



Park and Recreation Agency-Foundation Relationships: Partnering for the Future



NRPA National Recreation and Park Association

Because everyone deserves a great park





PHOTO COURTESY OF SOUTH DAKOTA STATE PARKS

Children bike on a trail at South Dakota State Parks' Chief White Crane Recreation Area.

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COVER PAGE:

TOP IMAGE: A camp director at Glenview (Illinois) Park District shows campers how to weed the community garden at Historic Wagner Farm. *Photo courtesy of Glenview Park District.*

BOTTOM IMAGE: Children participate in a wheelchair tennis demonstration at St. Andrews Recreation Center in Los Angeles, hosted by the U.S. Tennis Association and in partnership with City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. *Photo courtesy of Juan Carlos Chan.*

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INTRODUCTION

Parks and recreation is an essential local government service. Park and recreation professionals and their agencies deliver vital services, programming and amenities that millions of people enjoy every day. Well-funded park and recreation services advance community health and well-being, better prepare communities for the impacts of a changing climate and natural disasters, and help ensure equitable access to park and recreation amenities and their benefits. Studies conducted by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and others have consistently demonstrated strong public desire for local park and recreation agencies to have the necessary funding to deliver on their missions.

Funding mechanisms vary for the more than 10,000 park and recreation systems across the United States, but agencies typically draw the overwhelming majority of their funding from two sources: taxpayer support and revenue generated by agency activities (e.g., registration fees, sponsorships, concessions). In the case of the former, park and recreation leaders compete for limited tax revenue with other local government services including public safety, education, transportation and social services.

While local public park and recreation agencies receive considerable tax-based financial support and often are able to generate significant revenues themselves, they frequently must seek funding from other sources. One approach taken by many agencies is to partner with nonprofit park foundations or “friends groups.” Park and recreation foundations can be crucial in fundraising, outreach/marketing, advocacy, volunteer organization, planning, operations and strategy. Such support may be more necessary than ever, given the budget and staffing issues precipitated by both the Great Recession and now the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

There is, however, a lack of research on the characteristics and conditions that lead to effective and sustainable relationships between park and recreation agencies and their nonprofit partners, particularly regarding the evidence-based best practices for maximizing the benefits provided through these relationships. To fill this information gap, NRPA commissioned a nationwide study of agency-foundation relationships. A team of researchers, led by Dr. Nick Pitas of the State University of New York-Brockport, surveyed park and recreation agency leaders and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with leaders of both public agencies and nonprofit foundations. The survey results and interview data serve as the basis for the key findings in this report.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. CHARLES PARK DISTRICT

People come out to twist, twirl and spin their way into summer with an evening of dancing and live music at an event hosted by St. Charles (Illinois) Park District.

During the opening of the Thomas James Knox Rink, hundreds of children visited Alum Creek Park South in Westerville, Ohio, to learn street hockey from the Columbus Blue Jackets at no charge.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERVILLE PARKS AND RECREATION

TAKEAWAYS

Park and recreation foundations are valuable partners for many local park and recreation agencies, facilitating the delivery of high-quality services in a variety of ways. Most park and recreation leaders view their agency-foundation relationships as largely positive and place a high value on their foundation's capacity to provide expertise and support for fundraising, community engagement and relationship building. Among the benefits park and recreation leaders seek from foundations are:

- Extra fundraising capacity
- Ability to serve beyond the scope of a traditional park and recreation agency
- Advocacy
- Expertise
- Flexibility arising from the fact that foundations are not government agencies

Leaders at park and recreation agencies consider their agency-foundation relationships to be productive and generally positive. The overwhelming majority of respondents sees the relationship as:

- Strong
- Close
- Effective



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTHONY IRACKI

Strong interpersonal relationships between leaders of agencies and foundations are a key factor in a successful agency-foundation partnership. These person-to-person ties are not enough, however, and strong organizational relationships at every level are necessary to create productive and stable agency-foundation partnerships that stand the test of time.

