

Politics and Advocacy

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Kimberly J. Bodey
Indiana State University

Nathan A. Schaumleffel
Indiana State University

Practitioner Consultant
Richard Dolesh
National Recreation and Park
Association

Public policy for parks and recreation is a complex subject. For any given challenge, there is a myriad of cause-and-effect relationships that can be fraught with confusion, contradiction and consternation. Moreover, the political environment inside and outside the organization add to issue complexity (Bodey, 2008). Nonetheless, the park and recreation professional must develop and exercise his or her political skill and actively advocate for public policy that positively impacts the organization and community at large.

Politics

Organizational theory is a field of study that investigates the design and function of organizations. One aspect of organizational theory is the study of political behavior (and reactions) individuals and groups experience in the workplace. Historically, scholars have argued that politics interferes with proper management processes (e.g., decision-making or distribution of rewards and punishments) and damages productivity and performance within the organization (Vigoda, 2000). A different view has emerged in recent years. This view suggests political skill is a legitimate managerial attribute because it is necessary to achieve organizational goals within the larger political environment.

The Park and Recreation Professional as a Politician

Scholars disagree on how to define “politics”. Various definitions exist. Each definition focuses on the use of power and influence; however, the definitions differ in regard to purpose, means and circumstances, as well as to whether political activity is formal or informal, sanctioned or non-sanctioned. In general, negative connotations outweigh positive connotations. For instance, Mintzberg (1983) refers to politics as “individual or group behavior that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in a technical sense, illegitimate—sanctioned neither by formal

authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise” (p. 172). Clearly the focus is on the dysfunctional or deviant aspects of political activity sometimes found in organizational settings. Alternatively, Ferris, Perrewe, & Gilmore (2000) described politics as an “internal social influence process in which behavior is strategically designed to maximize short term and long term self interests” (p. 26). This definition allows for both functional outcomes, such as building consensus or alliances, that have a positive impact on the organization and dysfunctional outcomes, such as manipulative, self-serving behaviors, that have a negative impact on the organization.

In any case, it is not useful to think about politics as being “good” or “bad” since all behavior within an organization can be perceived as being politically motivated and could potentially result in positive or negative outcomes for the agency. Rather, the park and recreation professional should concentrate on developing useful political skills to increase the likelihood of achieving strategic outcomes in line with the organization’s mission. Specifically, the park and recreation professional must set a managerial agenda, develop a map of the political terrain, network and form alliances, and master the art of negotiation.

Set a Managerial Agenda

A managerial agenda is a statement of personal and organizational interests. (See Compendium 4-1 for NRPA’s Legislative Platform for 2009.) It is a prioritized list of what the park and recreation professional wants to accomplish. Frequently, the organizational interests are outlined in the agency’s strategic plan. In the event the strategic plan is nonexistent or out of date, the park and recreation professional must rely on input from staff and patrons to determine which strategic initiatives should be undertaken during a given period of time. For instance, a strategic initiative may be to increase the capital budget for new facilities or land acquisition (e.g., parks) during the next three years.

The managerial agenda must express a purpose, provide direction and fit within the organization’s

mission. The park and recreation professional uses the managerial agenda to guide decision-making about how to manage the agency, as well as how to politically position the organization to achieve its strategic outcomes. This “agenda for change” includes two key elements: vision and strategy.

Developing a vision for change begins with understanding major stakeholders’ agendas and motivations. For example, the park and recreation professional should understand the perspectives of the director of the chamber of commerce, director of community development, director of the convention and visitors bureau, president of the association of neighborhood associations, and others because these people represent groups likely to be affected by changes in facilities or land acquisition in the community. A key political attribute is to be “sensitive;” that is, to know other people’s concerns and how they think, in order to respond to their concerns. Gathering information is also important because to be a successful “persuader,” the park and recreation professional must know who should be persuaded and how to best convince them. Moreover, the astute manager must plant seeds. The aim is to deposit the bud of an idea so that it germinates, blossoms, and floats around the system. With luck, the idea takes hold and grows. (See Compendium 4-2 for Department of Natural Resources Stakeholder List.)

The strategy for change is based on prioritizing key issues, recognizing who makes decisions, and understanding when and how decisions are made. The park and recreation professional should outline a specific, yet flexible, plan to meet and persuade key decision-makers about the need for additional funding for facilities or land acquisition and the value these spaces create for the community. A particular strategy must adjust to the internal and external forces working for and against the vision for change. As the context changes, so do the priorities and resulting actions. Depending on the forces at work, a savvy park and recreation professional may need to act in more overt or more covert ways. Remember the vision for change does not come in a neat package, nor does the best strategy.

Develop a Map of the Political Terrain

To map the political terrain, the park and recreation professional must be able to assess political turf. In other words, he or she must scout the “battlefield” to determine who will be allies and who will be opposition in the fight to increase green space in the community. This process involves four steps (Pichault, 1993). First, determine and assess channels of informal communications. Where can you get information? How reliable are the sources? Second, identify the principle agents

who have political influence. Ask yourself: who are the key players? what do they want? what do they need? Third, analyze the possibility for internal and external mobilization. In other words, continually observe and evaluate the motives and actions of others; the goal is to identify specific points of time and actions that will likely result in substantive victories contributing to the goal of adding funding for facilities and land acquisition. Fourth, anticipate the strategies others are likely to employ. This means that the park and recreation professional must determine how much clout each player is likely to exercise and how to respond with appropriate political maneuvering. Throughout the process, it is best to employ a healthy skepticism about the limits of what is likely to be achieved. (See <http://www.muckety.com/California-State-Parks-and-Recreation-Commission/5027417.muckety> for an interactive relationship map.)

