Americans' Broad-Based Support for Local Recreation and Park Services:

Results From a Nationwide Study

National Recreation and Park Association

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INTRODUCTION

Americans cherish their local public park and recreation services, seeing them as valuable features of their communities, towns and cities. A large majority of Americans use their local public parks, playgrounds and other open spaces with an even larger percentage saying they personally benefit from public parks. Furthermore, Americans almost unanimously agree that their communities benefit from local public parks, even if they themselves are not regular park users. This passion for local public parks has remained consistent over the past quarter century even as our nation and the ways we interact and entertain each other have dramatically evolved.

A reason for this fervent and unfailing support for local parks is the consistent delivery of services and programming focused on conservation, health and wellness and social equity. Americans agree local public parks are well worth the tax dollars used to operate and maintain these facilities, with many willing to increase these investments to build on the success public parks have had in their communities. Finally, the enthusiasm for local recreation and park offerings is practically universal, spanning across a wide range of demographic groups, including age, income, household formation and even political affiliation.

These are the key highlights from a nationwide study commissioned by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) on Americans' perceptions of local park and recreation services. These conclusions confirm that Americans do not see public parks as luxuries, but rather as critical infrastructure worthy of full and consistent investment. The findings further inform park and recreation professionals, policymakers and other stakeholders about the support for park and recreation investments to address the many challenges facing local communities.

NRPA has long known the importance of understanding the public's support of parks and the physical and social amenities they provide. Back in 1992, NRPA commissioned a study to better understand the benefits and value of local park and recreation services as perceived by the American public. That study, conducted by Pennsylvania State University, found that most Americans indicated they had personally benefited, as did their community as a whole, from their local recreation and park services (Godbey, Graefe, & James, 1992).

In the time since that study's release, much has changed in the United States. Today, America is older, better educated, more racially/ethnically diverse and more urbanized. Technology has also altered how we communicate, interact and entertain ourselves in ways unimaginable a quarter of a century ago.

To understand how these demographic and societal changes may have affected Americans' view of local public parks, NRPA engaged Dr. Andrew Mowen and his Penn State colleagues Drs. Geoffrey Godbey and Alan Graefe and Mr. Austin Barrett to update the 1992 study. Working in cooperation with NRPA researchers and Left Brain Concepts, Inc., these researchers surveyed more than 1,100 Americans asking many of the same questions/topics from the 1992 study, including:

- Americans' proximity (walking distance) to local parks, playgrounds and/or open space
- Americans' personal and household use of local parks and participation in recreation activities
- Americans' perceptions of park/program benefits for themselves, their family and for their community
- Americans' view of the key priorities for their local park and recreation agencies; namely, their support of NRPA's Three Pillars — conservation, health and wellness and social equity
- Americans' willingness to pay for local park and recreation services through tax dollars

As detailed in the pages that follow, the survey findings show Americans are as enthusiastic in their support for public parks as they were 25 years ago, and this passion resonates with the public across almost every demographic group throughout the United States.

Support for local parks is widespread, spanning:

AGE GROUPS

HOUSEHOLD TYPES

INCOME STRATA

POLITICAL AFFILIATION

7 IN 10 AMERICANS

GO TO THEIR LOCAL PARK

83%

of Americans **personally benefit** from local parks

92% of Americans

say their **communities benefit** from local parks

4 in 5

agree that local parks are **worth the tax dollars** spent on them

Americans see NRPA's 3 Pillars as the **chief priorities for local parks**

CONSERVATION

HEALTH & WELLNESS

SOCIAL EQUITY

KEY FINDINGS

Use, Value and Benefits of Local Parks

A majority of Americans live within walking distance of a park.

A major factor for why Americans go to their local park on a regular basis is proximity. Two-thirds of survey respondents say there is a park, playground or some other type of open space within walking distance of their home. Note that the survey did not specifically define what constitutes a "walking distance," but instead allows the survey respondent to decide what is meant by being "nearby." This is important as it is the perception of what is near that determines whether or not a local park is used frequently.

