

## **BENCHMARK STUDY**

Benchmarking can be a very valuable tool that prepares an organization to be proactive by making improvements. It is recognized as an effective, formal methodology for improving an agency's performance and is one of the most powerful tools for initiating and sustaining continuous improvement. Benchmarking is a formal methodology for improving practices through analyzing the practices of other agencies in order to initiate improvement. The information collected in this study will help in the ongoing effort to improve the Hot Springs Park and Recreation Department and therefore benefit the city.

The primary purpose of this benchmark analysis was to determine how Hot Springs Park and Recreation Department compared to the other cities surveyed. The study was conducted on eight cities of equivalent size to Hot Springs. The criteria for selecting the cities was provided by the National Recreation and Parks Association website. Past winners of the prestigious Gold Medal Award were selected from the same classification under which Hot Springs would fall. This includes cities with a population from 25,000 to 50,000. A second group, Northwest Arkansas (NWA) communities, was also used to compare at a more local level. The similarity in size and geographic location of these communities compares with Hot Springs quite easily. The study collected data in the areas of acreage, agency budget, and staffing levels.

In order to achieve advancement, the research had to be conducted on cities that would help Hot Springs set future goals. Consequently, four Gold Medal Award (GMA) winning cities were selected because they have shown distinction to garner a prestigious award. The purpose of this award is to select and honor the nation's outstanding park and recreation agencies for

excellence in the field of Recreation Management. Data has been collected from the following four cities;

2001 Westerville, OH

1999 Bolingbrook, IL

1998 St. Charles, IL

1997 Germantown, TN

Benchmarking results focus management's attention on core issues and problems to provide a vehicle for developing effective solutions. Good decisions begin with good information, and benchmarking provides a framework and methodology to gather essential analysis. When benchmarked with the Gold Medal Award cities, Hot Springs does not compare well in any of the three areas examined.

The data collection totals for the Gold Medal Award winning communities are as follows.

City	Population	Acres- Total/Maintained	Fulltime Staff	Budget- Millions
Hot Springs	35,570	140/140	22	1,428,197
Bolingbrook, IL	56,321	714	50	14,000,000
Germantown, TN	37,348	700	75	6,536,000
St. Charles, IL	42,051	1,500/900	56	11,375,000
Westerville, OH	36,000	450/297	55	14,307,000

City	Population	Acres/1000 Pop.	Staff/1000 Pop.	Budget/Capita
Hot Springs	35,570	4	.62	40.2
Bolingbrook, IL	56,321	13	.90	248.6
Germantown, TN	37,348	19	2.0	175
St. Charles, IL	42,051	21	1.3	270.8
Westerville, OH	36,000	8	1.5	389

The average amount of land for the award winners is over 650 acres compared to Hot Springs at 140 acres. These cities have an abundance of land; with this land, they are able to offer many more programs. St. Charles has the most land at 21 acres per 1000 people. The lowest of the four, Westerville, has 8 acres per 1000 people which is twice the amount of acreage offered by Hot Springs.

The GMA cities also have many more employees to manage the parkland and create and maintain programs. They had a range from .9 to 2 staff members per 1000 people with the lowest at Bolingbrook, IL and the highest at Germantown, TN. Hot Springs has a staff of 22 fulltime employees. This equates to .6 staff members per 1000 people, which is the lowest in the study.

The total operating budgets for the cities ranged from \$6.5 to \$14.3 million dollars. This shows a wide gap between the budget of Hot Springs and the GMA cities. Each of the four winners had a higher budget than the non-award winners, exceeding the nearest non-winner by almost \$4 million per year. Westerville, OH had the most investment per capita at \$389, while Germantown, TN had the least per capita at \$175. The per capita investment by the city of Hot Springs for the Park and Recreation Department is \$40. The data collection totals for the NWA communities are as follows.

City	Population	Acres- Total/Maintained	Fulltime Staff	Budget- Millions
Hot Springs	35,570	140/140	22	1,428,197
Bentonville, AR	19,730	600/600	21	1,553,573
Fayetteville, AR	58,047	3,303/1,500	47	2,874,960
Springdale, AR	45,798	250/250	25	1,429,600
Rogers, AR	38,829	415	29	2,407,181

City	Population	Acres/1000 Pop.	Staff/1000 Pop.	Budget/Capita
Hot Springs	35,570	4	.62	40.2
Bentonville, AR	19,730	30	1.1	78.7
Fayetteville, AR	58,047	23	.81	49.5
Springdale, AR	45,798	5	.55	31.2
Rogers, AR	38,829	11	.75	62.0

When benchmarked with the NWA cities, Hot Springs is on the low end based on population. The average population was 40,600 for the cities surveyed. Excluding Bentonville, AR, (19,730), the populations ranged from 38,829 in Rogers, AR to 58,047 in Fayetteville, AR.

Of the cities surveyed on the total number of acres they manage, Hot Springs was low by comparison. Both the total acres and maintained acres were surveyed. The data was broken down into acres of maintained land per 1000 people with Bentonville having the most at 30 acres per 1000 people. Hot Springs has the least with only 4 acres per 1000 people.

Staffing is an important consideration for a Park and Recreation Department. More staff can bring more programs, more satisfaction for the populous, and overall a more productive department. The cities were polled on employees consisting of full-time staff including administration, programmers, and maintenance. Hot Springs has a staff of 22 fulltime employees. This data was broken down into staff per 1000 people. Northwest Arkansas cities had a range from .55 to 1.1 with the lowest at Springdale, AR and the highest at Bentonville, AR. Hot Springs has .62 staff members per 1000 people, which is at the low end of the polled cities. Only Springdale, who has .55, is lower.

An adequate operating budget is crucial to making a great Park and Recreation Department because with more money comes more programs and opportunities for the public. The budget per capita for the cities ranged from \$31.2 at Springdale to \$78.7 at Bentonville. Hot Springs' budget, at \$40 per person, is only ahead of Springdale.

Benchmarking is a measurement technique that gives information to an organization so they can learn something about their own practices and the practices of selected others. The organization compares the differences and alters practices where needed. When it comes to budget and to acreage, Hot Springs is behind the cities in NWA. In fact, Hot Springs is lagging behind the Gold Medal winners in all three categories as well. If the goal of Hot Springs is to become an elite figure in the parks and recreation community then they will need to follow the lead of these past winners.

The award winning cities have large budgets, acreage totals, and staffs that allow them to offer a wide variety of programs that can accommodate many people. Hot Springs will need to increase all three categories in order to reach their level. The proposed Hot Springs Regional Park would be a huge step in the right direction that would launch the Park and Recreation department to new heights. The proposed park would add another 482 acres to the existing 140 and bring the totals (622) up to compete with the Gold Medal Award winners. The extra acreage is essential for adding more programs that will enhance the effectiveness of the Department. The citizens want more soccer, softball, and scenic trails, and this would be possible only with more land. With extra acres and programs, there comes a need for a higher budget, however, there is also the power to generate a great deal of revenue.