Park and recreation leaders place a high degree of importance on both soft and technical skills for their employees, such as:

- Leadership and decision making
- Professionalism
- Interpersonal skills
- Communications
- Goal setting
- Conflict resolution

Park and recreation leaders recognize several characteristics of successful agency-foundation relationships:

- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Community trust in both the agency and the foundation
- Fundraising capacity
- Aligned funding priorities

At the same time, park and recreation leaders acknowledge that a variety of challenges exist that can limit the effectiveness of an agency-foundation relationship:

- Organizational structure issues
- Unproductive interpersonal relationships
- Lack of key stakeholder understanding, buy-in and awareness
- Competition for scarce resources
- Equity and diversity deficiencies

Doug Kane (right), adult sports coordinator for Whitefish Bay Recreation (Wisconsin), stands next to one of his badminton program participants.



Pinecrest (Florida) Parks and Recreation staff show support for Breast Cancer Awareness Month at the Pinecrest Community Center Playground.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHELLE HAMMONTREE

KEY FINDINGS

PARK AND RECREATION LEADERS SEE FOUNDATIONS SUPPORTING THEIR AGENCIES IN A VARIETY OF CAPACITIES

A condition of successful, productive relationships is a common set of expectations for working together. This holds true for the agency-foundation relationship. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that a majority of park and recreation leaders (73 percent of survey respondents) indicates their foundations are “extremely” or “very” important to their agency’s capacity to fundraise and nurture philanthropic support.

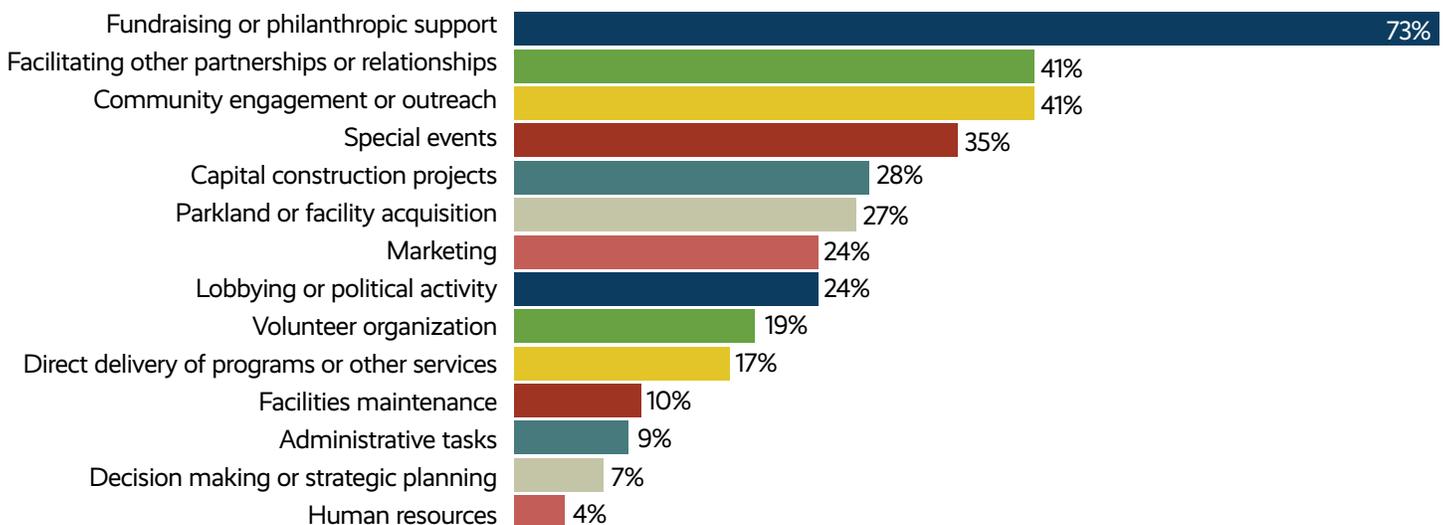
- Special events (35 percent of respondents cite as “extremely” or “very” important)
- Capital construction projects (28 percent)
- Parkland or facility acquisition (27 percent)
- Marketing (24 percent)
- Lobbying and political activity (24 percent)

But park and recreation leaders look to their foundations in areas beyond direct financial support. For example, two in five survey respondents indicate that their foundations are “extremely” or “very” important in facilitating other partnerships and relationships, as well as community engagement and outreach. Other services and activities in which park and recreation leaders see a role for their foundations include:

Park and recreation agency leaders view their foundations as much less important in day-to-day activities. For example, 10 percent or less of agency leaders see their foundations as “extremely” or “very” important to facility maintenance, administrative tasks and human resources.

