

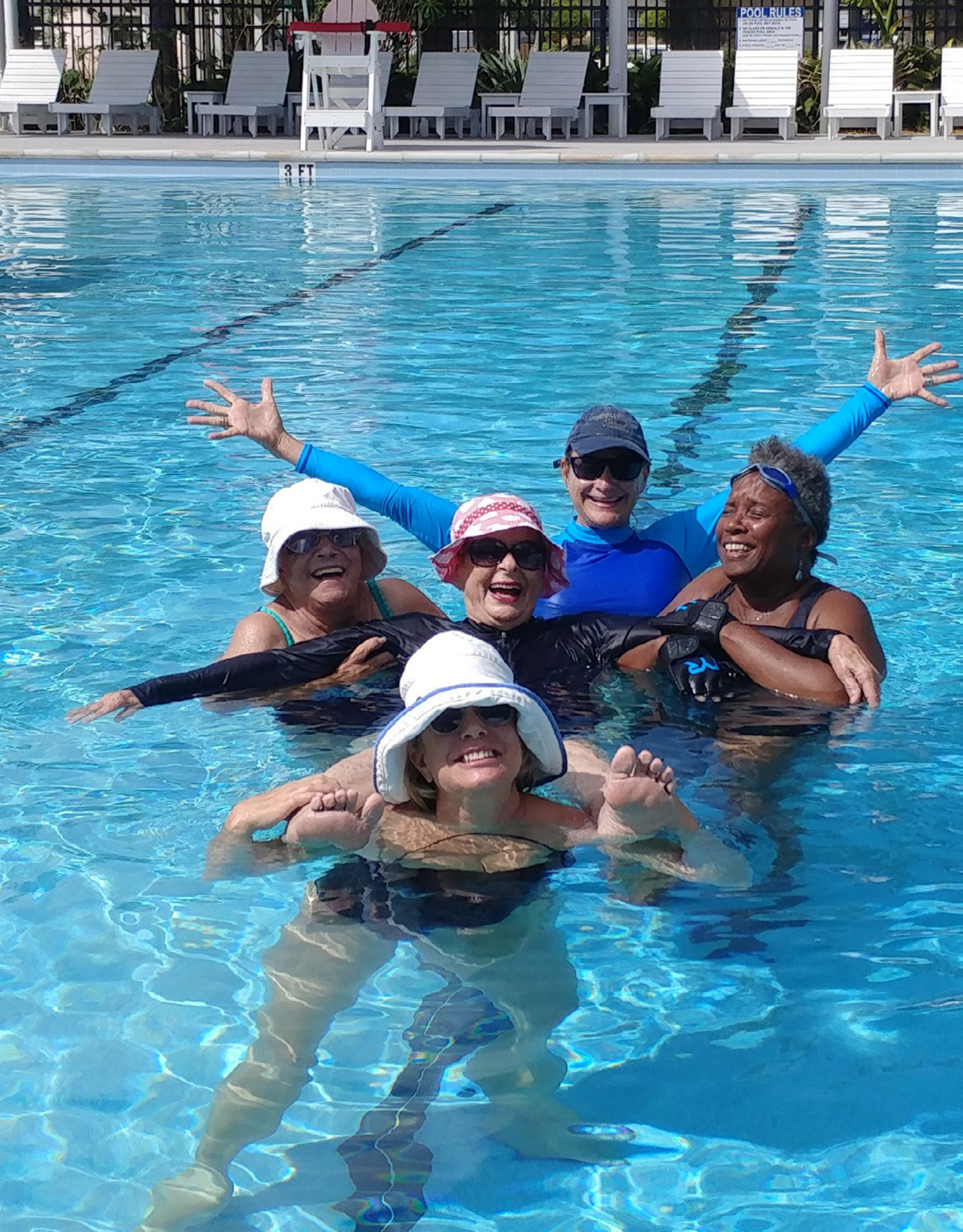


**AWARENESS AND THE USE OF PARKS**



**NRPA** National Recreation and Park Association  
*Because everyone deserves a great park*







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## INTRODUCTION

Parks and recreation is essential to the physical, social, environmental and economic health of a community. Local leaders and planners often link the availability of high-quality park and recreation amenities to the achievement of community equity.

Park and recreation advocacy and research often focus on how **proximity** is key to community equity in the use of park agency facilities. An example of such focus is the 10-Minute Walk Campaign, a partnership among the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), the Trust for Public Land and the Urban Land Institute. This coalition works to ensure there is a great park within a 10-minute walk of every person in every neighborhood in every city across the United States.

Making sure that all people live near high-quality parks is, however, only one piece of the puzzle in encouraging greater use of such facilities. Another important factor is **awareness**. Making sure residents are fully aware of the park and recreation amenities and programming available to them, where to find them and what activities are offered – as well as residents’ perception of the quality and other characteristics of a park – are all important factors in whether they will utilize a park and its facilities.