Roughly three-quarters of Americans who say they live in large, medium-sized or small cities/towns say they live within walking distance of a park. Those who say they live in a rural area have less access — slightly more than half of these survey respondents indicate they live near a local park.

A large majority of Americans use their local parks.

Local park and recreation systems are an integral part of most Americans' lives. Seven in ten survey respondents indicate that they go to their local park areas , including athletic fields, playgrounds and other open spaces in the community. Slightly more than a quarter of respondents use local parks "frequently" (26 percent) while another 44 percent do so "occasionally." This level of use is essentially unchanged from that reported in 1992. In the previous study, three-quarters of respondents reported using their local park and recreation areas for any purpose, including 24 percent saying they used parks frequently.

Park usage is broad based, with strong majorities of most demographic groups indicating that they visit their local parks.

Who is more likely to go to their local park? Those who are:

- Younger: 79 percent of survey respondents who are between the ages of 21 and 35 versus 57 percent of respondents between the ages of 65 and 75
- Wealthier: 80 percent of respondents earning more than $80,000 per year versus 66 percent of respondents that earn less than $40,000 per year
- Live in larger households: 87 percent of respondents living in homes with five or more people versus 60 percent of respondents who live by themselves

Not only do respondents visit their local parks, they also report that local parks, playgrounds and other open spaces play an important role in the lives of other members in their household. For example, 76 percent indicate that other members of their household — a spouse, children, relatives and other housemates — use local park areas. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents say that other members of the household "frequently" use parks, and 47 percent of other household members "occasionally" use parks. These results are consistent with household use of parks in 1992.

7 in 10 Americans go to their local park.

Americans' perceptions of the benefits from local parks have increased significantly during the past quarter century.

The positive outcomes or benefits derived from parks is a frequent message of the profession and was a key finding of the 1992 survey. Today, Americans see themselves benefiting from their local park areas, regardless of whether they themselves actually take advantage of the offerings available at their local park and recreation system. Even more remarkable, however, is that people place a greater value on their local parks today than they did a quarter century ago.

76% of respondents say household members use local park areas.

Five in six survey respondents indicate they personally benefit from their local park areas (83 percent). Almost half of people report that they personally benefit "a great deal" from local park areas (46 percent) while another 37 percent report "somewhat" gaining personal benefits from local parks.

The personal benefits arising from local parks are greater today than they were in the 1992 study. While the percentage of Americans indicating that they personally benefit from public parks is virtually unchanged from that reported a quarter century ago, survey respondents are more likely today to report that they benefited "a great deal" from local parks than they did in 1992. In the 1992 survey, 84 percent of survey respondents reported gaining benefits from their local parks, but only 37 percent of people felt they personally benefited a "great deal" from their local park areas. Whereas in 2015, 46 percent felt they benefited a "great deal."

As we saw with park usage, the likelihood of someone gleaning benefits from their local park spans across most demographic groups (with strong majorities of members of most demographic cohorts indicating so). Nevertheless, the survey respondent is more likely to indicate "a great deal" of benefits from local parks when s/he:

- Is younger: 52 percent of survey respondents between the age of 21 and 35 say they benefit "a great deal" from their local park areas versus 37 percent of respondents between the age of 66 and 75 who indicate the same.
- Earns a higher income: 56 percent of survey respondents earning more than $80,000 per year report benefiting "a great deal" from their local parks versus 41 percent of respondents that earn $40,000 or less annually who indicate the same.
- Lives outside of a rural area: Roughly half of survey respondents living in a city or town of any size derive "a great deal" of benefits from their local parks versus 36 percent who live in a rural area.