Park and Recreation Leaders Place a High Degree of Importance on Their Foundations’ Fundraising Support

(Percent of Respondents Rating Specific Activities as “Extremely” or “Very” Important)



People take part in the DeKalb County Senior Olympics track and field event in Decatur, Georgia.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAWN CRIBB

Interview subjects — leaders of both agencies and foundations — note that even though the benefits of agency-foundation relationships go beyond financial support, the ability to quickly fund services outside the capacity and scope of a public agency budget is a primary desired outcome.

Other key benefits from foundations include the capacity to act in ways beyond the scope of a traditional park and recreation agency, the freedom to advocate on behalf of park and recreation-related causes, the capacity to increase key stakeholder buy-in, a complementary set of skills and expertise, and flexibility arising from the fact that foundations are not government departments.

“But what [the friends group] did is something we would never do. It worked with a local microbrewery, and we brewed a [park district name] beer that was for sale at [festival]. And it wasn’t just the beer that was a big hit. [They] worked with our volunteer groups to go out into our beehives that are throughout our district. They gathered 400 pounds of honey. They took the honey to the brewery. The brewery integrated the honey into the mix for the beer it made. So not only is that beer made with [agency] in mind — it’s a beer made with [agency] honey. Then take that one step further: a dollar from every six pack that was sold then goes back to the friends group.” [public leader]

Many foundations are established typically in response to an acute need within a community such as a lack of funding for parks and recreation, deteriorating conditions in parks and recreation facilities or issues of inequitable distribution of recreation services.

“Our goal is to address [what is] really the heart and soul of the park system — the neighborhood parks. They had been underfunded for decades, and they weren’t able to receive additional resources.” [foundation leader]

Community leaders also may launch a foundation with the goal of financing a specific landmark project such as a regional or destination park. In these instances, respondents highlight the need for foundations to be flexible in their focus and to evolve to serve other community needs after the completion of the initial project.

“I would say, in the early 2000s, mid-2000s, we shifted or expanded beyond just capital projects... in some cases, we literally operate the facility, run programs, manage contracts. We do restoration work. I describe us as a small parks and rec department.” [foundation leader]

MOST — BUT NOT ALL — PARK AND RECREATION LEADERS DESCRIBE CURRENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOUNDATIONS AS “EXTREMELY” OR “VERY” STRONG, CLOSE AND EFFECTIVE

Most park and recreation leaders consider their agency-foundation relationships to be productive, especially in terms of their strength, closeness and effectiveness.

- Strong:** Eighty-nine percent of park and recreation leaders agree that their agency-foundation relationship is “strong.” Sixty-eight percent of respondents characterize the relationship as either “extremely” or “very” strong, while 21 percent are less enthusiastic and perceive the relationship as being “moderately” strong. Only eight percent of agency heads view their agency-foundation relationship as weak.
- Close:** Ninety percent of park and recreation leaders agree that their agency-foundation relationship is “close.” Sixty-six percent of respondents characterize the relationship as either “extremely” or “very” close, while 24 percent perceive the relationship as “moderately” close. Only four percent of agency heads view their agency-foundation relationship as weak.