A primary reason for increasing awareness is that parks and public open spaces have long been associated with **improved public health and well-being**. Originally implemented in the 1800s to promote the health, safety and welfare of residents in cities across the United States, public parks, over time, became great equalizers in communities, since they are available to all residents regardless of race, age or ability to pay.

But in addition to the health, safety and welfare of residents, there are other reasons to promote greater awareness of parks and recreation: creating stewardship for green spaces, caring for the environment, appreciation of parks’ positive economic impact and the fact that they provide places for cognitive, social and physical activities. Finally, park awareness and usage also lead to greater advocacy, political support and public funding for park and recreation facilities.

NRPA asked GP RED to explore the role awareness plays in driving park and recreation usage. Key drivers include:

1. the availability of program locations and facilities (both the **number of and proximity** of park and recreation amenities) and
2. **awareness** of and satisfaction with those components, along with the role that other aspects, such as individual socioeconomic characteristics and quality of the components, may play.

This report summarizes the research findings, and looks at a series of steps that park and recreation leaders should consider when executing an awareness strategy. A full detailed report on this research is available at [www.nrpa.org/park-awareness](http://www.nrpa.org/park-awareness)



# EVALUATING PROXIMITY AND AWARENESS

## A REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A review of the academic literature provides insights on how proximity, awareness and other factors influence the usage of park and recreation amenities. Following are some of the key themes discovered in this analysis of 879 peer-reviewed academic papers:

### KEY FINDINGS ABOUT PROXIMITY

- In those cases where there is a **match between *perceived and actual*** proximity to a resident's closest park, residents are **more than 1½ times more likely to engage** in at least some park-based physical activity.
- People who perceive that they have **many places to exercise** in their community and who report more facilities within a 5-minute walk are **more likely to achieve recommended levels of physical activity.**
- **Perceived park proximity is more important than *objective* park proximity** in relation to self-reported park visitation frequency and daily physical activity.
- While objective distance measures are important, **individual awareness and perceptions** of park environments may also be important factors.
- Certain features, such as playgrounds and wooded areas, produce better matches in terms of perceived proximity than do other features. The **type of features** matters: parks that are larger or have more features may produce a higher level of awareness.

### KEY FINDINGS ABOUT AWARENESS

- **Discordance** (disparity) between an individual's perception of the environment around him/her and objective measures is common.
- Discordance is **different for different types of facilities**. When looking at non-residential destinations, respondents have the least understanding of where parks, trails and fitness centers exist, while they have better awareness of where golf courses, pharmacies and pools are located.
- Awareness of **features and characteristics** of parks is important, in addition to simply knowing whether a park exists.
- The presence of **more parks and more features** is associated **with a better match** between perceptions and objective measures.

**While objective distance measures are important, individual awareness and perceptions of park environments may be more important.**



## KEY FINDINGS ABOUT RELEVANT INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

- **Individual and social characteristics** may be more important than environmental ones in relation to the frequency in visiting park and recreation facilities.
- **Age, income, education level, marital status, physical fitness and the presence of children** are the key variables in awareness, with older people generally being less aware than younger ones.

## KEY FINDINGS ABOUT SAFETY AND PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

- An individual's **perception** (whether it is reality) about safety is important. Perceptions may be either about crime and other unsanctioned behaviors or related to traffic and transportation.
- The perception that a community may be unsafe can lead to a **reduction in use** over time.
- People who report high **neighborhood cohesion** (or trust) have better matches on proximity.
- Women, children, long-term residents, foreign-born residents, individuals with lower levels of education, lower incomes and those with fewer family and friends in the immediate area **perceive the neighborhood as a smaller place** than do others.
- **Strategies**, such as increasing police and adult presence, positive messaging, reducing gang problems and *crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED)* tactics, can help address safety issues.

