

# From Interest to Commitment: The Citizen Connection

A White Paper Summary of an Open Forum  
at the 2010 NRPA Congress



National Recreation  
and Park Association

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### Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements.....	1
Introduction and Background .....	2
Citizen Participation in Park and Recreation Agencies .....	2
NRPA Open Forum.....	3
Results from the Panel and Roundtable Discussions.....	4
Access: Are we reaching beyond the “usual suspects” (most powerful stakeholders and opinion leaders).....	4
Are we listening: Authenticity of citizen participation .....	4
What do we do with the information we get from the citizens.....	5
Findings and Recommendations .....	6
References .....	10
Appendix A .....	13
Appendix B.....	17
Endnotes .....	19

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## Introduction and Background

### Citizen Participation in Park and Recreation Agencies

It is generally assumed that citizen participation is a desired and necessary part of any community based initiative. At the same time, the concept is so broad that until this time there has not been a clear-cut and widely agreed upon definition of it<sup>1</sup>. In practice public involvement in community decision making can be traced as far back as Plato's (429–347 BC) Republic and Aristotle's (384 BC–322 BC) theory of citizenship. Even though their concepts of freedom of speech, assembly, voting, and equal representation have evolved through the years, citizen participation remains the essence of democracy<sup>2</sup>.

A picture of citizen participation and civic engagement in America is rather ambiguous. Three decades ago, Hyman and Wright (1971) argued that Americans were more prone to volunteer memberships than other national groups; their study reported that over 40 percent of American population was engaged in volunteer activities during a given year. The same year, Curtis (1971) compared the U.S. volunteer rate (43%) to other countries and found sizable differences: 34% for West Germany; 33% for Great Britain; 25% for Italy, and 15% for Mexico. Volunteerism was regarded as a distinguishing characteristic of American society<sup>3</sup>.

Two decades later, Putnam (1995, 2000) wrote that that we were “bowling alone,” and the National Commission on Civic Renewal (1997) called the United States “a nation of spectators.” The results of a study by the Roper Center for Public Research over a twenty-year period reported declining engagement numbers—for example, the number of Americans who served as an officer of some club or organization had

reportedly declined by 42%, the number of those who served on a committee for some local organization—by 39%, and the number of those who attended a public meeting on town or school affairs—by 35%.

In such complex and often ambiguous environment, public officials have often taken a situational stance. While some assumed that citizens are apathetic and do not possess enough skills to meaningfully contribute to pressing public concerns, others opened the discussion arena to the citizens and welcomed input beyond that of volunteering, serving on boards, and fundraising/ financial support. Even though the latter remain the traditional areas of public engagement in parks and recreation, it has become more and more evident that citizen knowledge, interest and action are necessary ingredients to the delivery of top-quality public services.

In planning domain, normative planning theorists—among them Arnstein (1969), Kravitz (1970), Friedmann (1973, 1987), Godschalk and Mills (1966), Forester (1989, 1999), Healey (1992), Innes (1995, 1996), and Hall (1992) – have long argued that planning should be participatory. Moreover, there have been organized and mandated efforts to involve the general public in planning and decision making. Today, many states mandate citizen participation in comprehensive planning, growth management, and environmental planning. Many governments have experimented with participatory planning models, but until now these efforts have been more of a feature of environmental planning, especially through the environmental impact assessments<sup>4</sup>.

Citizen participation in parks and recreation is in a unique position. On one hand, engaging the users and



the broader public allows public officials to directly involve their constituencies in the design, planning and management of parks and other natural resources, and creating informed and engaged residents that feel better connected to their communities. On the other hand, parks support community participation by providing residents with a venue for engagement, provide a sense of place and enhance community and individual well-being<sup>5</sup>. While these processes are neither quick nor easy, and sometimes contentious, they are often productive and rewarding. The American Planning Association (2002) concludes that citizen participation in parks and recreation is an essential ingredient of creating successful open spaces, and that by understanding community benefits of parks, decision makers can develop constituencies that can sustain their park systems over time.

The National Recreation and Park Association has long emphasized the role and importance of citizen participation in parks and recreation. In recognition of the fact that citizen participation in community betterment projects doesn't usually occur by chance alone, but rather happens because certain principles of organization are observed<sup>6</sup>, the NRPA has recently outlined some of the recommendations with regard to citizen engagement in its official documents, including several Resource Guides (2007, 2008). Specifically, the NRPA emphasizes open public participation as one communication strategy that has proven to be successful, and encourages citizen participation in park and recreation agency events, programs and services, as well as volunteering and advocacy.