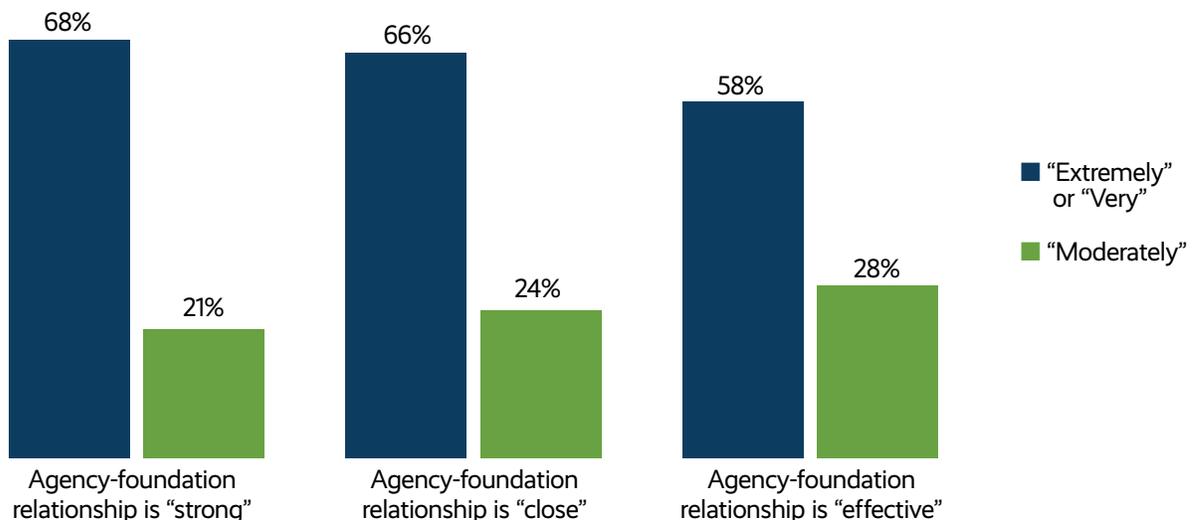
- Effective:** Eighty-six percent of park and recreation leaders agree that their agency-foundation relationship is “effective.” Fifty-eight percent of respondents characterize the relationship as either “extremely” or “very” effective, while 28 percent perceive the relationship as “moderately” effective. Ten percent of agency heads view their agency-foundation relationship as weak.

Related to these positive relationships, leaders at both park and recreation agencies and foundations note several important characteristics of agency-foundation relationships:

- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for both organizations
- Community trust in both the agency and the foundation
- Fundraising capacity
- Frequent and purposeful communication
- Alignment of funding priorities

“Being on the same page is a good place to start, just for a clear understanding of the role that each organization plays, and where that fits in the overall big picture for whatever it is you’re trying to accomplish.” [public leader]

A Majority of Park and Recreation Leaders Views Their Agencies’ Foundation Relationships to be Strong, Close and Effective (Percentage Distribution)



Trust, Collaboration and Clearly Defined Roles Are Necessary Conditions for Healthy and Sustainable Agency-Foundation Relationships

(Percent of Respondents Rating Condition as “Extremely” or “Very” Important)