## INSIGHTS FROM RESIDENT SURVEYS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

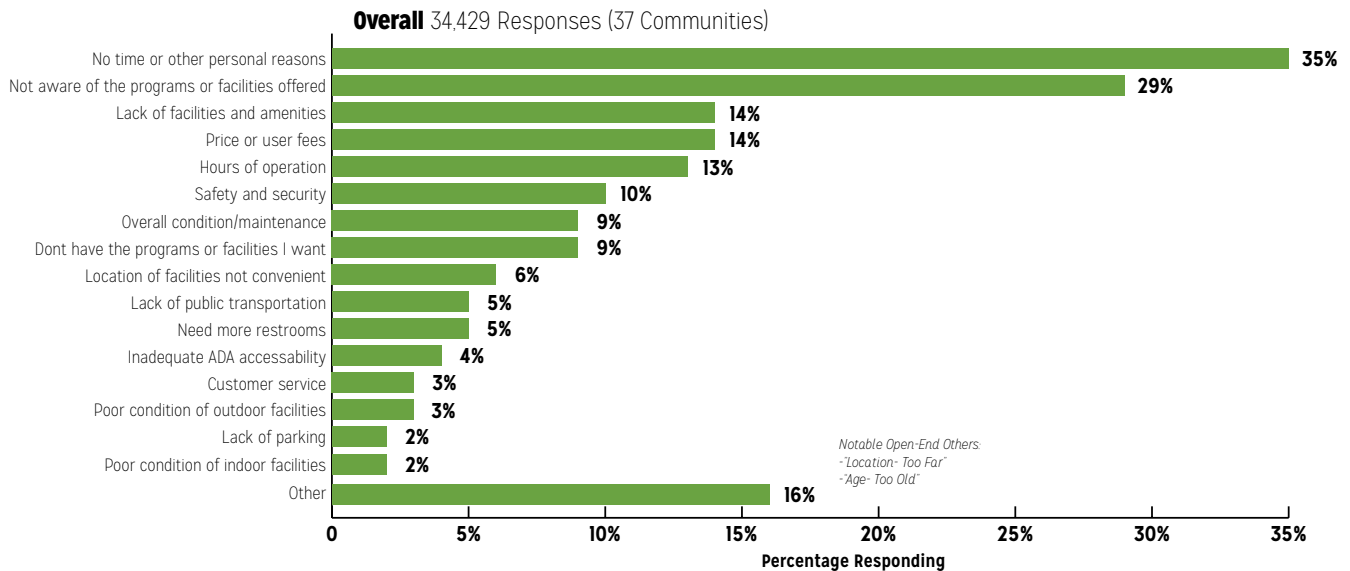
Between 2005 and 2017, GP RED, GreenPlay LLC and RRC Associates conducted surveys of residents from 119 communities across the United States regarding their local park and recreation offerings. The surveys included common questions as well as 25 variables related to the topics of proximity and awareness. Primary variables explored included *age, income, household makeup (including marital status)*, race and the geographic location of the community. From the analysis, a focus on three relevant questions emerged.

### 1. WHY ARE PEOPLE NOT USING PARK AND RECREATION OFFERINGS?

The greatest barrier keeping people from enjoying park and recreation amenities in their communities is a lack of time or other personal reasons. Thirty-five percent of survey respondents indicate **time limitation** keeps them from utilizing their local parks.



## REASONS FOR NON-USE OF PARK AND RECREATION OFFERINGS



The second most-cited reason people do not use park and recreation amenities in their community is a lack of **awareness** about the programs offered at those facilities. Nearly 3 in 10 respondents report that they are not aware of the park and recreation offerings available. Other barriers cited by survey respondents include:

- Price (cited by 14 percent of respondents)
- Hours of operation (13 percent)
- Perceived safety and security (10 percent)
- Condition/maintenance (9 percent)

While personal time challenges tend to be consistently reported as the most frequent reason in most communities, awareness appears to be key. The importance of other barriers varies greatly by community. There are significant differences based on age, income, race and household makeup. These barriers can be addressed through targeted strategies in communities.

### 2. HOW RESIDENTS FIND OUT ABOUT OFFERINGS

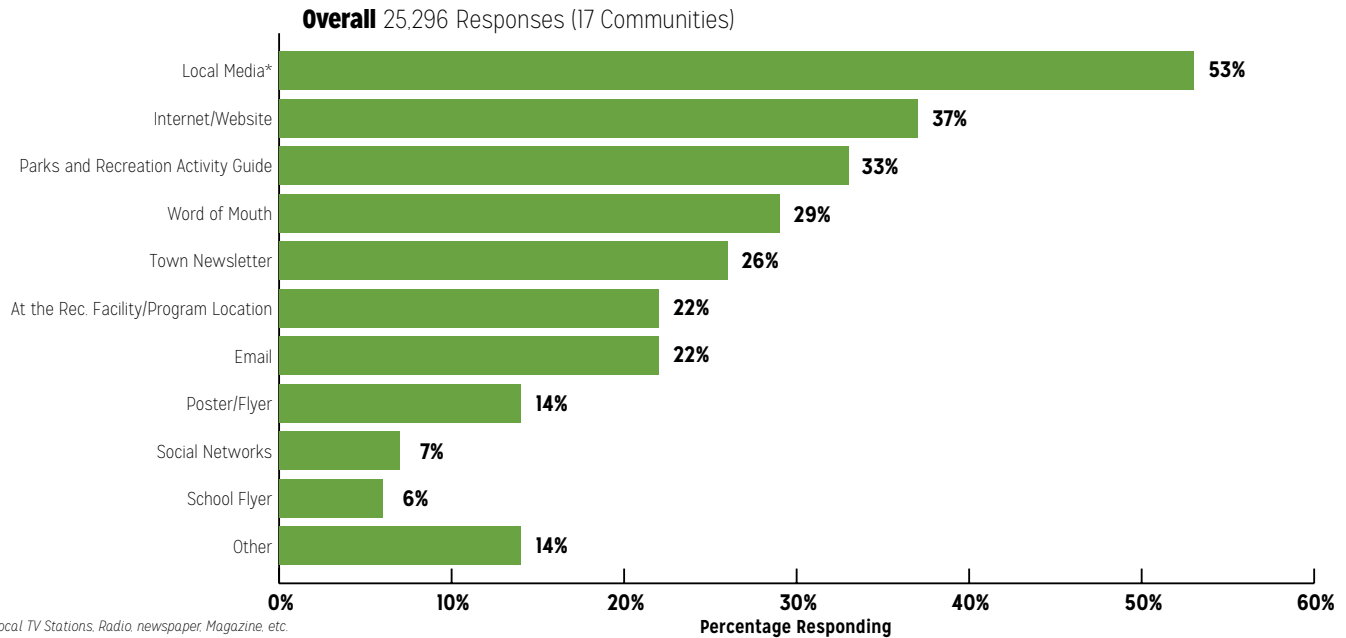
Local media and the internet (including park and recreation agency websites) are the two most popular means by which residents discover the amenities and programming offered by their local park and recreation agencies. Fifty-three percent of survey respondents report they learn about local park and recreation offerings from local media; 37 percent find out about park and recreation offerings from the agency's website.