To further explore the promise of citizen participation in parks and recreation, the NRPA organized an Open Forum "From Interest to Commitment: The Citizen Connection" at its 2010 Annual Congress in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This white paper documents the results of the Open Forum discussions.

## NRPA Open Forum

The purpose of the Open Forum was to chronicle the experiences of participants with citizen participation in parks and recreation\*. The Forum opened with four panel presentations, followed by roundtable discussions (see Appendix A). While each table used the same suggested discussion guide, conversations varied broadly and touched upon many important issues pertinent to citizen engagement in parks and recreation.

The panel presentations addressed the following areas:

- Innovative ways to use park users as volunteers/advocates
- Educating citizens on the value of parks and recreation to the quality of life
- Development and ongoing support of friends groups
- Citizen involvement in garnering funds and support for parks

The roundtable discussions sought to address the following questions:

- Access: Are we reaching beyond the "usual suspects" (most powerful stakeholders and opinion leaders) to engage the broader general public?
- Are we listening: Authenticity of citizen participation
- What do we do with the information we get from the citizens: Do we encourage and enable citizen action as a way to give people a role in the process?

This white paper reports on the results of the Open Forum in order to offer park and recreation agencies insights on how to successfully engage park users and the broader public in their organizations—in other words, using experiences of panelists and discussants, what worked, what didn't, and why. The paper also contains a series of recommendations based upon findings from the Open Forum.

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\* It should be noted that when speaking of citizen participation in parks and recreation, particular emphasis is placed on the users (citizens that use the parks) as opposed to the broader public. While it is important to involve the general public, it is especially essential to involve the users.

## Results from the Panel and Roundtable Discussions

### Access: Are we reaching beyond the “usual suspects” (most powerful stakeholders and opinion leaders)

Perhaps the main criticism of citizen participation practices comes from the fact that they are often not representative of the broader population. These concerns have been around for a long time—Gans (1968) warns that participants in public decision making are usually professional politicians, economically concerned businesspeople, and those in the middle and upper middle classes who are ideologically motivated and well educated<sup>7</sup>. Molotch (1976) argues that public decision making processes tend to attract development “lovers” and “haters,” or those who perceive the issue to be in their immediate and tangible interest, and leave behind so called “realists” who usually have a balanced view on the issue<sup>8</sup>. In addition, most of participatory processes exclude low income population whose voice remains unheard by decision makers<sup>9</sup>. A study of Verba and Nie (1972) concludes that the tendency for political participation is positively related to individual’s social status. In other words, participatory processes tend to attract more affluent and better educated residents who often hold opinions different from those of the general public<sup>10</sup>, and exclude those who are poor or not educated<sup>11</sup>. In this environment citizen participation is often dominated by “interest group politics,” and groups that get involved in public process are those whose private interests are at stake<sup>12</sup>.

Resolving the problem however is not that simple. Ensuring appropriate representation involves more than making sure diverse stakeholders are invited to participate<sup>13</sup>. It involves making moral and ethical decisions to ensure descriptive representation (the degree to which participants are descriptively similar to the broader population), opinion representation (the degree to which participant opinions are similar to those of the broader population), and trustee representation (assuming that participants will apply independent judgment and act according to conscience)<sup>14</sup>. An alternative is gloomy—unrepre-

sentativeness of participatory processes not only skews the public input but also does not inform decision makers of the real issues that are of concern to their constituencies<sup>15</sup>. Inadequate citizen participation can therefore lead to private interest groups taking control over the process and imposing their decisions.

When sharing their experiences with reaching out to the broader public, participants of the Open Forum agreed on the following:

- Park users can be our best advocates, they can do things we can’t
- We need to ensure broad representation of our constituencies
- Park and recreation agencies need to collaborate with other departments and agencies
- It is extremely important to involve various community groups including children, students, immigrants, faith-based groups, minorities etc.
- Use of technology and social media broadens ability of park and recreation agencies to reach their advocates and recruit volunteers

### Are we listening: Authenticity of citizen participation

Citizen participation is often viewed as the “Achilles heel” of public decision making in that citizen participation is needed yet the fear of participatory processes prevails<sup>16</sup>. deLeon (1992) explains that even though citizen participation has been often prescribed as the “remedy” to address current inadequacies in decision making and planning, administrators are not aware of the strategies to ensure that citizenry is informed, involved, and process is functional. As a result, most public agencies tend to see practices of citizen participation as an obstacle to overcome in order to comply with existing state and/ or federal mandates<sup>17</sup>. While the numbers are high—Williamson and Fung (2004) report that 97% of cities nationwide use public hearings as a strategy for involving citizens—more often than not these forms of citizen consultation do not provide for a genuine communication between the participants, and do not confer citizens any meaningful role in the process<sup>18</sup>.



