

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARKS AND RECREATION



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Key Findings.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Local Officials' View on the Role of Parks and Recreation in the Community.....	5
The Importance Local Officials Place on Parks and Recreation Relative to Other Local Government Services.....	7
Funding Park and Recreation Services Through Local Taxes.....	10
Funding for Parks and Recreation Compared to Other Services.....	11
What Corresponds with Officials' Funding Allocations for Parks and Recreation?.....	13
Local Officials' Priorities for Park and Recreation Spending.....	14
<b>Conclusions and Implications.....</b>	<b>15</b>

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS & PARKS AND RECREATION

**95%**

personally use  
their local park areas

**99%**

agree that **their communities**  
**benefit from local park areas**

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SAY PARKS AND RECREATION IS A SOLUTION

TO SOME OF THE TOP ISSUES FACING THEIR COMMUNITIES  
(INCLUDING PREVENTING YOUTH CRIME AND PROMOTING COMMUNITY QUALITY OF LIFE)

**BUT ARE LESS LIKELY TO VIEW PARKS AND  
RECREATION AS A CONTRIBUTION TO  
THEIR #1 CONCERN: ATTRACTING &  
RETAINING BUSINESS**

**While 6 in 7 agree that parks and recreation**

**IS WELL WORTH THE TAX DOLLARS SPENT ON IT,**  
they indicate that parks and recreation is likely to be hit with the  
**largest cut in funding** when the city/town/county suffers budgetary pressure

### TOP PARKS AND RECREATION FUNDING PRIORITIES:

**MAINTAINING EXISTING PARK  
AND RECREATION AREAS**

**PROVIDING RECREATION  
PROGRAMS**

**BUILDING CONNECTIVE  
PEDESTRIAN AND CYCLING PATHS**

# INTRODUCTION

---

Park and recreation offerings and services provide a variety of personal, societal and environmental benefits to communities across the United States. Neighborhood parks, expansive trail networks, aquatic and fitness centers, and recreation programming serving everyone are cornerstones to what is a vibrant community. These services deliver close-to-home opportunities for Americans to engage with the outdoors, spend time with family and friends, and further their physical health and well-being.

Americans are both regular users and strong believers in what local parks and recreation brings to the local community. According to the *Americans' Broad-Based Support for Local Recreation and Park Services* study, seven in 10 Americans regularly go to their local parks, 83 percent report that they personally benefit from local parks, and 92 percent agree that their communities benefit from local parks. A smaller, but still notable 32 percent of Americans report participating in local recreation programs and activities. The level of usage and strength of support for parks and recreation crosses nearly every demographic group, including age, household structure, income and political affiliation.

Parks and recreation is predominantly a service provided by local governments and therefore is reliant on financial support from local governments' general tax funds. However, local governments fund and manage a variety of different public services, including, but not limited to, police protection, fire protection, transportation, education, public welfare and parks and recreation. Typically, these public services must vie for funding from the same limited pool of tax revenues. In the face of this competitive environment, many park and recreation agencies throughout the United States suffer from stagnant or declining budget allocations from their local government, despite the solid support for their offerings and services from Americans.

Both elected and appointed officials are responsible for these budget allocation decisions. Elected officials (such as council members, mayors, commissioners) are the ones responsible for adopting municipal budgets and approving other legislation. Appointed officials (municipal managers/administrators) are local government professionals who are appointed by their elected counterparts to fulfill specific jobs/duties. Together, elected and appointed officials are the individuals most involved in drafting, approving and implementing local government budgets.



Due to the crucial role officials play in determining public expenditures, it is important for the park and recreation profession to understand how local government officials view and prioritize these services. To this end, NRPA partnered with Penn State researchers Dr. Andrew Mowen, Dr. Austin Barrett and Dr. Alan Graefe to conduct a nationwide study of local government elected and appointed officials. Researchers worked cooperatively with the National Association of Counties, International City/County Management Association and the National League of Cities to collect responses. A total of 810 officials, from all 50 states, responded to the survey conducted during the spring of 2017. Their responses are the basis of this report.