Additional ways the public learns about local programming and facilities include:

- Park and recreation activity guides (cited by 33 percent of respondents)
- Word of mouth (29 percent)

- Town newsletter (26 percent)
- Messaging at park and recreation agency facilities (22 percent)
- Email (22 percent)

### HOW DO YOU CURRENTLY FIND OUT ABOUT PARK AND RECREATION OFFERINGS?



Older respondents (those older than 44) tend to get more information from local media (74 percent), whereas residents under the age of 44 tend to rely on the internet (47 percent). There are differences between the sources used – including local media and the local agency’s printed activity guide – based on race and income. Family status also produces differences in information sources used, with 59 percent of respondents categorized as “families with no children at home” using local media and 47 percent of those “with children at home” primarily using the internet. Again, the differences suggest that park and recreation agencies can address any lack of awareness by adjusting marketing and communication channels to targeted segments of their communities.

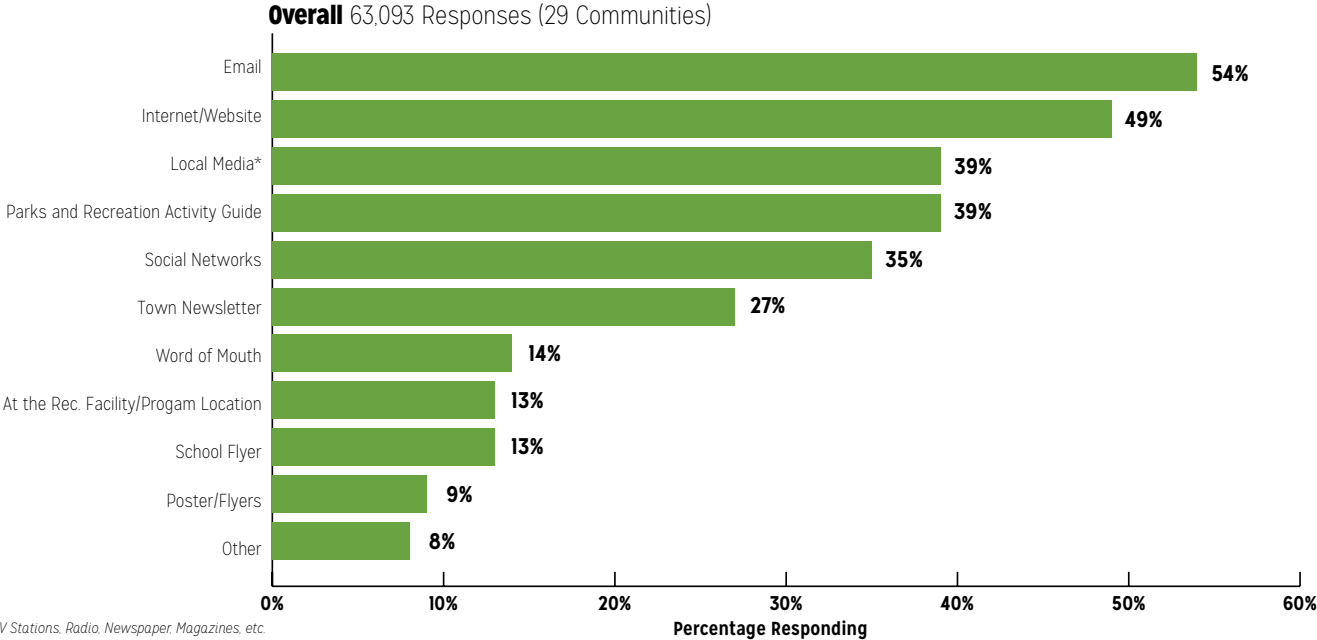
### 3. HOW RESIDENTS PREFER TO LEARN ABOUT PARK AND RECREATION OFFERINGS

The survey also asked how residents would prefer to learn about park and recreation offerings. A majority (54 percent) indicates a preference for **email**, with **internet/website** ranking second (49 percent) and **local media** third (39 percent). Note that email is the sixth most frequently cited method (22 percent)



by which residents indicate they were actually being reached (previous question); the internet/ agency website is second.