Despite their critical importance, participatory processes today encompass many inherent weaknesses. First, they rarely provide citizens with relevant, timely and adequate information in easily understandable format in order to enable them to form attitudes and arrive at informed opinions<sup>19</sup>. Studies examining community awareness of the critical issues conclude that residents are often not familiar with the information that is available, and that the information is not readily accessible<sup>20</sup>. Second, public processes mainly rely on scientific and technical information, forgetting that the complex problems of today's world require use of the different kinds of information including participants' own experiences, personal stories, and intuition<sup>21</sup>. Third, until now public agencies have primarily relied on a one-way communication with the public (provision of information in a way of "educating" the citizens on the issues) as opposed to utilizing the two-way information flow in a form of a dialogue<sup>22</sup>. Lastly, "appendage participation processes" organized to meet formal participation requirements often happen too late in the process, when the decisions have already been made, and the public is invited to "vent off" their concerns and get informed about the future developments<sup>23</sup>.

When sharing their experiences with ensuring authenticity of participatory initiatives, participants of the Open Forum agreed on the following:

- Park and recreation agencies need to become a part of their communities ("good neighbor" approach) and build trust with the users and residents
- Park and recreation agencies need to speak and write in a clear language that their users understand
- There is a need for a response system (two-way communication tool) between public agencies and their constituencies
- It is very important to operate in a transparent manner and engage the public early
- Use of technology and social media enables instant feedback from the users

## What do we do with the information we get from the citizens

More than two decades ago, Rich and Rosenbaum (1981) wrote that one of the problems of citizen participation is that it has been difficult to document the impact of public participation upon agency policies, and that public officials are often not aware of how engaging the citizens will benefit their programs. On the other hand, citizens become disengaged as they lose the confidence that their voices are going to be heard and opinions considered.

To remedy the situation, several strategies have been proposed. First, according to Knopman, Susman & Landy (1999), the more citizens acknowledge their own part in the problem, the more willing they are to become part of the solution. Leighninger (2005) adds that to mobilize



citizens it is necessary to ensure that they feel they are a part of something larger than themselves. Second, reluctance to engage in participatory initiatives partly comes from the fact that there is either no clarity about citizen decision making power<sup>24</sup>, or little evidence that citizen input is acted upon by policy makers<sup>25</sup>. Renn, Webler, Rakel, Dienel and Johnson (1993) agree and add that a major problem of all citizen participation models today is legitimizing citizen recommendations. Finally, with participation often limited to the final approval stages, there is no real potential for citizens to have an impact on project outcomes<sup>26</sup>.

When sharing their experiences with ensuring active citizen role in participatory processes, participants of the Open Forum agreed on the following:

- Those who use resources must have a share in their provision
- Participation of park users and the broader public can be an asset and help solve problems
- We need to make park users part of decision making process (“People will support what they helped create”)
- It is very important to develop strategies to ensure long term engagement of park users
- To ensure success of a project, park users must have a role to play at each stage starting with the planning process, to the decision making and implementation phase

## Findings and Recommendations

Despite the great promise of citizen participation, in practice these efforts often leave much to be desired. Public officials tend to point fingers at the public and accuse it of being apathetic, disengaged, cynical and incompetent to meaningfully participate in complex processes of public decision making; citizens, in their turn, tend to point fingers at the public officials and argue that they are not invited, and when they are, they are not being listened to. Responding to these challenges, this white paper sought to summarize the findings and provide recommendations from the Open Forum panelists and discussants on organizing authentic and successful participatory processes in park and recreation agencies.

The Open Forum discussions unwrapped many stories of participatory processes, as well as interpretations of what worked, what didn’t work, and why. Based upon these discussions and a review of related literature, several findings emerged:



### Finding 1: Importance of understanding and communicating the value and benefits of citizen participation

Problems that park and recreation agencies face today are rather complex, and require input and commitment from a broad range of constituencies, most importantly—park users. At the same time, public officials do not have any guidelines, models, or frameworks to facilitate meaningful citizen participation<sup>27</sup>. As a result, even participatory processes that have the noblest of intentions are often inadequate and clumsy.