*Support for parks and recreation crosses nearly every demographic group*

# KEY FINDINGS

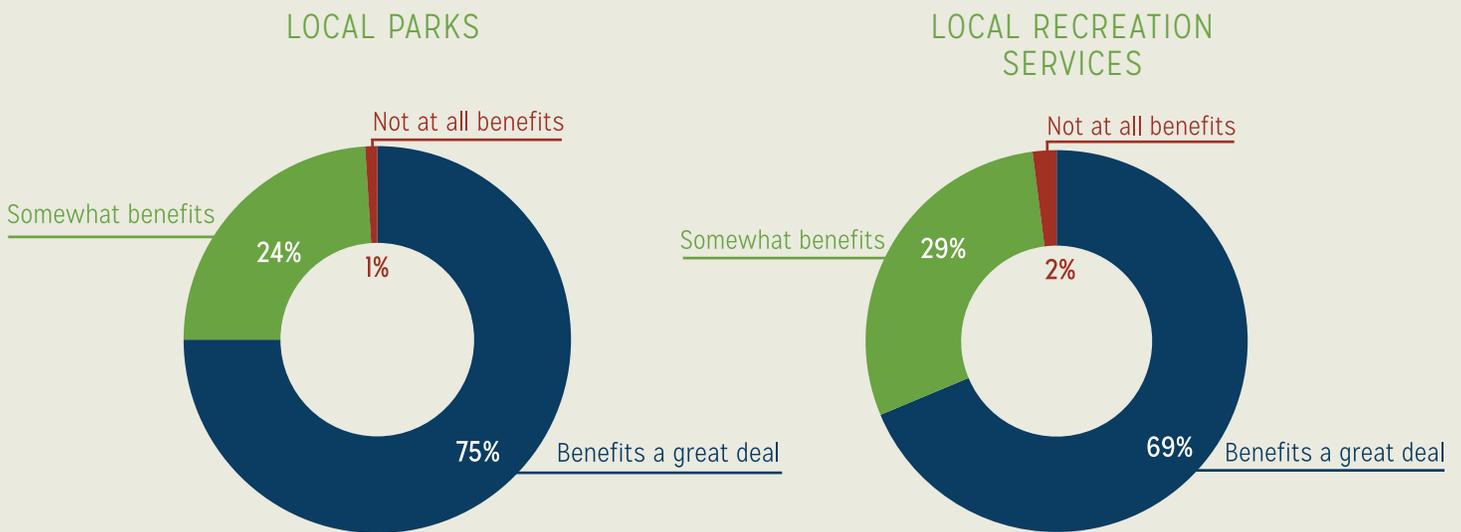
Americans are both regular users and strong believers in what local parks and recreation brings to the local community. Seven in 10 Americans regularly go to their local parks, 83 percent report that they personally benefit from local parks and 92 percent agree that their communities benefit from local parks.

Although those numbers show strong support for parks and recreation, local government officials report even higher levels of park usage than the general public and are firmer believers in the great benefits that parks and recreation brings to their community. This includes:

- A clear majority of local government officials (95 percent) report that they personally use their local park areas.
- Nearly all local government officials (99 percent) agree that their local communities benefit from local parks areas
- Three-quarters of local government officials (74 percent) participate in local recreation programs and activities
- Local government officials nearly unanimously (98 percent) agree that recreation services provide benefit to their communities.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AGREE THAT LOCAL PARK AND RECREATION SERVICES SIGNIFICANTLY BENEFIT THEIR COMMUNITIES

(Percentage Distribution)



## LOCAL OFFICIALS' VIEW ON THE ROLE OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN THE COMMUNITY

All communities have issues that citizens expect their local governments to address. These issues are wide-ranging and often specific to each jurisdiction. For many of these issues, local government officials see important roles that park and recreation agencies need to play. For some of these functions, local government officials agree that parks and recreation is already a successful contributor today. But, for other roles, there is a great opportunity for parks and recreation to narrow the gap between what officials expect and what their agency is delivering to the community.

Based on a five-point scale, local officials see the most important issues facing their neighborhood to be attracting and retaining businesses, preventing youth crime and enhancing the community's quality of life.

### LOCAL OFFICIALS' RATINGS OF IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING THEIR COMMUNITIES

(Mean Score Based on Five-Point Scale of Importance)

Rank	Issue	Mean*
1	<b>Attracting and retaining businesses</b> , including convincing businesses to locate in the community, preventing businesses from leaving the community and attracting professionals to live in the community.	4.5
2	<b>Preventing youth crime</b> , including helping youth to develop into productive citizens, providing positive role models for adolescents and providing youth with positive ways to fill their free time.	4.4
3	<b>Community quality of life</b> , including maintaining a high quality of life, building a sense of community and providing opportunities for social interaction.	4.2
4	<b>Growth management</b> , including managing growth in a responsible way, encouraging sustainable development and reducing traffic congestion on roads.	4.1
5	<b>Community health</b> , including providing opportunities that promote physical and mental fitness among residents and helping residents lead healthy lifestyles.	4.0
6	<b>Enhancing real estate values</b> , including keeping neighborhoods well-maintained and ensuring there is open green space near every home.	4.0
7	<b>Environmental stewardship</b> , including preventing erosion and flooding, protecting environmentally sensitive areas, encouraging residents to connect with the natural environment and improving air quality.	3.9
8	<b>Social equity/social justice</b> , including providing services to all residents, improving relationships between different ethnic groups of residents and addressing issues related to social equity.	3.8

