



CHAPTER 8



ENGAGEMENT:

partnering with the public

How can the Game Plan engage the public as stewards, volunteers, and participants in decisions regarding design, funding, management, and programs? This chapter proposes a policy to engage businesses, community groups, and other organizations and institutions as partners in efforts to improve the system. And it recommends ways in which parks and recreation facilities and programs can become the catalyst for neighborhood revitalization and cohesiveness.





▲ COLLABORATION NEEDED FOR SUCCESS

The long-term success of our parks and recreation system depends on developing a solid relationship between DPR and the community. DPR must respond to the changing needs of Denver’s diverse residents and communities. In turn, citizens should be active stewards of our parks, open spaces, and recreation facilities. This requires strong, mutually beneficial partnerships, a flourishing volunteer program, continual assessments of community needs, and an inclusive process for decision-making.

Hands on Denver

Denver Parks and Recreation’s own volunteer program. Hands On Denver keeps over 6,000 volunteers a year busy! From painting playgrounds to using parks to teach job skills. Hands on Denver works to increase stewardship and visibly improve our parks and programs.

Your “Hands on Denver” volunteers ▲



Partnerships

Fortunately, Denver residents have a long history of generous involvement, from William McLellan, a blacksmith who almost single-handedly raised the money to build City Park’s elaborate gateway, to the Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, who have completed more than 40 construction projects for Denver parks within the past 10 years.

DPR’s own foundation, The Park People, has raised millions of dollars for park projects since its inception in 1963. DPR’s volunteer division, Hands on Denver, provides thousands of

service and learning hours each year. Concessionaires provide services and income to help protect our historic structures.

City-owned cultural institutions, such as the Denver Zoo, the Denver Botanic Garden, and the Historic Four Mile House, are flourishing today because of their dedicated trustees and fund-raising efforts. Nourishing these partnerships (through increased accountability, responsive decision-making processes, and innovative approaches) and building new ones will be critical for Denver, especially as social needs increase and budgets decline.

Engaging the Public

The *Game Plan*’s adoption and success ultimately depends on residents committed to helping DPR achieve its goals and on monitoring progress. Denver residents are passionate about their parks and recreation facilities and want a voice in every aspect of the system, from designing new parks and recreation programs, to evaluating the success of new maintenance standards.



DPR's Hands on Denver volunteer program, for example, provides opportunities to give back to the system through service, and has begun to tap the potential of DPR's physical resource base as a source for education, interpretation, and community enrichment.

Parks as Community Catalyst

The 20,000 acres of land and recreation facilities throughout the city could, in fact, become an economic and social catalyst for neighborhoods, and sites for service-based learning or the Saturday morning art-in-the-park classes for families.

With innovative partnerships and approaches, the system could provide neighborhoods places for job training, local economic opportunities, and enrichment classes. Parks no longer are passive, expanses of green but become the lively neighborhood social centers, complementing the recreation centers' outreach efforts.

Current models, such as the DPR's YO! Youth Opportunity Movement, the City Park Alliance, or the South Platte River Commission, could be broadened in scope. It is especially important to target youth in departmental input and new opportunities.

Responding to Needs

Parks, facilities, and programs need to vary across the city. An aging population, changing demographic groups, new recreation uses, and other shifting trends call for programs and services that reflect the needs of people using DPR facilities.

Park construction should be planned and executed according to the life cycle of neighborhoods, balancing basic equitable amenities with changing social needs.

For example, residents between the ages of 30 and 39 indicated the greatest use of park and recreation resources, with the elderly using them least, according to the *2001 Game Plan Survey*. In overall use, Hispanic and African-American respondents valued and used recreation facilities and ballfields significantly more than Caucasians.

Nearly 66 percent of Caucasians frequently used trails, compared with 39 percent of Hispanics responding. Only 25 percent of Caucasians reported using Denver's public pools, compared to 42 percent of Hispanics. Denver's low-income residents (households with incomes less than \$25,000 per year) use park and recreation facilities least often.