What's more, in this environment we frequently overlook the fact that the value of citizen participation is in the actual participation<sup>28</sup>. Even though community dialogues can seem time consuming, impractical and frustrating, they have a potential to turn the most exasperating gridlocks into productive and useful conversations<sup>29</sup>. While public participation takes time and resources, the costs of involving the public in decisions can avoid the most significant costs of continued conflict and the need to change decisions that prove to be inadequately informed and unstable<sup>30</sup>.

*Recommendations: what is needed today is a strategy to educate public officials and decision makers on the value and benefits of engaging park users and the broader public. As participants of the Open Forum stated, it is critical to educate the key players on viewing their constituencies as a vital and valuable resource. Citizen participation should be viewed as an asset that can help solve problems; after all, park users can be our best advocates and do things public officials cannot. Not only do they supply ideas on how to improve park and recreation services, they also help determine problems and opportunities with resources available. Citizen input can be used to educate politicians; residents as users can “go places and open doors,” whether lobbying before local council or serving as advocates for what we do.*

### Finding 2: Need to make citizens an integral part of public decision making

Having established the value and benefits of citizen participation, the next step is making citizens an integral part of public decision making. Not only will it foster a more democratic form of governance, but will also improve quality of decisions, minimize costs and delays, help build consensus on complex issues, increase ease of implementing decisions, help avoid confrontations, and improve credibility and legitimacy of decisions made<sup>31</sup>. Citizen input is especially needed today when public agencies deal with the complex issues that go well beyond technical, analytical and design questions<sup>32</sup>.

Even though these days participatory processes are the mainstream of contemporary public decision making<sup>33</sup>, the question is whether these practices are participatory in any meaningful way<sup>34</sup>. Studies examining current participation mandates usually conclude that existing practices are no more than “window dressing” to ensure passing through the motions when the main decisions have already been made<sup>35</sup>. Authentic and meaningful public engagement, on the contrary, moves beyond gathering citizen input or satisfying procedural requirements, to involving citizens in a dialogic discourse focused on learning, consensus building, and accommodation of varying interests<sup>36</sup>.

*Recommendations: park and recreation agencies need to make park users a part of decision making process (as one of the discussants pointed out, “People will support what they helped create”). There are a variety of ways to engage them, and park and recreation agencies should provide multiple opportunities for user engagement (instead of a simple linear way—e.g. committees or boards). Moreover, to ensure success of a project, park users must have a role to play at each stage starting with the planning process, to the decision making and implementation phase. Early engagement is especially critical as it allows for transparency and ensures a larger constituency.*

### Finding 3: Importance of ensuring broad and representative citizen participation

Verba, Schlozman, Brady & Nie (1993) argue that those who are active in public decision making processes are unrepresentative of the latent public “in ways that are of great political significance.” Moreover, modern participatory processes tend to exclude those who are poor or not educated, and instead attract people in the middle range of socioeconomic indicators<sup>37</sup>. Such unrepresentativeness not only skews the public input, but also does not inform decision makers of the real issues that are of concern to their constituencies<sup>38</sup>. Inadequate citizen participation can therefore lead to private interest groups taking over the process and imposing their decisions.

Broad and representative public participation is difficult but not impossible to achieve (for strategies and examples of successful participatory processes, see case studies in Grybovyh, 2008). What is needed is commitment from public officials to organize public processes that would bring together groups holding different (at times polarized) opinions, and engage them in a meaningful process of mutual social learning and public decision making. It is true that such processes can take time and bring about conflict (as Joseph Schumpeter once said, the masses are bound to get out of control when they get together). There lies a great challenge, however, not to avoid, transcend, or displace conflict that may potentially arise, but to deal with the practical differences in and through conflictual settings<sup>39</sup>.

*Recommendations: first and foremost, park and recreation agencies need to become an integral part of their communities and build trust with the users and residents. As one of the Open Forum panelists remarked, “So often we find that we respond to complaints and demands without recognizing that leadership can change directions and take a negative to positive through creativity, imagination, and encouragement.” Such partnerships based on relationships will not only help gauge what’s important*

*for public, but can also help get park users and the broader public excited about getting involved in their community. Building trust with the residents is necessary when working with a broad array of opinions, and it is extremely important to involve various community groups including children, students, immigrants, faith-based groups, minorities etc.*

### Finding 4: Importance of two-way communication and information sharing

Both academic literature and practice suggest that participants in public processes want a better and more meaningful engagement which requires officials to rethink the role and the use of information<sup>40</sup>. Until now, public agencies have mainly relied on provision of information to the public (a one-way information flow) as opposed to the two-way dialogue<sup>41</sup>. This approach has endured for a number of reasons, among them—a fear of power sharing, and/ or belief that citizens cannot comprehend complexities of public decision making in order to meaningfully and effectively partake in these processes. In reality, as Alexander Hamilton once said, if public agencies want to make fair and competent decisions, it is not public opinion that we need to guide us, but wise public judgment<sup>42</sup>. The latter can only be achieved if the public has access to relevant, timely and adequate information in easily understandable format.