\*Measured on a five-point scale – “Very Unimportant” (1) to “Very Important” (5)

Local officials see parks and recreation as successfully serving as a solution to some, but not all, of these issues. Two of the three most important areas to local government officials (community quality of life and preventing youth crime) are

issues they also see parks and recreation as being successful in addressing. However, the issue that is top of mind for local government officials – attracting and retaining businesses – is an area where local officials are far less likely to view parks and recreation as making a strong, positive contribution.

Local government officials are even less likely to view parks and recreation as a force in attracting and retaining businesses if they are:

- **Younger:** Officials ages 66 years and older are more likely than their younger colleagues to believe park and recreation services contribute to attracting and retaining businesses.
- **Serving less populated areas:** As population size increases so does local officials' beliefs that park and recreation services contribute to attracting and retaining businesses.
- **Less experienced than their peers:** As the number of years an official has spent in his or her current position increases, so does the official's perception that park and recreation contributes to attracting and retaining businesses.

The disconnect between critical community issues and whether parks and recreation is viewed as a solution represents both a communication and education opportunity for parks and recreation. Research demonstrates that companies are attracted to areas with a high quality of life that attracts and retains highly educated and motivated workers. Quality of life includes a number of components, such as ample opportunities to engage with the outdoors at parks, trails and beaches; low crime; and infrastructure that promotes healthy lifestyles. Having these opportunities presents a strong draw for business location decisions, and this connection can be made more specifically to local officials through the evidence as well as through relevant stories.

Beyond employee location decisions, park and recreation spending is a direct contribution to economic activity in the community. According to NRPA's *Economic Impact of Local Parks* study, operations and capital spending at local park and recreation agencies generated approximately \$140 billion in direct, indirect and induced economic activity and was responsible for nearly 1 million jobs in 2013.

Hence, many of the “other” contributions of park and recreation agencies also support local government officials' chief concern: the recruitment and retention of businesses in the region. Park and recreation advocates could tailor their messages to speak more directly to, or provide more evidence about, how parks and recreation helps to attract and retain businesses. Park and recreation leaders should consider building relationships with local business development leadership (e.g., chambers of commerce, economic development agencies) to serve as an active partner in these activities. To this end, NRPA has commissioned both an update to the *Economic Impact of Local Parks* study and a new research project that will enumerate how parks and recreation is an economic development tool for the community.



*Park and recreation spending is a  
**direct contribution to economic  
activity in the community***

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SEE PARKS AND RECREATION AS A VALUABLE CONTRIBUTOR TO SOME—BUT NOT ALL—OF THE TOP ISSUES FACING THEIR COMMUNITIES

(Ranking)

Officials' Ranking of Most Important Issues Facing the Community	Officials' Ranking of Parks and Recreation's Contribution as a Solution
Attracting and retaining businesses	#6
Preventing youth crime	#2
Community quality of life	#1
Growth management	#8
Community health	#3
Enhancing real estate values	#4
Environmental stewardship	#5
Social equity/Social justice	#7

### THE IMPORTANCE LOCAL OFFICIALS PLACE ON PARKS AND RECREATION RELATIVE TO OTHER LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Local governments provide a multitude of critical services for their community, including public safety, education, transportation, and offerings that enhance the public welfare, in addition to local park and recreation services. Each of these government functions competes with all the others for finite tax dollars, and frequently there are winners and losers in the battle for sufficient funding. A major determinant of the winners of this battle are services on which public officials place a higher level of importance in addressing critical community needs.

In the face of this funding challenge, local government officials place only a moderate level of importance on parks and recreation relative to other typically provided local government services. Specifically, local government officials place parks and recreation only sixth among 10 local government services with an average score of 5.4 on a seven-point scale of importance. The following rank higher than parks and recreation in terms of importance:

- Education (mean: 6.4)
- Police protection (6.3)
- Fire protection (6.2)
- Hospitals/Health (5.9)
- Transportation (5.5)

Parks and recreation places ahead of four other local government services: housing and community development (5.2), corrections (5.1), public welfare (5.1) and libraries (5.0).