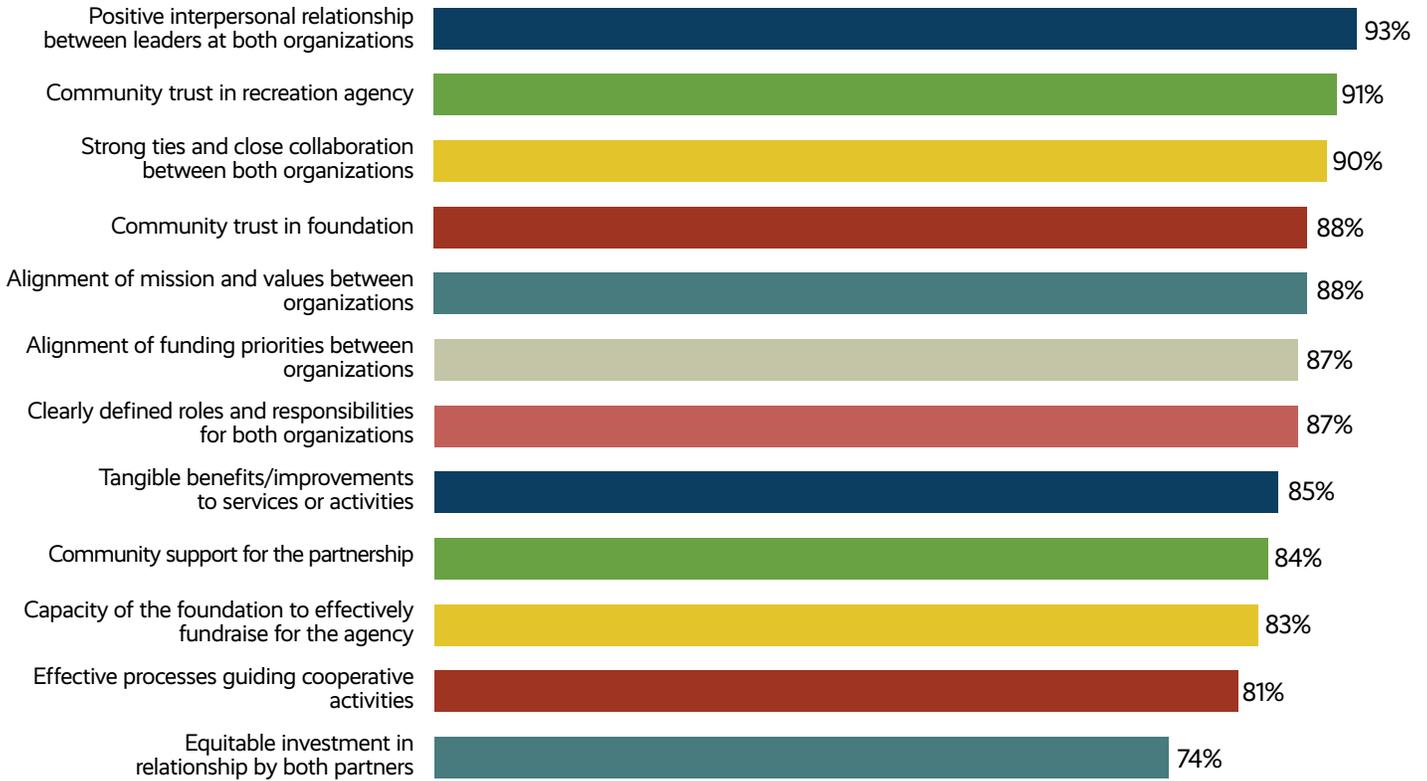


PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERVILLE PARKS AND RECREATION

Park and recreation leaders further emphasize that a variety of technical skills is important in fostering a successful and sustainable agency-foundation relationship:

- Leadership and decision making (99 percent of respondents cite this as “extremely” or “very” important)
- Professionalism (97 percent)
- Interpersonal skills (97 percent)
- Communications (96 percent)
- Goal setting (88 percent)
- Conflict resolution (78 percent)

In addition, soft skills related to emotional and cultural intelligence play an important part for park and recreation employees:

- Financial resource management (85 percent of respondents cite this as “extremely” or “very” important)
- Business acumen (81 percent)
- Marketing (75 percent)
- Political and legislative acumen (70 percent)

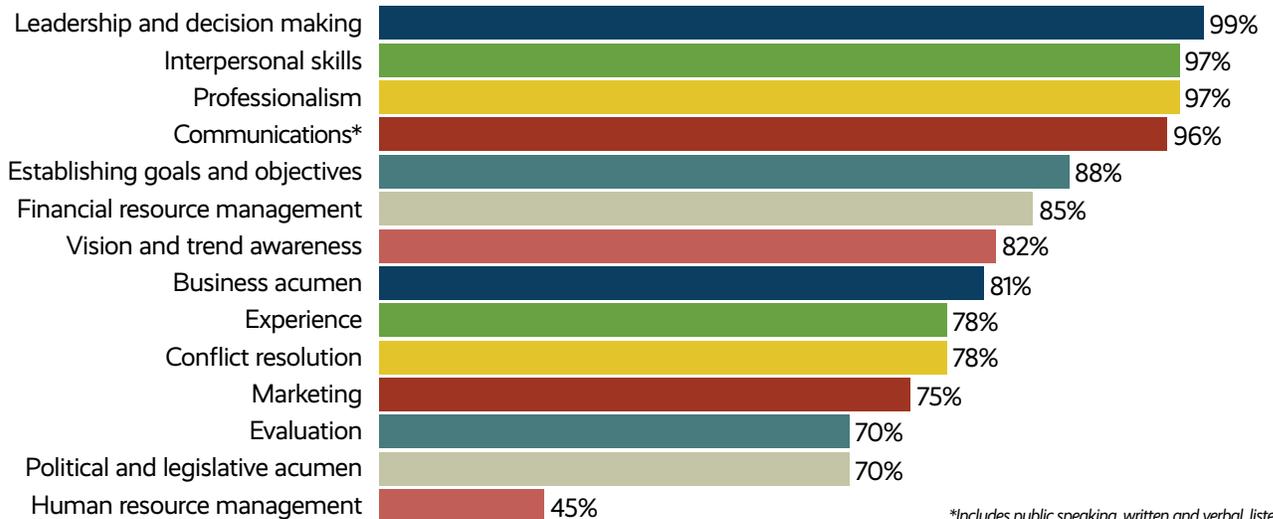
Joe Pruitt (front center), natural and cultural resources manager for Gwinnett County (Georgia) Parks and Recreation, and his staff distributing food during the COVID-19 pandemic.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK PATTERSON