Information plays a critical role in public processes and therefore information sharing and mutual education should be put at the list of priorities of any public participation initiative. Participants must be granted access to accurate and relevant information in a format that is easily understandable. Experts must be available to explain and interpret information when needed; joint-fact finding can further facilitate productive problem-solving<sup>43</sup>. Such processes clearly depart from traditional practices in that they focus on communication, dialogue and information exchange, and ensure participatory and an inclusive planning process design that would incorporate a multitude of community voices and worldviews<sup>44</sup>.

*Recommendations: park and recreation agencies need to institute communication plans that are constant, consistent, shared by competent people, and ultimately require commitment. Such plans need to outline a response system (two-way communication tool) between public agencies and park users which is necessary in order to ensure information flow to and from the public. A broad array of communication techniques have been implemented in park and recreation agencies, including citizen forums, community meetings, public workshops, neighborhood parties, focus group meetings, and online response systems. Each and every concern from the users has to be addressed within a previously set time frame, in order to build trust in the community.*

#### **Finding 5: Importance of collaboration and use of technology to facilitate citizen participation in parks and recreation**

As it was anticipated, participants of the Open Forum raised many important issues impacting the way citizen participation works in their communities. The following two aspects appeared to be especially important: (1) the need to collaborate with other departments and agencies, and (2) use of technology to facilitate broad public participation in parks and recreation.

*Recommendations: (1) Park and recreation agencies are often not as visible as other public service departments; the public often doesn't know our mission or benefits. Park and recreation agencies need to be out there, communicating in a clear language that their users understand. It is important to collaborate with other departments and agencies, to be in the community constantly and not alone. (2) Any practitioner will attest to the profound impact of new technologies on the way public participation and response are elicited. Use of technology and social media broadens ability of park and recreation agencies to reach their advocates and recruit volunteers. It also enables instant feedback from park users and helps build trust in the community. At the same time it is important to tailor communication methods based on the audience (as older generation, for example, is not always comfortable using new technologies).*

In summary, successful citizen participation is neither fast nor easy, but rather complex and challenging. Working with a multitude of worldviews and opinions can require patience, ability to listen and resolve conflicts/ compromise, as well as ability to pass the emotional side to the practical side. Such processes can be lengthy and costly, but as Creighton (2005) writes, "The real cost of a decision is not how long and how costly it is to reach the decision, but how long it takes and how much it costs to solve the problem... by that measure, public participation is the winner" (p.244).

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# Appendix A

## Notes from Panelists and Roundtable Discussions National Recreation and Park Association Congress

### Open Forum “From Interest to Commitment: The Citizen Connection”

Minneapolis, Minnesota • October 28, 2010

#### Panelist 1

**Jane Hodgkinson**, Executive Director, Western DuPage Special Recreation Association (Illinois)

Shared with the audience how the special recreation advocates in Illinois were successful in getting their budget removed from the Tax Cap law.

The main presentation points:

- If it's a difficult task, don't assume it's impossible
- Important to identify the main constituencies
- Parents want to be involved if the decisions concern their children
- Prepare for the objections
- Need to explain how the public can help
- Importance of hearing stories at public hearings

#### Panelist 2

**Dale Larsen**, Director, City of Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department (Arizona)

Shared with the audience how Parks and Recreation department in Phoenix, Arizona fought their major city budget reduction. They lobbied to get a parking lot user fee passed to put funds into their park maintenance. The fee did not pass, but was tabled.

The main presentation points:

- How do we reposition ourselves to hear citizens' stories
- Children have stories to tell
- Failure in passing the user fee attributed to the lack of communication plan
- Importance of having a communication plan that is constant, consistent, shared by competent people, and ultimately requires commitment
- The mission and the main message of park departments needs to be out there
- Need to speak and write in a clear language/ sound bites that users understand

#### Panelist 3

**John Dargle**, Director, Fairfax County Park Authority (Virginia)

Shared with the audience how Fairfax County Park Authority worked to develop their friends groups, namely volunteer/ friends groups, partners and stakeholders, adopt-a-park, adopt-a-field, dog park monitors/ garden park monitors/ trail monitors/ athletic field monitors.