Local officials are more likely to view parks and recreation as being important if they:

- Are managers, council members and mayors: these officials perceived park and recreation services to be more important than county commissioners/supervisors.
- Serve populations less than 10,000 people: officials who serve smaller populations placed a higher level of importance on parks and recreation than officials who served larger populations.
- Are Democrats or independents: both viewed park and recreation services as more important than officials who described themselves as Republicans.
- Represent suburban and urban areas: officials in suburban and urban areas placed a higher level of importance on parks and recreation than officials from rural or county areas.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES RATED BY IMPORTANCE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

(Mean Score Based on 7-Point Scale of Importance)

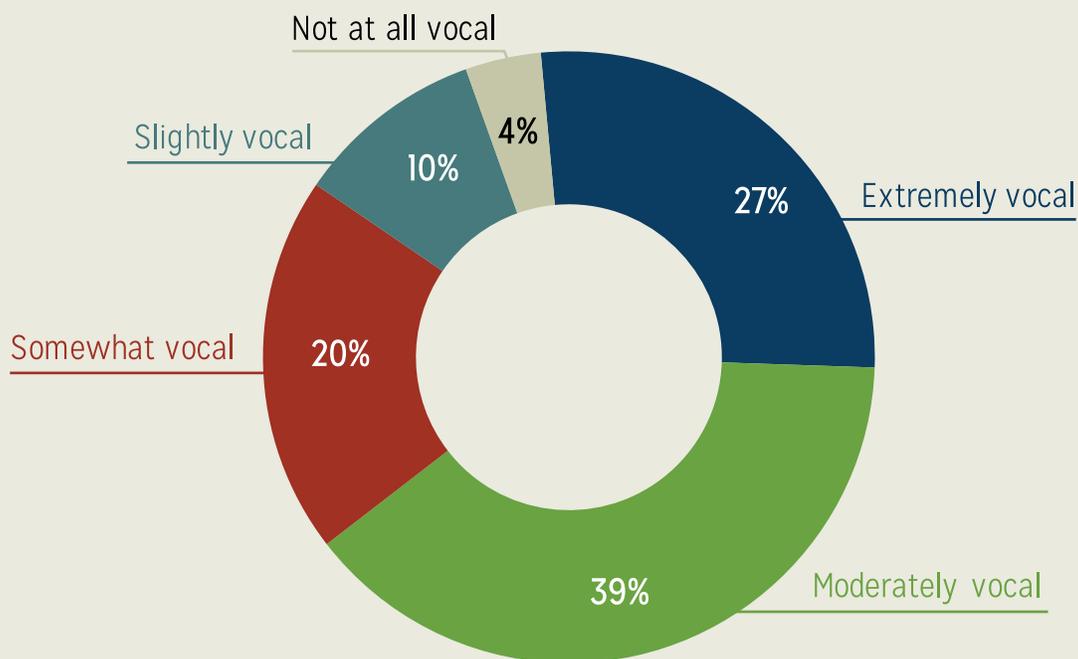


Local government officials' perceptions of what is important to their constituents has a significant influence on how these officials rate the importance of specific local government services. More specifically, they are more likely to address issues when they feel pressure from the community to do so. Any government service – whether it is for greater public safety, improved education or enhanced transportation networks – can benefit from a passionate group of advocates who are vocal in their support for these activities.

Park and recreation too can benefit from constituents' passionate, vocal support. While roughly two out of three officials reported their constituents as being moderately or extremely vocal in their support, only 27 percent were "extremely" vocal.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS DESCRIBE PARK AND RECREATION ADVOCATES AS MODERATELY OR SOMEWHAT VOCAL

(Percentage Distribution)



Another factor that affects the level of importance public officials place on a government service is their working relationship with the person most responsible for providing that service. For parks and recreation, that person is most commonly the park and recreation director. Overall, officials consider their working relationship with this person to be very positive. More than half of officials describe their relationship as good or very good, with an additional 36 percent saying it was excellent. Statistical comparisons find that officials' working relationship with park and recreation directors strongly correlate to both their perceptions of parks as being important to the community but also to the amount of funding they direct to these services. (The latter point will be demonstrated in a later section)

Finally, the more officials believe parks and recreation contributes solutions to specific community issues, the more they say their park and recreation services are important. While this positive relationship holds for all eight issues studied, some contributions stood out more than others. For example, the more officials think park and recreation services enhance environmental stewardship, and the more these services help to increase real estate values, the greater importance officials place on these services.