Park and Recreation Leaders’ Mastery of Both Soft and Technical Skills Is Crucial for Successful and Sustainable Agency-Foundation Relationships

(Percent of Respondents Rating Skill as “Extremely” or “Very” Important)



*Includes public speaking, written and verbal, listening

STRONG INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS MATTER, BUT ARE NOT ENOUGH BY THEMSELVES

Leaders of both park and recreation agencies and foundations agree that developing strong interpersonal relationships is fundamental to successful and sustainable agency-foundation partnerships. In particular, respondents in vibrant agency-foundation relationships report that their interpersonal connections include clear, regular and positive communications. Conversely, less productive agency-foundation partnerships are characterized by weaker or less-positive interpersonal relationships between the organizations' leaders.

"It's a terrible challenge. It's the largest impediment to doing my job..." [foundation leader, regarding a negative interpersonal relationship]

But healthy interpersonal relationships must not stop at the top of the organizational chart. Leaders at both agencies and foundations also stress the importance of forming organizational relationships that transcend the C-suite and permeate interactions between individuals at every level of both organizations. This is particularly important for sustainable, long-term agency-foundation relationships that must be able to outlive the departure of an agency director or the head of a foundation.



A person plays a hand-painted piano outside of the Danville (California) Senior Center.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GEOFF GILLETTE

THERE IS NO "ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL" SOLUTION FOR AGENCY-FOUNDATION RELATIONSHIPS

Although various relationship traits or practices typify successful agency-foundation relationships, leaders at both park and recreation agencies and foundations stress that there is no "one-size-fits-all" set of best practices for agency-foundation relationships.

For example, specific strategies that are successful in one community may not always be appropriate in another community. Respondents stress that each community is unique; they cautiously apply lessons learned elsewhere using the context of their individual knowledge and experience.

"I can't take what I did in [municipality A] and apply it to [municipality B], and I can't take what I did in [municipality B] and apply it here. I can take pieces of all those. But I can't take and replicate the exact model because it just won't work.... There isn't a cookie-cutter approach." [foundation leader]

Park and recreation leaders and their counterparts at foundations and friends groups can address this challenge by building their cultural knowledge. Specifically, respondents note that it is vital for leaders to boost their understanding of the municipality, foundation and the context in which they operate. Several interview subjects note a lack of cultural knowledge as a limiting factor in the success of an agency-foundation relationship, and emphasize that no amount of technical proficiency will ensure a successful relationship.

"I can be the most technically sound parks professional, but if I can't figure those nuances in a community [I won't be successful]." [foundation leader]

AGENCIES AND FOUNDATIONS MUST COORDINATE EFFORTS TO MAXIMIZE SUCCESS AND LIMIT COMPETITION FOR SCARCE RESOURCES

Park and recreation and foundation leaders also emphasize that open communication, cooperation and coordination between agencies and their nonprofit partners are critical in order for such relationships to reach their full potential. In general, more successful agency-foundation relationships are characterized by more frequent contact. Communication between agencies and foundations occurs about once a month on average, and two in five park and recreation leaders note that they interact with their foundations at least once a week.

The benefits of communication are multifaceted. Interview subjects note that regular, purposeful communication between the organizations is necessary to ensure alignment of funding priorities. This includes both formal communication — focused on official business — and informal, interpersonal interactions between the leadership and support staff of both organizations.