**HOW WOULD YOU PREFER TO RECEIVE INFORMATION ON RECREATION PROGRAMS AND FACILITIES?**



Again, there are meaningful differences based on age, race, income and family status. Lower income, older and non-white respondents have a stronger preference for relying on local media. Those with children have a greater preference for email and social media.

**Summary Insights from the Aggregated Survey Analysis**

The aggregated survey data confirms that age, race, income and household makeup consistently influence responses about park and recreation awareness. (Note that this analysis is from secondary data not specifically designed for this research.)

As these questions were asked during the 2005 to 2017 timeframe, it is likely that responses changed over time. Marketing channels such as social media and websites have become more prevalent; however, traditional sources, such as newspapers and printed activity guides, remain critical in most communities. Key to addressing these differences is knowing the demographics of a community, periodically asking residents their preferences and then adjusting communications accordingly. Methods and strategies need to be different in different communities.

Going forward, researchers, consultants and park and recreation practitioners should structure community survey questions to specifically address aspects of awareness and proximity.

Comparisons can then be tracked through random surveying by individual agencies to compare changes about information sources over time and then set internal goals for action. Community profiles and needs assessments should be no older than five years – perhaps even younger in rapidly changing communities.

## HOW AGENCIES ARE ADDRESSING PROXIMITY AND AWARENESS

To investigate more fully how successful agencies are addressing proximity and awareness, the current analysis also includes case studies of two park and recreation agencies: those in **Montgomery County, Maryland** (as part of the Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission) and **Cary, North Carolina**. The studies addressed how these two agencies identified improving marketing and awareness as objectives in their needs assessments and marketing plans.<sup>1</sup>

### CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS OF PROXIMITY AND AWARENESS

The studies looked at inventory and levels of service (LOS) to determine any potential correlations of proximity and awareness for each agency. An analysis of environmental variables around residents' homes was also conducted to see if certain physical aspects of the park system in the vicinity of those homes could be correlated with the residents' sense of awareness of their local park and recreation facilities. This was to test the hypothesis that the presence and quality of parks in the area surrounding a household would tend to be associated with a higher awareness of the park system's offerings. In other words, were people more aware of parks if there were more such facilities closer to home of higher quality and if such facilities offered a wide variety of activities? Conversely, does a lack of parks, or the presence of ones of lower quality, result in residents paying less attention to those parks, being less aware of what facilities are offered and result in that segment of survey respondents citing a "lack of awareness" as a reason for not using the park's facilities and services in their communities?

A relatively large share of the case study samples (41 percent) indicates some degree of non-use of park facilities and programs; of that, **more than half (54 percent) indicate that lack of awareness is a factor.** Of all the



**For the case study agencies, proximity to a park, number of parks nearby, size of the parks, number of features within them and other variables analyzed besides design and ambiance were not significant factors.**

*1. The authors thank both agencies for allowing their insights to be included within this report.*



variables examined, only park quality shows an effect, whether positive or negative. The only variable that shows significant correlation to awareness in this case study is related to **design and ambiance (D&A)**. Interestingly, a higher score for D&A nearby is correlated with lower awareness of parks and amenities overall.

The rationale for these findings is not apparent. It is possible that the presence of a higher-quality park nearby suggests that other “nice” parks and services might be available within one’s community; that could stimulate an interest in knowing more about them. This may lead to a positive relationship between park use and the desire for greater awareness of (more information about) park offerings. (See the results for respondents indicating they were not aware of other offerings.)

## COMPARISON TO THE AGGREGATED SURVEY DATA AND RELEVANT MARKETING OBJECTIVES

Below, we look specifically at the actions being taken by the town of Cary, North Carolina. (Additional information regarding Montgomery County, Maryland, is available in a fuller, detailed report available from GP RED or at [www.nrpa.org/park-awareness](http://www.nrpa.org/park-awareness))

The Cary Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Department is accredited through the Council on Accreditation for Parks and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) and has a strong commitment to regular needs assessments and master and strategic planning. The agency has adopted component-based methods (CBM) for inventory and level-of-service analysis. Such detailed information allowed for additional proximity-based geospatial analysis. The agency shared marketing documents and input, its key elements of awareness, potential strategies (e.g., marketing, social media, signage and wayfinding) and significant management takeaways.

There are differences between the agency and the national survey aggregation analysis.

- The primary reason Cary respondents reported not using the amenities and programs in 2010 was that they were not aware of the programs and facilities offered. In response, the agency established objectives to increase marketing and awareness as part of its 2012 Master Plan. Objectives included marketing plans, signage, wayfinding and communication channels.
- The town of Cary collects data on program usage, registrations and retention, and the town and Cary Parks and Recreation Department both have committed staff resources to marketing and marketing plans. The Cary Parks and Recreation Department indicates it is moving forward with a unique integrated solution called Marketing Cloud to enhance these capabilities.
- In addition, the town of Cary conducts a biannual town-wide citizen’s survey that includes questions on where residents get their information, barriers to involvement and potential new media sources. The recent survey results show that the second largest barrier was also “Don’t know about opportunities.”