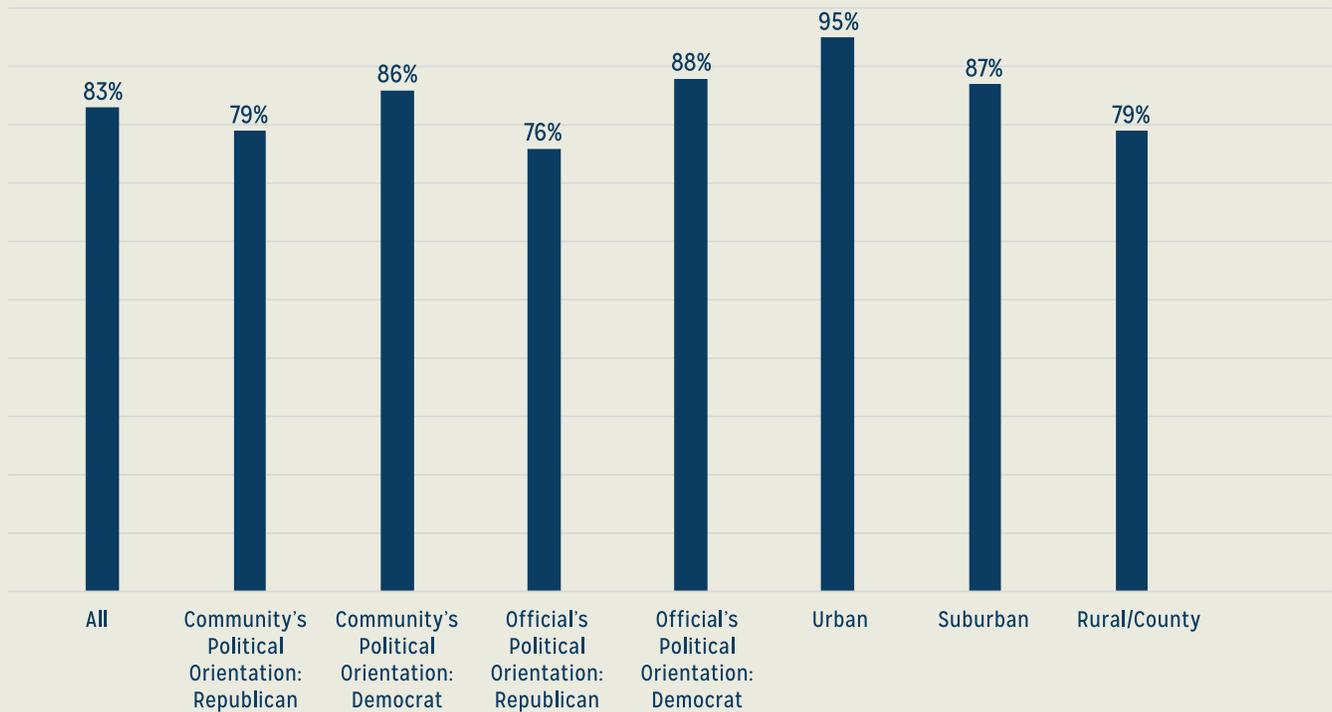
## FUNDING PARK AND RECREATION SERVICES THROUGH LOCAL TAXES

According to *NRPA Park Metrics* and the *2017 Agency Performance Review*, local governments typically spend \$76 per resident annually on park and recreation services. While the per capita annual spending amount can vary significantly by community, it demonstrates how park and recreation agencies deliver tremendous offerings and services for a relatively small cost.

A resounding 83 percent of local government officials agree that park and recreation services are worth the amount of tax dollars expended on them each year. The level of agreement does not differ based on whether an official was elected or appointed, the community's political orientation or the size of the community. Even though a greater percentage of officials who identify themselves as Democrats, serve communities predominantly made up of Democrats, and those in urban communities say that parks and recreation is worth the funding expended, a big majority of officials who are Republicans, serve Republican communities, and those in suburban and rural communities share similar feelings about park and recreation funding.

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AGREE THAT PARKS AND RECREATION IS WELL WORTH THE TAX DOLLARS SPENT ON IT

(Percent of Respondents)



## FUNDING FOR PARKS AND RECREATION COMPARED TO OTHER SERVICES

If there is one constant through time, it is that government budgets change significantly during periods of economic recession as well as expansion. Local government spending can vary dramatically as changing economic conditions affect officials' ability and willingness to tax residents. But, the impact of an increase or decline in a local government budget may affect the budgets of local government services in dramatically different ways.