- The main presentation points:
- In order to get anything done, you need to surround yourself with the people smarter than yourself

- Importance of being transparent
- Need to share budget with the public
- When engaging the users, you need to have a clear dividing line as to who is doing what, how, and when
- Challenge of establishing a “feeder system” considering that friends and volunteers are getting older

#### Panelist 4

**Paul Romero**, Chief Deputy Director, California State Parks (California)

Discussed methods used in California that afforded independence on several park agencies to move from the “general fund” to their own funding source.

- The main presentation points:
- Economic situation of parks will not get better as we are governed by public funds and competition is immense
- Citizen connection can change the way we do things, and make us more successful
- Citizen participation can be an asset and help solve problems
- Park agencies that are surviving today have independent funding sources
- An initiative to get a drivers license fee dedicated to the park system in California
- Citizens have to become change agents for park and recreation agencies
- Some parks are going through the legislative change process to become special independently governed districts
- We can’t do without citizens; if you think you can, you are going to fail

### Roundtable Discussions

**Access: Are we reaching beyond the “usual suspects” (most powerful stakeholders and opinion leaders)**

- Need to change organizational mission, goals etc. to include citizens
- Need to work with businessmen and nonprofits, engage them in park and recreation agencies
- Different approaches to identifying key stakeholders: (1) segmenting park users, (2) based on projects
- Need to engage park users in serving on boards, advisory committees and subcommittees
- Important to work with neighborhood associations, homeowners associations, and user groups
- Need to collaborate with other departments and agencies; be out there constantly and not alone
- Important to reach out to college students, new arrivals in the communities, and underrepresented groups
- Important to work with faith based organizations—they always have a good pulse of community needs and have a large number of volunteers
- Challenge of park and trail management—cities get involved in building trails but not maintaining them; engage users in park and trail maintenance



- Engaging teenagers: example of teens planting and harvesting in parks, then working with corporate employees to teach them how to landscape and maintain their trail systems
- Engaging adults/ seniors: example of a program organized by the Jewish Vocational Service sponsoring adults 55+ to do family outreach
- Engaging businesses: CAST event sponsored by Bass Pro Shops—special needs children are paired with pro fishermen to learn how to fish
- Engaging volunteers: Trails from the Trails program where volunteers donate park photos/ post them on Flickr
- Difficulty of achieving a balance in public representation
- Difficulty of engaging citizens in larger communities
- Use of technology and social media broadens ability of park and recreation agencies to reach their advocates and recruit volunteers
- Challenge of engaging and creating an emotional connection with non-users (how to communicate the value of parks on a personal level)
- Consistency when communicating with citizens

#### **Are we listening: Authenticity of citizen participation**

- Public engagement techniques: exit surveys, electronic feedback sites, public workshops where residents have time to speak to their issues
- Make park users a part of a process (people will support what they helped create)
- Early participation is critical: it allows for transparency and larger constituency
- Early participation is successful: extremely important to involve friends groups and community groups early in the process
- Engage park users in the planning process as it allows them to see what it is coming to their communities
- Share master plans with the community
- Use of technology and social media for instant feedback from the users
- Conduct citizen forums and post answers to the questions on the website to allow for transparency
- Tailor communication methods based on the audience (city/ community TV channels vs. email or print newsletters)
- Involving park users in lobbying or legislative processes helps mitigate some of the adverse reactions to decisions that are made
- Bring resource agencies and elected officials to the table
- When working with friends or community groups, be careful not to allow some groups to take over

#### **What do we do with the information we get from the citizens**

- Implement citizen initiatives brought up at public meetings
- Hold smaller focus group meetings before the open public meetings; focus group participants become advocates at the open public meetings
- Always communicate with the legislators before beginning a project that affects the public
- Create partnerships based on relationships; become a part of a community and build trust with the users and residents (being “good neighbors”)

- Important to engage citizens in projects in the long term
- Service learning projects to encourage lifelong vs. episodic community engagement
- Example of public engagement involving a series of community meetings and forums with different groups and ages; engaging participants in developing goals and objectives to be implemented
- Make a promise to the users—if you bring information/ concern forward, it will be addressed (it might not be what you want to hear, but you will get an answer). Set a time frame to provide a response
- Example of an online system ACR (Active Customer Response) that logs in all the calls and complaints and gives 7 days to give residents a response—builds a lot of trust in the community

# Appendix B

## Roundtable Discussion Guide

*The purpose of round table discussions at the open forum is to chronicle the experiences of participants with citizen participation in parks and recreation, in order to document and share them with other NRPA members in a white paper*