“We’d have the park board meeting start at 7 p.m., so we bring everybody in at 6 p.m., feed them, and let them chat and talk about [how] ‘this is the direction that the department’s going. Where would you as foundation board members see yourselves being able to help get some funding going for specific projects...’ So, I think that’s what really is the only string that’s holding the two together right now.” [public leader]

Regular communication is also a strategy to avoid unnecessary competition between agencies and foundations for scarce resources in a community. Both agency directors and foundation leaders note financial resources (from donors) are often limited and caution agencies and foundations to avoid reaching out to the same donor network.

Beyond financial resources, agencies and foundations should seek to:

- *Work to avoid attention fatigue or annoyance* with park and recreation-related causes. Donors have limited time, patience and attention, and also may be receiving solicitations from other community causes and organizations. Agencies and foundations should coordinate their communication schedules and avoid soliciting the same donors over and over again.
- *Avoid competition for volunteers* who may be called on repeatedly by both agencies and foundations to do the “on the ground” work for projects and initiatives.
- *Avoid competition for board members.* Do not inadvertently ask the same individuals to serve on both foundation and park advisory boards. Agencies and foundations should coordinate and communicate about potential board members to avoid overburdening key stakeholders and to ensure greater diversity on each respective board.

“The city also had its own parks board. So it was like they had all these civic leaders who were engaged in advising on parks issues, and that board took a lot of the energy away from the parks foundation, because we needed to have a board for the parks foundation and the city had its own parks board and was doing its own fundraising. So, there just wasn’t enough food to keep the foundation strong.” [foundation leader]

Leaders at both park and recreation agencies and foundations recommend creating a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the organizations. The MOU should clearly articulate the foundation’s role, how the organizations should facilitate coordination and cooperation, and define expectations and measures of success.

“And, there’s just not an appetite for master planning here. I think I could raise money for it [key long-term initiative]. But every time I bring it up, the chief of staff will say, ‘Yeah, we don’t want to do a master plan. We just want to do projects.’ And so, if there were some way that NRPA could talk compellingly about the value and benefit of master planning, that would be helpful to me for sure.” [foundation leader]

In Berea (Kentucky), meals prepared by Berea College and the Berea Community School food service are distributed with a school bus to children in need.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BEREA COLLEGE



A Harlem Wizards team member greets fans at the grand opening of newly renovated basketball courts at Summer Road Park in Whitehouse, New Jersey, during the 2019 Summer Spectacular event.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVE DABOUR

“MISSED OPPORTUNITIES” EXIST WITHIN AGENCY-FOUNDATION RELATIONSHIPS

Despite the largely positive way in which most agency and foundation leaders view their partnerships, certain “missed opportunities” exist in which the agency-foundation relationship is not being utilized to its full potential.

Equity Remains a Largely Unresolved Challenge for Most Agency-Foundation Relationships

Many leaders at both park and recreation agencies and foundations express disappointment with the limited success they have had in addressing equity-related issues. Specifically, respondents view equity as one of the biggest unresolved challenges for their agency-foundation relationship.

“And, we really failed. It was just not successful — a few gifts. But people care about what they know and see in their own backyard.” [foundation leader]

In some instances, addressing equity-related issues is a primary motivation for the establishment of a foundation. A nonprofit organization’s ability to fundraise and allocate resources in a more flexible and entrepreneurial fashion, *specifically targeting underserved populations/areas*, is key to the mission of these organizations.

However, interview subjects note that there is often a significant disconnect between where funding *comes from* in the community and where funding *is needed* in the community. More specifically, many foundations and friends groups find more success fundraising for projects concentrated in affluent areas and otherwise well-served communities. As a result, foundation efforts do not always benefit underserved communities in an equitable fashion.

“It turns out, usually the people who have the ability to advocate for themselves with a nonprofit like this are the ones who are not living in the neighborhoods with the parks that haven’t been maintained in 20 years and that sort of thing. So the inequity...is a cycle and it grows.” [public leader]

Foundations Can and Must Do More to Advocate for Parks and Recreation-Related Causes in Their Communities

Park and recreation leaders consistently identify foundations and friends groups as important advocates for park and recreation-related causes. The capacity to advocate on political issues, such as bond initiatives or referenda, is a key strength for foundations due to their greater flexibility as non-government entities. This can be particularly critical, as many agency leaders are unable to publicly lobby local political leaders on their agency's behalf.