More than half of officials say they personally place a high priority on funding park and recreation services relative to other services. Only one in 10 officials said that funding parks and recreation was "not a priority" or a "low priority."

Regardless of how public officials see parks and recreation as a funding priority, they agree that their local government tends to prioritize other government services over parks and recreation when making critical budget decisions. One in four officials said that their local government placed low or no priority on funding parks and recreation versus a third of officials who claimed their local governments placed a high or essential priority on funding these services.

Building on how funding parks and recreation stacks up relative to other services, officials were presented with a pair of hypothetical budget scenarios. When presented with a hypothetical increase in the local government's budget, local government officials indicate they would allocate an average 14.8 percent of these extra revenues to their park and recreation agency. Only transportation (17.7 percent), education (15.0 percent) and police protection (14.8 percent) would receive a larger percentage of the increased budget dollars. Smaller beneficiaries of the hypothetical budget increase include:

- Housing and community development (13.8 percent)
- Fire protection (10.0 percent)
- Public welfare (9.0 percent)
- Hospitals and Health (8.9 percent)
- Corrections (6.4 percent)
- Libraries (5.9 percent)

While parks and recreation appears to be one of the biggest beneficiaries when local governments enjoy an increase in revenues, it is also hit with the largest funding cut when the local government must cut back on spending. When presented with a theoretical decrease in the local government's budget, local government officials indicate they would cut the park and recreation budget to the equivalent of 15.2 percent of the overall local government budget cut. Government services that would suffer smaller budget hits include:

- Education (7.6 percent)
- Fire protection (8.1 percent)
- Police protection (9.0 percent)
- Transportation (12.8 percent)

## HYPOTHETICAL CHANGES IN LOCAL SERVICES SPENDING RESULTING FROM INCREASED OR DECREASE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BUDGETS

(Mean Percentage of Overall Local Government Budget Cut)

	Average (%) Amount Added (Rank)	Average (%) Amount Taken Away (Rank)	Net Allocation*	Rank of Local Officials Importance
Education	15.0 (2)	7.6 (10)	+7.4	1
Police protection	14.8 (3)	9.0 (7)	+5.8	2
Transportation	17.7 (1)	12.8 (3)	+4.9	5
Fire protection	10.0 (6)	8.1 (8)	+1.9	3
Hospitals & Health	8.9 (8)	7.7 (9)	+1.2	4
Housing & Community development	13.8 (5)	13.6 (2)	+0.2	7
Park & Recreation	14.7 (4)	15.2 (1)	-0.5	6
Public welfare	9.0 (7)	11.4 (5)	-2.4	9
Corrections	6.4 (9)	10.9 (6)	-4.5	8
Libraries	5.9 (10)	12.6 (4)	-6.7	10

\*Net allocation is the difference between the average amount added and the average amount taken away.

While these allocations are hypothetical, prior research using local government expenditure statistics reinforces these findings (Barrett, Pitas & Mowen, 2017). That study found that during times of fiscal surplus, park and recreation services experienced increases in expenditures at nearly the highest rate compared to other services. However, in the aftermath of the recent Great Recession, spending on parks and recreation decreased at a faster rate than any other public service.



*Parks and recreation is hit with **the largest funding cut** when the local government must cut back on spending*

## WHAT CORRESPONDS WITH OFFICIALS' FUNDING ALLOCATIONS FOR PARKS AND RECREATION?

Public officials' views weigh heavily on the magnitude of park and recreation budget increases and decreases. Specifically, public officials' perceptions of the importance of parks and recreation are positively and significantly related to the extent they would increase the budget for parks and recreation during periods when their government is flush with revenues. The more important officials thought parks and recreation was, the more money they decided to allocate toward these services.

Further, public officials who personally used local park areas tend to increase the budget for park and recreation services by a greater percentage than those who do not personally use parks. Public officials who agree that parks and recreation enhanced real estate values are more likely to push for increased spending for park and recreation services when their government has greater spending capability.

Similar to budgetary increases, public officials are most likely to protect park and recreation budgets from significant cuts if they themselves see parks and recreation as an important local government service. The more important officials believe park and recreation services are, the smaller their budget cuts were for parks and recreation. Specifically, when public officials see that parks and recreation contributes positively to environmental stewardship, attracting and retaining businesses, and/or social equity/social justice, they are likely to reduce park and recreation budgets by smaller amounts during a hypothetical budget reduction scenario.