*When sharing your own experiences with citizen involvement in parks and recreation, please provide us with a background/ setting in which these practices took place—including the types of resources in the community, state participation mandates, problem areas/ key issues, social capital (cohesiveness of the community), other circumstances related to public involvement, as well as your own interpretation as to what worked, what didn't work, and why*

*The following is a list of suggested areas to address. It is not a laundry list to follow, answering each one, but rather a list of topics that should be addressed in the discussion. We hope the participants will raise other important issues that are not on this list.*

### **Given premise: Citizens (the public) are the users of resources we manage!**

**Access: Are we reaching beyond the “usual suspects” (most powerful stakeholders and opinion leaders)**

- How do you identify stakeholders in your community
- How do you engage the broader general public, not only opinion leaders
- In what role/ capacity do you involve citizens in parks and recreation
- In what ways do you attract younger generation to get involved in parks and recreation
- In what ways do you involve ethnic and native groups, immigrants etc.

**Are we listening: Authenticity of citizen participation**

- How early in the process do you involve the public (before or after the main decisions have been made)
- What are the usual concerns of the citizens
- What mechanisms do you use to share information with the community
- How do you ensure a continuous flow of information both to and from the citizens
- Do you provide multiple and varied opportunities for the public to learn about, talk about, think about and act on the problem/ issue
- What techniques do you use to get competing groups to talk to each other
- How do you involve citizens in problem solving, gaining political/ community support, creating resolution strategies, reaching out to the rest of the public and speaking on your behalf

**What do we do with the information we get from the citizens**

- Do you delegate any decision making power to citizens involved
- How do you foster a culture of decision making that would include both citizens

- and leaders sharing responsibility for resolving issues of common concern
- How do you educate the key players on viewing the public as a vital resource/ valuable asset or potentially powerful partner in problem solving (instead of viewing it as an audience to educate or a problem to manage)
- Do you involve citizen leaders and key players in establishing a strategy to resolve the issues and create opportunities
- Do you encourage and enable citizen action as a way to give people a role in the process