- The town of Cary provided examples of comprehensive wayfinding and signage plans that its park and recreation agency determined is more effective in increasing community awareness of the location and components of the parks. The key elements include signs and wayfinding devices that provide a cohesive identity of the agency's holdings. While not yet measured, agency staff believes this has greatly helped increase residents' knowledge and awareness.

## LESSONS LEARNED - ADDRESSING AWARENESS THROUGH AGENCY PLANNING

Implementing planning that prioritizes perception and awareness may be daunting for many park and recreation professionals, especially for those working at agencies with limited resources dedicated to marketing and communications. The following summary of findings can help prioritize:

- Park quality (e.g., design, ambiance and what facilities are in the park) matters — as much as, or perhaps more than, proximity or the number of parks — once a baseline level of service is achieved.
- Increasing awareness of park and recreation amenities and programs can improve overall usage of those parks and programs. That, itself, leads to improved community health and greater public and political support for park and recreation programs.
- Among the tactics that drive improved awareness are attention to wayfinding, social media and safety improvements.
- Executing marketing and communication strategies is critical to the success of any strategic plan with a focus to grow park usage. Awareness campaigns may be as critical as adding or enhancing parks and programming to drive increased usage.





## ACTIONS AN AGENCY CAN TAKE TO INCREASE AWARENESS

The main takeaway from both the research and the case studies is that increasing awareness of available park and recreation amenities and programming is critical for agencies that want to expand usage of their offerings. To do so, it is important to know where to begin.

### ASSESSING CURRENT PROXIMITY, AWARENESS AND MARKETING EFFORTS

Assessment is critical, and agency leadership should be honest with itself as the assessment needs to be objective. The most effective assessments come from an independent task force, committee or group of volunteers or by hiring outside help to provide critical feedback. If those options are not available, staff members can go through each step and then ask themselves, "How might we be wrong?" This question helps encourage deeper critical thinking pertaining to each topic or step.

1. An agency must have an accurate and objective assessment of what is available in the community. This indicates a need for an **up-to-date, component-based inventory and levels-of-service (LOS) analysis**. With the widespread and inexpensive availability of geospatial analysis tools, agencies can now use such digital methods to truly understand what is available. Analysis can include component, functionality, quality, proximity, walkability and other aspects.
2. To understand perceived proximity and awareness in the community, an agency should have a current and thorough **needs assessment** study. Such an assessment analyses demographics, community engagement and community input. It should also include a current statistically valid, random-sampling community survey questions specifically addressing perceptions of usage, awareness of offerings, barriers and constraints to usage, how residents currently find out about offerings, how they prefer to find out about offerings and their perceptions of safety.

These first two steps can be completed separately or as part of an agency-wide park and recreation master plan. Agencies will be able to identify where to start their marketing and awareness efforts after assessing current operations and offerings.

3. Once objective assessment and analysis of perceived needs are complete, the next step is to create and implement a **strategic marketing and awareness plan** that can communicate a three- to five- year action plan and influence operational decisions. Many agencies already have developed their marketing efforts but are constrained by insufficient staffing and other resources. As a result, these agencies are being pulled in multiple directions, finding it a challenge to overhaul these efforts all at once.

## DEVELOPING A MARKETING AND AWARENESS PLAN

Many park and recreation agencies do not have dedicated funding or staff resources for marketing efforts. If they do, the funding and resources are often dedicated only to marketing for specific tasks such as flyers, programs and/or advertising of specific events or offerings. By looking at evaluating awareness as an opportunity for improving marketing efforts and experiences, agencies can start to prioritize funds through maintenance or capital improvement to improve the overall awareness in the community without having to reprioritize their operations toward marketing.

Core services – e.g., parks, trails, community/recreation centers and programs – are usually the only services that an agency has an obligation to provide; and therefore, these should be the priorities for both short- and long-term decision making and awareness promotion. Outreach via other avenues (social media, advertising, etc.) should be based on critical decision making and continuous evaluation regarding whether each is meeting desired outcomes. Through the development of a strategic marketing and awareness plan, agency leaders can gain greater clarity about where they should dedicate resources. This includes developing and championing core services that reinforce the brand and that reach target markets and segments in the community. A strategic marketing plan designed to improve awareness should span over a three- to five- year period. A plan with a longer shelf life is prone to becoming obsolete before it ends because of changes to a community's demographic or behavioral character, technology, availability of components and/or recreational trends.

A shift in marketing tactics may be relatively simple, but only deep organizational cultural shifts can lead to effective and lasting changes to perception and awareness. This can be a long, slow process. Adding to the challenge is the fact that it often takes shifts in budgets or capital improvement plans (CIPs) to effectively communicate the commitment required to develop these relationships. An agency can mitigate the changes required by committing to objective feedback regarding the system and its community at the start of the process and with a yearly evaluation process. In developing such a foundation, changes and shifts can be more easily accounted for because a mission, vision and brand promise are long-term commitments and do not need to be changed if they are developed in an objective way. Further, if an agency has spent five years developing trust with its community (through implementation or development), the community will be more likely to trust that the agency will continue to build the relationship in the future, regardless of the channel, and will be more likely to stay engaged in the future.





