clean land, water, air and ultimately connection with the land and nature. In a world that is increasingly dominated by electronic gadgets and “smartphones holding

employees on a leash”, a walk in the park, bicycling on a trail, taking your dog to a leash-free zone or enjoying a sunset vista and so many other choices can be available to offset obesity, boredom, social isolation and need for relaxation and to reconnect with your natural human rhythm. Properly designed, sports fields should not be considered single uses that bar regular citizens from access and spawn numerous physical infrastructure not necessarily in keeping with local citizen perceptions of quality spaces. Minimizing use of fencing but use of more natural features and barriers may assist in great multi-use capabilities and harmonization of objectives within shared active and passive park areas.

### **Capitalizing on the Natural Advantages of Parks, Trails and Public Spaces**

So what are the kinds of “evidence-based investments” that may buttress requests for turf maintenance resources? People who go to outdoor spaces want an experience that is memorable to their own needs. Rarely can parks staff communicate the number of people visiting parks, when they do so and the value people place upon such visits. Recently infra-red installations can monitor numbers of visitors on pathways to begin to quantify park visitation (*Source: City of Mississauga, 30+ indoor and outdoor installations*) which allow departments to compare total visitation, cost and time of visitation.

Outdoor spaces have the advantage of changing seasons, exposures to nature, the ability to exercise while you are “multi-tasking” your senses! But what spaces become attractive to these desires?

For many years, the PPS movement (*Eleven Principles for Creating Great Public Spaces, The Project for Public Spaces, 2009*) confirmed that successful spaces that have a minimum of 10 different activities or areas of interest within eyesight, have a much higher rating of acceptance and quality. Framing of quality spaces requires the integration of skills amongst parks professionals that include parks/sports turf managers, horticulturalists, arborists and those

invaluable parks staff that are “jacks of all trades” facilitating park uses for everything from small to large special events, concerts, picnics, tourism and intensive urban squares.

But how does the average parks professional gauge what are appropriate investments? Does the turf manager get a chance to speak to those who design parks and sports fields? Do turf staff work closely with horticultural and arboricultural staff to decide what kinds of experiences park

## **PEOPLE WHO GO TO OUTDOOR SPACES WANT AN EXPERIENCE THAT IS MEMORABLE TO THEIR OWN NEEDS**

and sports field users desire to the point that the human senses, seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting (food concessions) are brought together consciously to relate to meeting the desires of park, trail and specialty space users?

### **Find Out What Clients Really Want**

More than ever, parks and turf managers need to reach out to their clientele beyond the traditional user-paying sports groups, to ethnically-diverse populations, to varied

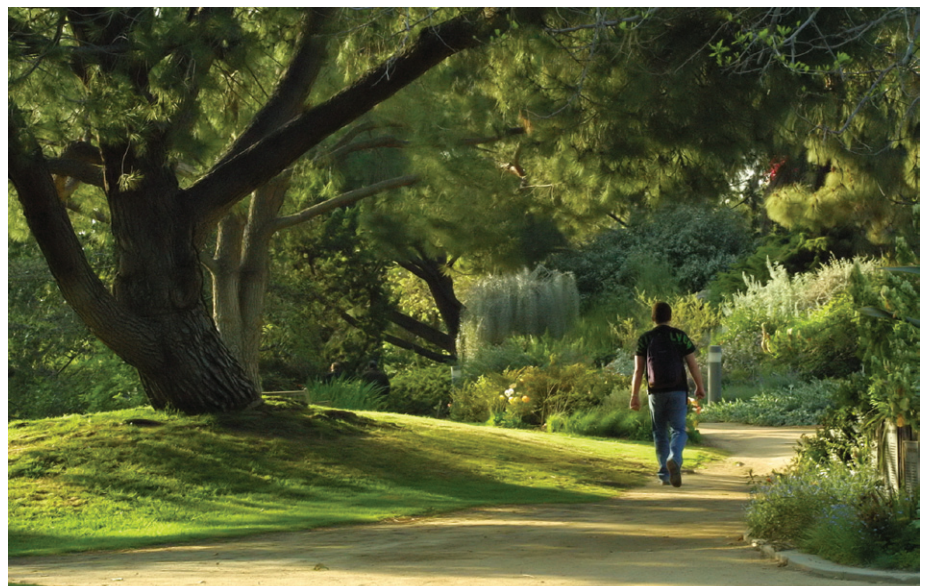
age-groupings, to people of different incomes, and use research to ask the actual client what their experience was through a variety of means.

Elected officials have important and difficult jobs. Most of the time these officials want to be re-elected. Elected officials are less likely to cut services that receive detailed and positive feedback from constituents that their needs and wants are being satisfied.

So turf managers need to outreach to community groups or to clientele that they are paid to satisfy and meet the “physical cues” that are important.

In many places, parks may often feature one or two park benches, an under-used playground structure, fenced-in sports field, no pedestrian or trail linkages and little else to make a park “more public”. Indeed, in such places, people on park benches are viewed with suspicion, as they must be vagrants, intoxicated or homeless to occupy such a place. Such “parks of desolation” are likely to be viewed as less safe, more forbidding and less valued by citizens.

Contrast that experience with parks that feature “place-making” philosophies ensuring with professional parks managers using multiple disciplines and all of the “toolkits” available to create and sustain outstanding quality parks. Such parks have variety of vegetation, healthy mature trees, attractive pedestrian and cycling options, spaces designed to encourage human





socialization, and feature water, texture, colour, natural features, smells and vistas, cultural and heritage interpretation and preservation and habitats for wildlife.

Park managers need to find ways to document how many users are in parks, using what features at what times. Find ways to ask users what they really value about various aspects of park



spaces, trails and features. Link park best practices, benchmarking and continuous improvement to matching your ability to provide what people really want and gain partners who will advocate on your behalf.

Use the incredible example of busy urban spaces such as New York's Central Park which now uses a conservancy model to ensure that citizens in that city do not have to live in "concrete jungles" and can still have picnics, view wildlife, enjoy grass and shade of trees just a walk away from office towers, subways and intensified urban environments.

Ensure that your public parks and spaces emphasize natural and vegetative solutions that harmonize within a multi-use environment. Minimize situations that can be perceived as "ugly aging physical infrastructure – such as rusting sports field fences keeping non-sport users out". Gain the trust of a wider constituency by offering your services to community groups, set up open houses and invite citizens who would like to get back in touch with the land and may need your advice on good cultural practices.

Dr. John Crompton, distinguished professor at Texas A & M University

(Source: *Repositioning Parks & Recreation – The Key to the Field's Future Vitality: 2009 Video*) has documented that time after time, investments in quality parks, trails and trees more than offset such investments by increased property assessments, reduced crime rates, greater public presence and feeling of safety, respect and pride in parks by local neighbourhoods.

Parks professionals no longer should be perceived as "open space maintenance custodians". Natural turf, arboriculture and horticulture frame important public spaces and provide colour, texture, cooling and relief from hard surfaces, so prevalent in today's communities.

Full public and professional input to sustainable parks and open designs will move toward understanding and delivering upon what citizens really want and are willing to support financially. Parks staff need the voice of many "communities" to advocate the cause of quality public spaces, places and parks but that can only be done by parks staff willing to step out from rigidly-defined job roles and to get out there to find out what park users "really want". •



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