The Park People

The millions of dollars raised by The Park People, the department's 501(c)(3) foundation, have brought the Cheesman Park Pavillion, Washington Park Boat House, Civic Center Park, the Dolphin Fountain and other park features in disrepair back to life. Its signature program, Denver Digs Trees, has resulted in more than 23,000 street trees have been planted citywide.



Opinions and perceptions also varied by group. African-American residents were the least satisfied with the maintenance of park and recreation facilities and did not think the city allocated resources equitably. When asked whether the city should provide public areas for dogs to exercise off-leash, the less than 30 percent of respondents who did not

support either fenced or unfenced areas included a greater number of Denver seniors.

How can the *Game Plan* address these needs and preferences? How can DPR forge stronger relationships with the public? It requires careful balancing of needs, assessments, aggressive community outreach, and an ethic that respects a diverse and changing population.

CSU Cooperative Extension

CSU Denver Cooperative Extension provides walk-in, phone, and outreach information in four areas: 1) urban horticulture and natural resources. 2) family and consumer sciences. 3) food-stamp nutrition education, and 4) urban 4-H and youth development. This partnership enables CSU to be the link between emerging research and technology and the people who can use it.

Rebuilding the DeBoer Box Canyon in City Park



GOAL FOR ENGAGEMENT

DPR will engage the public, increase stewardship and volunteerism, build partnerships that encourage advocacy and additional financial resources, and respond to diverse community needs.

Recommendations

- 1. Build DPR's organizational capacity to** strengthen existing programs and garner new resources. To set the stage for success, DPR should develop resources, partnerships, and volunteer projects using the following strategies:
 - Provide professional leadership at top management and appointee levels.
 - Create career-service-level positions to manage each division below the position of manager.

- Develop professional job descriptions and conduct a competitive search for each position, if divisions continue to be managed by political appointees.
- Devise a staff-development position to strengthen existing partnerships and pursue other funding sources.
- Add staff commensurate with Hands on Denver staffing levels to meet the city's growing needs for volunteer-supported projects, service-based learning, and, especially, programs for youth.
- Create a Public Affairs unit to coordinate and build strong relationships with the public through: volunteerism, on-going community assessments and research, development, and communications.
- Hire more Spanish-speaking staff members and encourage bilingualism among staff.



- ◀ Encourage continual staff training in facilitation, community development, and grant writing.
- 2. Build neighborhoods through DPR parks and programs.** DPR should nurture partnerships and build new alliances with diverse agencies, foundations, and organizations to strengthen its base for advocacy, financial support, and volunteer stewardship. It should expand the potential and presence of parks and facilities in neighborhoods, creating opportunities and enrichment:
 - ◀ Encourage an ethic of partnerships through DPR policy statements, staffing, staff training and incentives, and public outreach.
 - ◀ Use the park and recreation system as a resource base through volunteerism, youth programs and service/place-based learning projects.
 - ◀ Expand Community Recreation, Outdoor Recreation, Special Needs and recreation “beyond walls” to program Denver parks and meet changing user needs. (Example: programming the Skate Park).
 - ◀ Develop criteria and a more business-like approach to evaluating potential partnerships, concessionaire agreements, and joint ventures.
 - ◀ Establish and meet performance measures, schedules, and expectations for public-private partnerships.
- ◀ Ensure donated amenities are well maintained through adequate funding, maintenance guidelines, and accountability measures.
- ◀ Identify potential corporate partnerships and grant sources and then tailor to DPR’s needs.
- ◀ Establish a working group with Jefferson County to coordinate regional concerns and efforts.
- ◀ Establish a standing committee for DPR’s nonprofit and private partners.
- ◀ Formulate a joint strategic plan with The Park People to further the goals of the *Game Plan*.
- ◀ Create a *Game Plan* Advisory Board to act as the plan’s advocate and to monitor DPR success in meeting its goals.
- ◀ Increase the visibility of DPR programs and amenities through brochures, newsletters, public relations, and outreach efforts.
- ◀ Provide better staff and policy support for special resources such as the Denver Zoo, the Denver Botanic Gardens, and Historic Four Mile House.
- ◀ Provide better staff and policy support for special institutions and organizations located on city-owned or park land, such as the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, Bluff Lake Nature Center, Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, and The Park People.