An important decision at this point is determining whether there are outreach functions that no longer serve the direction of the agency or which functions to divest. This could mean completely ending, repurposing or delaying certain efforts. The most important efforts increase the perception and awareness of an agency and, therefore, strengthen the relationship between the agency and community.

A challenging example is social media. Most park and recreation agencies use some form of social media, including websites. In many cases, agencies embrace social media because its usage is *expected* in the modern age of business rather than because it is the most effective channel to reach certain market segments. Even when social media channels are an effective way to reach segments of the population, efforts in this area tend to underperform or are not properly executed in a way that continuously strengthens the relationship between an agency and community. Agencies that invest in social media but don't provide an experience that measures up to the standard of their brand promise risk diminishing their users' perception in the name of community expectation. In this scenario, an agency needs to determine whether using such platforms is desirable — and effective.

## **SIX STEPS TO DEVELOP A MARKETING AND AWARENESS PLAN**

Following is a step-by-step guide to developing a **Marketing and Awareness Plan**.

### **STEP 1 – DEVELOP A CONSISTENT BRAND**

A park and recreation agency may already have a brand or public perception. But there could be a need to define how the agency wants to be perceived, so it will have to develop strategies that promote that perception. Each agency, by being a public entity, already authentically represents its market. It may, however, need to reinforce this brand, perception and promise in every part of its operation. If an agency fails to fulfill its brand promise, it will lose support and advocacy.

### **STEP 2 – DEVELOP GOALS FOR THE MARKETING AND AWARENESS EFFORT AS A WHOLE**

Each park and recreation agency has unique goals and missions and no two agencies share the same exact goals of their marketing and awareness efforts. Such goals should go beyond “increasing awareness” or “attracting new users.” The marketing and awareness efforts should translate the desired brand into tangible goals that can influence the overall direction of any strategy. Defining goals that are not unique to a department will make it difficult to communicate value to users.

Development of marketing and awareness effort goals will include an objective look at an agency's most recent needs assessment and component-based inventory and level-of-service (LOS) analysis. Among the questions to ask is whether there are enough parks and quality components available to meet the demands of the community. That question needs to be answered objectively before moving forward.

### **STEP 3 – DEFINE TARGET MARKETS AND SEGMENTS**

Park and recreation agencies should strive to serve all people in their service areas. Residents of different communities have different needs and desires, so what they

expect from their local park and recreation agencies will also differ. In other words, no one size fits all. As a result, agencies need to define the target markets or segments and not only have offerings “for everyone.” What may interest one population segment of a city, town or county may not drive awareness with another population segment. Focusing efforts on market segments streamlines communication and allows an agency to communicate more effectively and directly to a select group rather than having a set of messaging that fails to resonate with individuals.

Needs assessments and LOS analysis can not only identify demand and special relationships but also help identify specific target segments. Target segments can be defined in many ways but should focus on the similarities of large groups:

- Demographically – age, sex, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.
- Behaviorally – Are there large/key segments that act or behave in the same way (in parks, online, during activities/uses)? When are they online? When do they access parks and services? When accessing parks and services, what do they do?
- Psychologically – Are there large/key segments that think or feel in the same way (nostalgia about parks/assets)? How do they think/feel about parks and services? Do residents feel safe?
- Geographically – Are there large/key segments that are in close physical proximity?

**STEP 4 - DEFINE THE GOALS FOR EACH CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION**

Because of the nature of park and recreation services and the different audiences that different agencies may serve, marketing channels to increase awareness can take on many forms, including:

- Recreational programming
- Level of service/proximity
- Maintenance/Current condition
- Social media, including websites
- Online media/video
- Mobile applications
- Texts/Emails
- Signage/Wayfinding
- Events, festivals and concerts
- Amenities/Components
- Pricing
- Print media
- Customer service
- Online searches
- Addressing safety
- Trail connectivity

Park and recreation agencies should select communication channels with specific target markets in mind. For example, agencies may be more





successful reaching millennial populations for fitness opportunities through promotions delivered by mobile applications and social media.

**STEP 5 - DEFINE THE CONTENT GUIDELINES FOR EACH CHANNEL**

Content guidelines can be thought of as the “dos and don’ts” for each marketing channel. Ensuring that these guidelines are in place allows for more consistent and focused messaging (look, language, content) across all platforms, reinforcing the brand, story and goals of the marketing and awareness efforts. Like the other steps, these guidelines need to be unique to an area or agency and should include the use of:

- Colloquial language and events
- Pop culture and growing trends
- Brand messages

**STEP 6 - DEFINE EVALUATION METHODS FOR MARKETING EFFORTS**

Marketing and awareness campaigns can be as much art as science where trial and error are part of the process. Hence, not every campaign will be successful even if well thought out and supported by sufficient resources. As a result, park and recreation agencies must evaluate their efforts for effectiveness and be willing to make changes.