KEY FACTORS RELATED TO LOCAL OFFICIALS INVESTMENT IN PARKS AND RECREATION	
Factors	Investment Variables
Perceived Importance of Parks and Recreation (+) Use of Parks (+) Enhance Real Estate Values (+)	Percent Added to the Park and Recreation Budget
Perceived Importance of Parks and Recreation (-) Environmental Stewardship (-) Attracting and Retaining Businesses (-) Social Equity/Social Justice (-)	Percent Taken Away from the Park and Recreation Budget

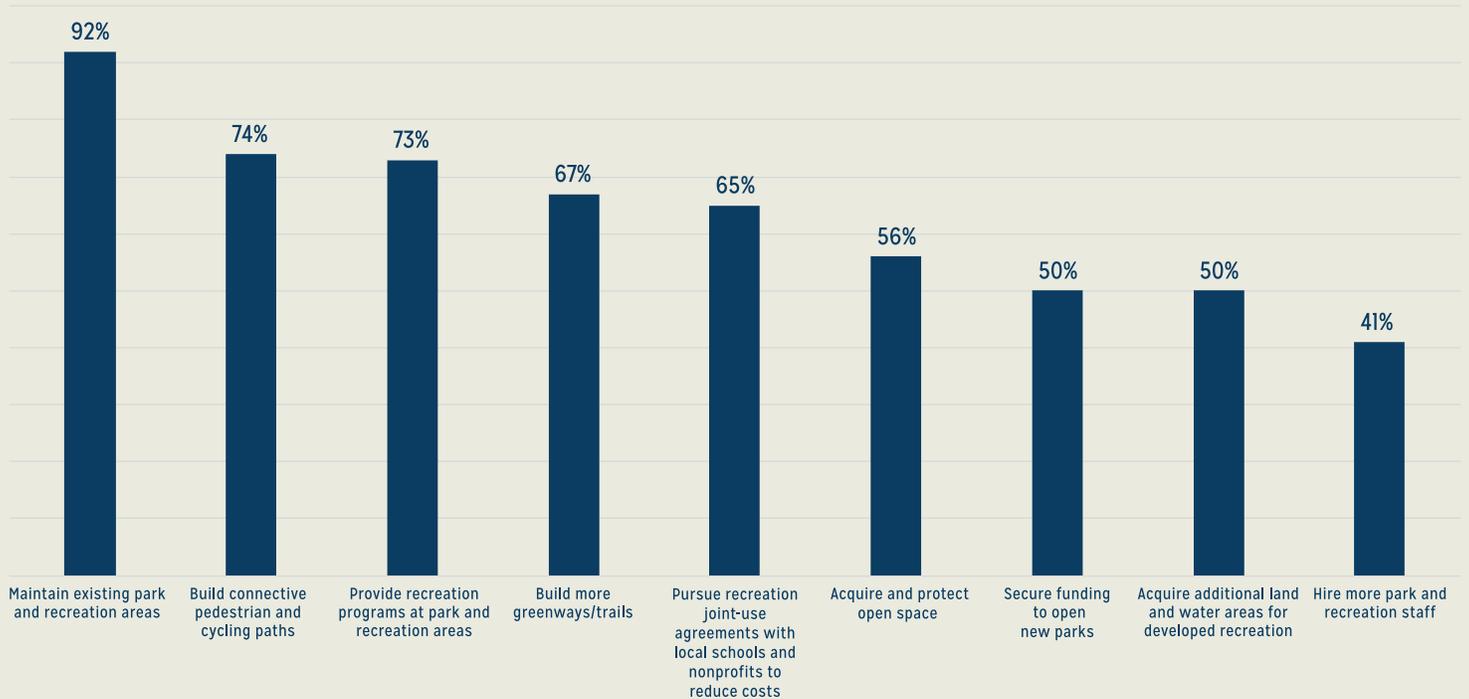
## LOCAL OFFICIALS' PRIORITIES FOR PARK AND RECREATION SPENDING

Even in the future, local governments will continue to be the primary stewards and funders of local park and recreation services. So, what do officials think are the most important funding priorities for the profession? Generally, local officials prioritize funding for maintenance, adding connectivity and providing park and recreation programming for residents. Ninety-two percent of local government officials agree that maintaining existing park and recreation areas is either an "important" or "very important" funding priority. By comparison, just half of local officials view building new parks as a funding priority for their local agency.

Local government officials also place a high level of importance on improving connectivity in their communities. Three-quarters of officials say building connective pedestrian and cycling paths are important while two-thirds want to prioritize park and recreation funding on building more greenways and paths. Meanwhile, 73 percent of local officials see providing recreation programs at park and recreation areas as a funding priority.