The benefits of local parks also resonate with other members of the survey respondents' households. Eighty-one percent of survey respondents say members of their households benefit from local park areas, essentially unchanged from the 79 percent of survey respondents who indicated the same in 1992. Almost equal percentages of survey respondents in 2015 say their households benefited "a great deal" (41 percent) or "somewhat" (40 percent) from their local park areas. This is an improvement from the 1992 study where only 31 percent of survey respondents indicated that other members of their household had benefited "a great deal" from their local park system.

Americans agree their communities benefit greatly from local parks.

The passionate support for local parks goes well beyond the survey respondents, their families and friends. A vast majority of Americans also agree that their community as a whole benefits from its local parks, with most seeing a large benefit to the area where they reside. In fact, Americans are more likely to perceive a higher level of community benefit than personal benefit from local park areas.

Ninety-two percent of respondents say that their community benefits from local park areas. Even more impressive is that 63 percent of respondents indicate their local park areas provided "a great deal" of benefit to the village, town or city in which they reside. This is not a new phenomenon. Americans attributing great community benefits from their local parks is essentially unchanged from how they felt a quarter century earlier. Ninety-four percent of participants in the 1992 study said their communities benefited from their local parks, of which 61 percent said their local community benefits "a great deal."

Americans say they personally benefit from having parks in their community, even if they themselves do not visit them.

It is not surprising that 97 percent of respondents who use their local parks report that they benefit from those areas. What is remarkable is that people who do not use local park areas nevertheless see local parks providing a high level of personal, household and community benefits. For example, 56 percent of non-park-users believe that local park areas provide a personal benefit to them. Fifty-three percent of non-users perceive local parks provide a benefit to other members of their household.

Even more striking is that 80 percent of non-park-users say that local park areas provide benefits to their community, with 48 percent indicating local park areas provide "a great deal" of benefit. These findings show that respondents do not have to directly use local park areas to believe that they, other members of their household, and especially the community at large benefit from having local parks in their area.

80 percent of non-park-users say that local park areas provide benefits to their community.

Beyond the local park user/non-user distinction, it is noteworthy that overwhelming majorities of Americans see their local park areas benefiting their communities regardless of their age, gender, level of education, income, marital status, political affiliation, household formation and employment status. The figure above illustrates this strong belief across a variety of demographic variables.

A majority of Americans have participated in organized recreation activities and services (e.g., programs) at some point in their lives.

Americans also value the organized activities provided by local recreation and park services. Thirty-two percent of respondents say they had used local recreation and park services during the previous year. Of those who had not participated in the past 12 months, 41 percent report that they participated in these services at some time in the past. When these two groups were combined, almost 60 percent of the respondents indicate that they used local recreation and park services at least once in their lives.

People say they personally benefit from organized recreation activities even if they do not participate in these activities.

Among those who did not use local recreation and park services during the past 12 months, 60 percent of respondents say that they received a personal benefit simply from the fact that their community had such services. Written another way, a person does not have to personally participate in local recreation services to believe that they received benefits from those activities, programs and services.

Americans profit from their local parks and organized recreation programs, with exercise/physical activity/fitness being the most frequently mentioned benefit.

So, how do Americans describe the specific benefits they receive from their local parks and organized recreation programs? According to the open-ended responses received in the 1992 and 2015 surveys, these benefits can take many different forms, including:

- Personal benefits — exercise, health, relaxation, fun/entertainment, enjoying being outdoors
- Environmental benefits — nature, aesthetics, fresh air, open space, wildlife
- Social benefits — sense of community, family-time togetherness, a safe place to take children, a place to meet people
- Economic benefits — availability, bringing business activity to community, influence on property values
- Facility/activity oriented benefits — recreation, sports, place to play, place to exercise pets

Exercise is frequently mentioned as the most important personal, household and community benefit derived from local parks. It was also identified as the most important personal and household benefit of organized recreation activities (i.e., programs).

These things were true in the 1992 study, and they remain true today. The specific type of benefit that Americans ascribed to recreation and parks is physical activity and health. These perceptions support the notion that parks are an important component of our nation's health system.