**Facilitators may also wish to review the following list of questions and use them as needed**

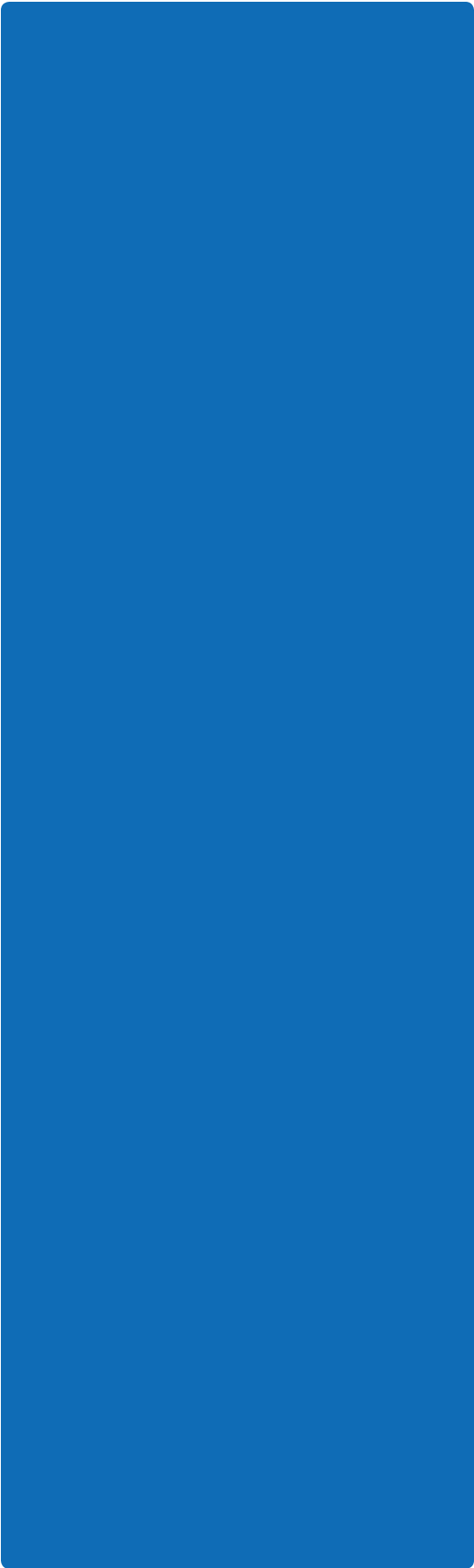

- What circumstances have you observed that should involve citizens and citizen leaders in parks and recreation
- In what ways do you include/ represent the broader public (community outreach)
- Do you have citizen representation in your organization—e.g. on boards etc.—if so how do you identify them, using what criteria
- Do you provide multiple ways/ opportunities for public engagement (instead of a simple linear way—e.g. committees only)
- How do you get the public excited about getting involved in their community
- What type of organizational structures seem to support citizen involvement
- Is public engagement a recognized function in your organization
- What methods do you use to educate the public (disseminate the information) on important park and recreation issues in your community (public announcements in newspapers, on TV, public meetings, community newsletters, local events etc.)
- Do you educate the leadership/ staff on ways to elicit public opinions on park and recreation issues, and how
- How do you structure/ organize interaction between different citizen groups involved
- What are the strategies of conflict resolution when working with various interest groups
- When working with various groups, are you prepared ahead of time to compromise if issues arise (do you define ahead of time how far you are willing to go)
- How do you overcome the problems of cost and time when working with citizens (considering not all costs are monetary)
- What are the ways to bring together multiple points of view in order to inform decisions
- What do you do with the power issues when it comes to decision making that involves the public (e.g. who decides?)
- Influence of local politics on decision making in parks and recreation/ what is the role of the public
- How has technology impacted the way you elicit public participation and response





## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Checkoway & Van Til, 1978; Fainstein & Fainstein, 1985
- <sup>2</sup> Ohio State University Extension, n.d.
- <sup>3</sup> Passewitz & Donnermeyer, 1989
- <sup>4</sup> Dowling, 1993
- <sup>5</sup> American Planning Association, 2002
- <sup>6</sup> Ohio State University Extension, n.d.
- <sup>7</sup> in Day, 1997
- <sup>8</sup> in Madrigal, 1995
- <sup>9</sup> Fainstein & Fainstein, 1985; Kweit & Kweit, 1987; Vasoo, 1991
- <sup>10</sup> Beatley, Brower & Lucy, 1994; Helling, 1998; Robinson, 1991
- <sup>11</sup> Williamson & Fung, 2004
- <sup>12</sup> Levy, 1992
- <sup>13</sup> Lowry, Adler & Milner, 1997
- <sup>14</sup> Beatley, Brower & Lucy, 1994
- <sup>15</sup> Kweit & Kweit, 1987
- <sup>16</sup> Almond & Verba, 1989; Beneviste, 1989
- <sup>17</sup> Julian, Reischl, Carrick & Katrenich, 1997
- <sup>18</sup> Arnstein, 1969; Stifftel, 1983
- <sup>19</sup> Keogh, 1990
- <sup>20</sup> Keogh, 1990
- <sup>21</sup> Innes, 1998
- <sup>22</sup> Hanna, 2000
- <sup>23</sup> King, Feltey & Susel, 1998
- <sup>24</sup> Lowry et al., 1997
- <sup>25</sup> Kathlene & Martin, 1991
- <sup>26</sup> Kweit & Kweit, 1987; Leighninger, 2005
- <sup>27</sup> Renn, Webler & Wiedemann, 1995
- <sup>28</sup> Pratchett, 1999
- <sup>29</sup> Burkholder & Feustel, 2004
- <sup>30</sup> Williams, Penrose & Hawkes, 1998
- <sup>31</sup> Adapted from Creighton, 2005 and Day, 1997
- <sup>32</sup> Krumholz, 1996
- <sup>33</sup> Murray & Greer, 2002
- <sup>34</sup> Hibbard & Lurie, 2000
- <sup>35</sup> Berke & French, 1994; Berke, Roenigk, Kaiser & Burby, 1996; Brody, Godschalk & Burby, 2003; Burby, 2003; Burby & Dalton, 1994
- <sup>36</sup> McCool & Stankey, 2003
- <sup>37</sup> Williamson & Fung, 2004
- <sup>38</sup> Kweit & Kweit, 1987
- <sup>39</sup> Sandercock, 1995
- <sup>40</sup> Hanna, 2000
- <sup>41</sup> Hanna, 2000
- <sup>42</sup> in Atlee, 2002
- <sup>43</sup> Penrose, 1996
- <sup>44</sup> Grybovyich, 2008



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is a national, not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing park, recreation, and conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people. NRPA encourages the promotion of healthy lifestyles, recreation initiatives, and conservation of natural and cultural resources. For more than 40 years, NRPA has been the voice advocating the significance of making parks, open space, and recreational opportunities available to all Americans. For more information on NRPA go to [www.NRPA.org](http://www.NRPA.org).



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