### IMPORTANT PARK AND RECREATION FUNDING PRIORITIES PERCEIVED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

(Percent of Officials Indicating these Priorities as "Important" or "Very Important" for Park and Recreation Services)



# CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

---

Results from this study reflect both a widespread appreciation and support of park and recreation services. But, the findings also underscore a sober reminder of the significant challenge that park and recreation agencies face in competing for needed budget dollars.

Compared to other local government functions, local officials perceive parks and recreation as not as important as many other services typically provided by local governments (e.g., public safety, education, transportation). This manifests itself through fluctuating funding for park and recreation services. During times of economic surplus, park and recreation agencies benefit from large percentage gains in their budgets. However, during times of economic shortfall, officials are likely to cut funding for parks and recreation more severely than any other widely offered local government service. This finding suggests that local government officials view parks and recreation as more of a luxury rather than as an essential service that deserves consistent and expanded funding.

The results highlight the need to elevate local officials' perception of the importance of parks and recreation to the vitality of their town, city, county or region. To make this happen, park and recreation advocates must continue to communicate how these services are a solution to the issues confronting their communities. Officials who believe park and recreation services contribute solutions to key community issues are more likely to believe these services are important. Officials who believe parks and recreation addresses these community issues are also more likely to support favorable funding decisions for parks and recreation.

This study provided glimpses into the issues that officials deemed most important for their local communities. Some of these important issues include attracting and retaining businesses, preventing youth crime, community and quality of life, growth management and community health. Local government officials do see parks and recreation as an effective contributor to preventing youth crime and community quality of life.

Where there is a perception gap, however, is in parks and recreation's role in attracting and retaining businesses. This issue is most important to local government officials. Anecdotally, we know that parks and recreation is one of the reasons businesses and young professionals choose to relocate to communities. When deciding where to locate, business leaders seek out parks, trails and open space because they contribute to community livability and quality of life. Identifying opportunities for parks and recreation to participate in a community's efforts to attract and retain businesses could be an effective way to increase its stature in the eyes of local government officials. To this end, NRPA has commissioned both an update to the *Economic Value of Local Parks* study and a new research project that will enumerate how parks and recreation is an economic development tool for the community. Look for these resources in early 2018.

Park and recreation services remain an important fixture of American society. Americans use these areas/services at similar levels now compared to a quarter century ago. In fact, they believe these services provide an even greater level of personal, household and community benefit today than they did in the early 1990s (Mowen et al., 2016). While parks and recreation relies heavily on the financial support from local governments, this report demonstrates that this support is tenuous, at best. Park and recreation professionals will need to seek out alternative forms of revenue if they are to thrive into the future. These other sources of funding span the gamut, including, partnerships, sponsorships, donations, user fees and state/federal grants. Pursuing these other types of revenue streams will help to offset potential losses in funding provided by local governments.

While trend analysis indicates the amount of public support for park and recreation services has declined within the past decade (Barrett, Pitas & Mowen, 2017), public funding will likely remain the primary source of financial support for parks and recreation for years to come. Recognizing this, it behooves park and recreation professionals and supporters to continue advocating for these services to their local government decision makers. Promoting the benefits of parks and recreation, particularly the ability to attract and retain businesses and enhance real estate values, could be an effective way to engender broader financial support for these services moving forward.

Advocacy and messaging are key. Selecting the issues/benefits that are most relevant to specific communities and then showing how parks and recreation contributes solutions to those issues will be necessary to help park and recreation services maintain their own piece of the tax pie. In a competitive budgetary environment, park and recreation services must continue to make the case about why their services are worth the investment.

Local officials value their local park and recreation services. However, when public officials must make tough budgetary decisions, parks and recreation is not at the forefront of their minds. Recognizing this, parks and recreation must take steps now not only to expand its revenues beyond the tax-base model, but also to redouble its efforts to ingrain its services into the heart of the community so that both the public and local decision makers view them as essential. If these two things happen, park and recreation services should be better equipped to face a brighter future.



*Local officials value their local park and recreation services*

Recommended Citation – Mowen, A. J., Barrett, A. G., Graefe, A. R. and Roth, K. (2017). Local Government Officials' Perceptions of Parks and Recreation. Ashburn, VA: National Recreation and Park Association.



22377 Belmont Ridge Road  
Ashburn, VA 20148  
800.626.NRPA (6772)  
[www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org)