Denver Zoo

After a modest start in 1896 with one bear named Billy Bryan, the Denver Zoological Gardens has grown into one of the top 10 rated zoos in the country. Open 365 days a year in City Park, Denver Zoo is home to more than 4,000 animals representing more than 700 species. Highlights include newer exhibits such as Primate Panorama, one of the world’s largest gorilla habitats, Dragons of Komodo indoor dragon exhibit, and Tropical Discovery.

Denver Botanic Gardens

Although only 23 acres in the heart of Denver by Cheesman Park, the Botanic Gardens displays more than 15,000 plant species from around the globe. Its focus, however, is to connect people with the plants from the Rocky Mountain region and features an award-winning rock garden, Dryland Mesa grasslands, the Chatfield Arboretum and Mt. Goliath on Mt. Evans.



Game Plan Criteria for new uses, and minimizing conflicts:

- ▲ Are passersby and other park users at risk of injury?
- ▲ Does the use have unique space requirements or require significant separation from adjacent activities?
- ▲ Does the use require special drop-off/loading or parking arrangements?
- ▲ Would the use create additional or unusual maintenance burdens?
- ▲ Would the use damage existing park landscape, natural/historic/cultural resources or wildlife habitat areas?
- ▲ Is the area protected by some sort of designation?
- ▲ Does the use have a significant and organized constituency?
- ▲ Do DPR Rules and Regulations currently forbid the activity?
- ▲ Does the activity increase pollution or noise?
- ▲ Cost?

3. Research and respond to changing and diverse trends and needs. DPR should conduct on-going research and community needs assessments. It should also commit to meeting the needs of a diverse population by developing responsive processes and criteria through the following strategies:

- ▲ Conduct regular community needs analyses and general population surveys.
- ▲ Develop an open process and accountability for making decisions and responding to the public.
- ▲ Assign research on recreation trends as a staff responsibility and evaluate requests for new uses on the basis of this research.
- ▲ Ensure that facilities and programs are accessible for people with disabilities.
- ▲ Produce materials in English and Spanish.
- ▲ Begin planning and implementing two new uses identified by the *Game Plan* — a citywide pilot system of areas for dogs to exercise off-leash and a pilot disc-golf course.
- ▲ Identify potential new and reuse facility sites for more capital-intensive sports, including indoor soccer, in-line skating, and indoor playgrounds.

4. Involve the community in all aspects of parks and recreation work. The success the *Game Plan* depends on the involvement of Denver residents. To encourage community involvement, DPR should:

- ▲ Create relationships with the public at the neighborhood level and have planning, maintenance, and recreation staff stay in regular contact through articles in neighborhood newspapers, attendance at neighborhood association meetings, and by assigning a DPR community liaison.
- ▲ Expand community advisory committees to include broader neighborhood involvement in park and open space planning.
- ▲ Work more closely with community agencies such as the Denver Planning Office Neighborhood Response and the Housing and Neighborhood Services Office.
- ▲ Encourage neighborhood involvement in evaluating maintenance standards in neighborhood parks and in assessing *Game Plan* success, perhaps through “park report cards.”
- ▲ Increase education and outreach efforts through events such as recreation center open houses, displays at libraries and other public buildings, and community forums.

Although DPR and Denver have a number of strong programs and partners, a great deal of unrealized resources — both human and financial — are waiting to be tapped. To do that will take new policies, increased visibility and standing within DPR and the community, and the organizational ability and staffing needed to make it happen.