"I think getting more information out and being seen as an essential service was by far what our department really needed." [public leader]

"I think the main role for the parks foundation was to raise money for things that weren't funded well. And, we also serve as an advocate and cheerleader for better public funding for the park system." [foundation leader]

However, only a quarter of agency leaders perceive their agencies' foundations as "very" or "extremely" important contributors in this regard. With this in mind, foundations must do more to maximize their potential role as an advocate of park-related causes in the community. As with other forms of communication, agencies and foundations should coordinate their efforts, utilize a purposive strategy, set concrete goals and objectives, and clearly define each partner's role.



Dancers perform at the Plano (Texas) Urban Dance Movement competition at McCall Plaza.



Children play at the spray park playground at Keith Mione Community Park in Mundelein, Illinois.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEEB ENGD AHL

Rural Areas and Small Towns Might be Missing Out on the Benefits of Agency-Foundation Relationships

The differences between agencies and communities with and without foundations point to another potential missed opportunity. In general, foundations and friends groups are more common in more populated urban and suburban communities; they typically support park and recreation agencies that offer more amenities and enjoy larger operating and capital budgets.

As such, smaller communities may be missing out on the benefits provided by a vibrant agency-foundation

relationship. While some smaller agencies and communities without a park and recreation-specific foundation can call on other, more general, community-based organizations, parks and recreation in these communities has to compete with other worthy causes for attention and support. Given the benefits of agency-foundation relationships, agencies serving smaller communities may wish to work toward establishing a park and recreation-specific foundation. As the agency-foundation relationship potentially becomes more important in the years to come, this may mean that the disparity between agencies with and without foundations could continue to grow.

Park and Recreation Agencies Tend to Serve Larger Populations, Offer Greater Amenities and Have Larger Operating Budgets (Mean Values)

	Agency Supported by a Foundation	Agency Not Supported by a Foundation
Population served	302,640	120,177
Acres of parkland managed	6,088	1,340
Parks and facilities managed	46	24
Annual operating budget	\$14.1 million	\$6.9 million

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Relationships between local park and recreation agencies and nonprofit foundations or friends groups often provide a number of benefits to a variety of stakeholder groups. Their capacity to fundraise for goods and services beyond the usual scope of a government agency, and their flexibility and responsiveness as nongovernment entities make these nonprofit partners powerful allies for many local park and recreation agencies. Overall, leaders from both the public and nonprofit sectors perceive these relationships as strong, close and effective, and, generally, agree on the characteristics and competencies that ensure an efficacious agency-foundation partnership. Despite the potential benefits, however, several areas exist as opportunities to further enhance the relationship between these organizations. In particular, equity is a vexing, unresolved challenge for many agency-foundation relationships.

It is important to note that the role of nonprofit foundations and friends groups may only become more prominent in the years to come as agencies grapple with the financial implications of the Great Recession, COVID-19 pandemic and future crises. This growing importance highlights the need for evidence-based best practices to maximize the efficacy of the agency-foundation relationship. While this research represents a first step in that direction, much remains unknown. Future research must continue to examine these public-private partnerships, with the goal of providing guidance to individuals and organizations on both sides of the relationship.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HONOLULU DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

The closing ceremony for the 92nd annual Lei Day Celebration in Honolulu, Hawaii, is a spectacle of Hawaiian culture and a way to remember Hawaiian royalty at the Royal Mausoleum (Mauna 'Ala).

ABOUT NRPA



A waterfall flows on the Chagrin River at South Chagrin Reservation near Henry Church Rock in Bentleyville, Ohio.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KYLE LANZER/CLEVELAND METROPARKS

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this mission by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations, including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA generates data and insights that support park and recreation professionals in making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the general public. The NRPA research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and members of the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at nrpa.org/Research.

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NRPA National Recreation
and Park Association

Because everyone deserves a great park

**22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501**

800.626.NRPA (6772) | nrpa.org