Americans see local park and recreation services as an important part of healthy living.

THE PRIORITIES OF LOCAL PARKS: NRPA'S THREE PILLARS

Americans agree that conservation, health and wellness and social equity are important priorities for local recreation and park services.

The evolving U.S. population, with new needs and desires, has presented a number of challenges for the nation that also impact local recreation and park services. These challenges span from a sedentary lifestyle that leads to obesity and other health problems to environmental and economic sustainability. Park and recreation agencies are a critical part of the solution because they provide their communities and their residents with a number of essential services and benefits.

NRPA summarizes the key priorities for local park and recreation agencies into its Three Pillars:

- **Conservation**

  Parks are critical in the role of preserving natural resources for communities. Local parks are the leaders, and often the only voice in communities, for protecting open space, connecting children to nature, and providing education and programming that helps communities engage in conservation practices.

- **Heath and Wellness**

  Local parks lead the nation in improving the overall health and wellness of communities. They are essential partners in preventing and combating some of the most complicated and expensive challenges our country faces — poor nutrition, hunger, obesity, chronic disease and physical inactivity.

- **Social Equity**

  Universal access to public parks and recreation is a right, not just a privilege. Local park and recreation agencies work hard to ensure that all members of their communities have access to their resources and programming.

But it is not just NRPA and its more than 50,000 members who agree the NRPA Pillars represent the critical role local and regional parks play in their communities. The NRPA Pillars also are the priorities on which Americans want their local parks to focus their resources.

Americans are almost in full agreement that the top priorities for their local and regional parks are associated with conservation, health and wellness and social equity. At least three-quarters of respondents (and, in some cases, upwards of six in seven) state that the following priorities should be "important" or "extremely important" for their local park and recreation agency:

CONSERVATION

86%
Conserving the natural environment

80%
Protecting open space

HEALTH & WELLNESS

84%
Offering facilities and services to improve physical health

80%
Offering facilities and services to reduce stress and improve mental health

SOCIAL EQUITY

88%
Ensuring that quality programs and facilities are equally accessible to all members of the community

77%
Addressing the needs of disadvantaged populations

Americans agree that the top priorities for their local parks are tied to Conservation, Health & Wellness and Social Equity.

THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF PARKS

Americans agree that local park and recreation services are worth the average amount of tax revenues invested in them…if not more.

In the current fiscal and political environment, local, state and federal governments face the challenge of meeting their broad mandates with constrained budgets. Local park and recreation agencies, too, have to do more with fewer resources, even though park agency spending leads to substantial economic activity in their communities and throughout the United States. The NRPA study The Economic Impact of Local Parks found America's local and regional public park agencies generated almost $140 billion in economic activity and supported almost 1 million jobs from their operations and capital spending alone in 2013.

Local and regional park agencies are able to serve their constituencies — and generate significant economic activity — at a relatively modest cost to the taxpayers. According to data collected in NRPA's benchmarking tool PRORAGIS, Americans currently pay an average of $70 per person per year in local taxes to support park and recreation activities.

Four in five Americans agree that the services offered by their local park and recreation agencies are worth the average amount of $70 per person spent each year. Support for local parks and recreation through taxes increases with age (at least through the working years), education level, income and (not surprisingly) whether the person has ever participated in a park and recreation activity. Interestingly, tax support for local park and recreation funding was unassociated with political affiliation and sex/gender. Furthermore, two-thirds of people who never visited parks or participated in organized programs agree that these services are worth the $70 per person collected in local taxes each year.

More so, two in five Americans are willing to pay even more than the 2015 U.S. average of $70 per person in local taxes to support their local and regional park systems. The support for increased funding of local parks is greater with males, those who are middle-aged, those with higher incomes, those who are Democrats and (not surprising again) those who have participated in local recreation services.

4 in 5 Americans say their local parks are well worth the average annual spending of $70 per person.