Park and recreation professionals should base their evaluation methods on the brand, segments, goals and content that are unique to their agencies to establish and reinforce an authentic brand. Efforts evaluated on other benchmarks may inaccurately reflect the success or failure of its effort. Opportunities for an agency include:

- Successful funding campaigns
- Increased program participation/lower cancellation rates
- Investment in historic structures
- Engagement through social media
- Utilization of resources such as maps
- Park usage/event participation
- Increased demand for rental opportunities (shelters, camping, sports fields)
- Informal surveys and feedback

# SUGGESTED CHECKLIST FOR AGENCY ACTION – ADDRESSING PROXIMITY AND AWARENESS

Below is a suggested “Agency Checklist” of elements and potential strategies to help improve awareness. In response to their findings that awareness of parks and recreation facilities was lacking, the case study agencies addressed this issue through targeted planning and strategic implementation. Such approaches could be helpful to other agencies as they move forward.

Are these items fully known, addressed and/or in place for your agency?

### OBJECTIVE MEASURES

#### Objective Proximity

- Measured Distance to Homes

#### Facilities & Parks

- Quantity/Location of Amenities
- Quality of Amenities
- Component-Based LOS Analysis

#### Demographics

- Age
- Sex
- Marital Status
- Race / Ethnicity
- Household Size
- Household Income
- Presence of Children

### AWARENESS

#### Signage

- Directional
- Entrance/Site
- Wayfinding
- Interpretive

#### Marketing

- Mission, Vision, Brand
- Website
- Social Media
- Direct Mail
- Vehicle Graphics
- Local News
- Outdoor Advertising
- Activity Guide

#### Customer Service

- Knowledge / Helpfulness
- Cultural / Language

### MEASURING PERCEPTION

#### Perceived Proximity

- Walkability
- Bike Friendly

#### Perception of Facilities & Parks

- Quality
- Type and Variety of Amenities
- Satisfaction & Use

#### Enhancing Perceived Safety

- Positive Activation
- Enforcement Presence
- Lighting
- CPTED Practices







## CONCLUSIONS

Park and recreation agencies desiring to build public perception and advocacy should place a greater priority on opportunities that impact the way their communities experience the park systems. Residents cannot use or experience park and recreation facilities if they are not fully aware of all the offerings available.

To evaluate perceptions and awareness, agencies first need to objectively identify inventories and assess what assets they own and manage and then determine what the perceptions are through thorough needs assessments. After establishing that facilities and lands are equitably available in a community, efforts likely will need to shift to managing the perceptions of availability, safety and quality.

To address awareness, it is important for agencies to use unified branding. This may be through signage, wayfinding or other park identity that builds awareness of locations and amenities. A well-branded agency can have a positive impact on an area, reaching users and non-users, and crossing all demographic, psychographic, behavioral and geographic segments of a community's population.

Park and recreation agencies provide core services that deliver value to communities. Continued assessment of those services, engagement with the community and promoting greater awareness and enhancing the perception of all that an agency has to offer can lead to increased usage of parks and recreation, along with better health, stewardship, advocacy and economic outcomes.





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Along with academic credentials and roles for GP RED ([www.gpred.org](http://www.gpred.org)), the three primary authors of this research are the owners and founders of long-established professional P&R planning firms in the United States. Dr. Teresa Penbrooke is the CEO and founder of GreenPlay, LLC, a management consulting firm, founded in 1999, that has conducted more than 500 master, strategic and related plans for parks, recreation, open space and other quality-of-life agencies around the country, and she also is the director of the Healthy Communities Research Group for GP RED. Dr. Robby Layton co-founded Design Concepts, an award-winning landscape architecture and planning firm with a focus on parks and community design, in 1981. Chris Cares co-founded RRC Associates, a survey and qualitative research, planning and tourism analysis firm, in 1983. These three authors and their representative firms have worked together on more than 150 community P&R planning projects since 2001. The history of these firms and their relationships are very relevant to this project, as the realization was made that, collectively, these firms have access to a vast repository of community-specific random surveying, geo-spatial, management, operational and marketing analysis that had never previously been assessed from an aggregated research standpoint on a topic like this.

*GP RED is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing research, education and development for health, recreation and land management agencies, and a committed collaborator with NRPA. To request the detailed research report for this topic with full literature review, methodology, results and references, please email [teresap@gpred.org](mailto:teresap@gpred.org).*

*To find out more or to support GP RED's work, please see [www.gpred.org](http://www.gpred.org).*

## ABOUT NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing parks, recreation and conservation efforts that enhance quality of life for all people. Through its network of 60,000 recreation and park professionals and advocates, NRPA encourages the promotion of healthy and active lifestyles, conservation initiatives and equitable access to parks and public space.

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 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 the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at [www.nrpa.org/Research](http://www.nrpa.org/Research)







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