Agreement That Park and Recreation Services Are Worth $70, per Household Member, per Year

Percentage of People Willing to Pay More Than $70/Person Annual to Support Local and Regional Parks

So, who are these people who feel parks are worth more than the national average taxation bill of $70 per person? Of Americans who support increased taxation to support their local park and recreation agency

- 73 percent live near a park.
- 83 percent use parks, including 37 percent who do so on a frequent basis.
- 92 percent report a personal benefit from local parks.
- 92 percent report someone else in their household benefits from local parks.
- 97 percent believe their communities benefit from local parks.
- 55 percent have participated in a recreation activity at a local park at least once.

Even non-park users see tax spending on local parks as a good investment.

CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING FORWARD

Much as they had a quarter of a century ago, a majority of Americans use local park and recreation services and believe that they are a great benefit to their communities. The support is strong among virtually every segment of our society, regardless of age, income, household formation and even political affiliation. Further, Americans are united in seeing their local parks as leaders in conservation, health and wellness, and social equity.

The fact that support for local parks is as strong today as it was 25 years ago is most telling. In the time since this study was last conducted, much has changed in our society. For example, America has become an older, better educated, more racially/ethnically diverse and a more urbanized nation. Social interaction and entertainment options have also grown exponentially during this time period, with the advent and widespread adoption of the Internet, social media, 500-channel cable TV and on-demand media. These developments have broadened the definition of recreation beyond what could have been imagined a quarter of a century ago.

So why have Americans remained passionate about local parks even with the demographic shifts, technological advancements, economic pressures, new forms of recreation and the changing face of leisure? Local parks remain at the core of what defines a healthy, prosperous and connected community, and nothing related to technological advances and demographic shifts has altered that view.

If anything, the demographic, societal and technological changes have heightened the need for the many benefits of parks; namely, being an important contributor to health and wellness, being a communal place where people of all ages and social strata can interact with each other, and being a place that protects and preserves high-priority conservation areas. Finally, unlike virtually every other form of recreation, access to local parks is ubiquitous and not subject to high entrance fees or other qualifications.

The implications of these findings are clear. Despite the tight fiscal environment, Americans agree that local, state and national leaders need to dedicate financial resources to support, sustain and expand local park and recreation agencies. As indicated by their strong support, Americans do not view their local park and recreation system as a luxury, but instead as a vital part of what makes their neighborhood a vibrant, dynamic community.

Americans' strong support for local parks is magnified further when considering the fact that local and regional public parks contribute significant economic activity to their communities. As demonstrated in the recently released NRPA report, *The Economic Impact of Local Parks*, local and regional park agency spending generated almost $140 billion in economic activity and almost 1 million jobs in 2013. Investment in public parks aids in the progress for greater conservation, health and wellness, and social equity while also bringing economic prosperity to towns, cities and regions throughout the United States.

About the Study

This report is a follow up to the landmark study *The Benefits of Local Recreation and Park Services: A Nationwide Study of the Perceptions of the American Public*, by Geoffrey Godbey, Alan Graefe and Stephen James. That study was published by NRPA in 1992 using survey data that had been collected in 1991.

In 2015, NRPA commissioned Andrew Mowen, Alan Graefe, Austin Barrett and Geoffrey Godbey to follow up on the 1992 study. Using a 24-question survey instrument that closely followed the questions, wording and order of the 1992 survey, the 2015 study is based on responses from 1,144 randomly selected U.S. adults. The data collected from the telephone study was weighted to reflect the average age distribution of the U.S. adult population. The results presented in this report are subject to a margin of error of +/- 3 percent.

This report is a summary of key highlights from the full study report titled, Americans' Use and Perceptions of Local Recreation and Park Services: A Nationwide Reassessment. Please review the full report for greater detail on the study findings and survey methodology, along with a profile of the survey respondents. Find the full study report and interactive tools at www.NRPA.org/americans-support-parks.

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