Network and Form Alliances

The first step in building alliances is to determine whose help is needed. Then, the park and recreation professional must develop a positive relationship such that relevant people are there when needed. In part, this involves “cultivating cheerleaders,” “securing blessings,” and “horse trading” (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Cultivating cheerleaders is gaining the enthusiasm and support of peers, stakeholders, potential collaborators, and patrons by selling them on the importance or value of a particular initiative. Essentially, cultivating cheerleaders means building an advocacy base with people who can promote the initiatives within their networks. Securing blessings involve developing a polished, formal presentation to garner the support of senior managers, board members, local politicians and the like. Horse trading is a way to trade support for initiatives. To be sure, park and recreation professionals must always operate within a framework of the highest integrity and unswerving ethical behavior. However, it is entirely proper to share a vision for the future with potential allies, and, in seeking their support, it is appropriate to offer to support their goals and initiatives for the public good.

Park and recreation professionals need allies to get things done. To gain support, the manager must invest time and effort in building strong relationships. Of course, it is also sensible to develop, whenever possible, relationships with prospective opponents. Well-developed relationships with potential challengers are likely to result in better communication, greater access to information and more productive negotiation. (See Compendium 4-3 for California Parks and Recreation Society’s ideas to position your agency with policy-makers.)

Master the Art of Negotiation

Negotiation is the act of reaching an agreement when two or more parties have some interests in common and other interests in conflict. Any political action is fundamentally about compromise. The park and recreation professional must find ways to arrive at a win-win situation. To reach agreements beneficial to all parties, it is useful to engage in principled bargaining.

Principled bargaining has four strategies. First, separate the people from the problem. Keep the focus of negotiation on the merits of the problem and avoid getting bogged down by personal attacks and anger. Second, focus on interests, not positions. Recognize that there are many ways to achieve a goal. Being locked into a particular position limits the range of possible solutions. Third, invent options for mutual gain. Strive to identify new angles that could be advantageous to both sides. The effort invested in generating more options frequently results in better outcomes. Fourth, when possible, insist on utilizing objective criteria. For instance, if the park and recreation professionals are negotiating with the city council for additional operating funds, they could look at an independent standard, such as the rate of inflation, for guidance.

To be a successful politician, the park and recreation professional also must strive to develop an image. This begins with "dressing for success," but extends to personal mannerisms, speech, and interactions with others. Become invaluable by obtaining information and developing skills that no one else in the organization possesses. Develop positive regard by thinking outside the box; that is, create short-term and long-term initiatives by arranging different facts in unique ways. Constructively challenge "the ways things are done around here" by scrutinizing preconceptions and faulty assumptions. Finally, the successful park and recreation professional must be perceived as caring, sincere, enthusiastic, flexible, goal oriented, and prepared to seize opportunities when they appear in the political arena.

Internal and External Organizational Politics

Management involves working with and through people to achieve organizational objectives. Park and recreation professionals use political skill on a daily basis to get things done. Whether agreeing to program budgets and how to use facility space, or arguing for a less-expensive rate to landscape grounds, park and recreation professionals spend time and energy reconciling different interests. Managers are, like it or not, politicians that negotiate inside and outside the organization.

Internal Organizational Politics

To successfully manage internal politics, the park and recreation professional must communicate a managerial agenda (e.g., vision and strategy), enlist the cooperation of staff members, and watch for warning signs and symptoms of dysfunction within the organization. The park and recreation professional must outline priorities and be willing to promote practical solutions, if progress is to be made in the agency. If a manager does not have an agenda, one will be defined for him or her. Managers who wait for either top-down, unambiguous direction or bottom-up, definitive input essentially have passed the power to others. Political activity is not something to be scheduled for one afternoon a week. Rather, using power and influence is a fundamental part of managing organizations all day, every day.

Achieving strategic goals depends on the cooperation of others. Staff members rarely give their best efforts and fullest cooperation simply because they are directed to do so. Staff members engage in the workplace when they perceive the park and recreation professional is a credible, competent, and sensible individual. Perrewe, Ferris, & Anthony (2000) described the manager as "behaving in a disarmingly charming and engaging manner that inspires confidence, trust, sincerity, and genuineness" (p. 118). Therefore, the park and recreation professional must be cognizant of how they are perceived by staff members and seek to collaborate with likeminded individuals with whom they can develop ideas into action plans for change.

The park and recreation professional also must be aware of the "politics" that happen in the office. Each staff member has his or her own agenda, be it self-serving or altruistic. Keep in mind, regardless of agenda; everyone has something to contribute so long as the workplace is managed appropriately. However, even in the best of settings, dysfunctional behavior may take hold. The park and recreation professional should monitor and take action when warning signs such as a high stress workplace, dictatorial leadership and over-management, constant crisis mode of operation, inequitable work distribution, and low productivity are apparent. Additional symptoms may include empire-building practices, lack of collaboration, fragmented organizational efforts, and low morale (International Institute of Management, 2008).

External Organizational Politics

Consider the various political strategies for getting things done in the community. Some strategies, when repeated frequently, destroy relationships, marginalize groups, and create unnecessary conflict. Other strategies, when repeated frequently, build relationships, facilitate inclusiveness, and support collaborative work.

Both approaches can produce change; however, only the second set of strategies produces lasting efforts where success consistently breeds more success. The essence of “sustainable politics” is to employ strategies to meet organizational needs and strengthen a collaborative and inclusive political culture. Building sustainable politics requires the park and recreation professional to create synergy around a shared vision within the community.

Meeting community needs requires action by multiple institutions and a significant number of citizens. Elected officials recognize they cannot make changes alone. Inter-organizational networks, made up of legally independent and autonomous agencies, are needed to share knowledge and resources as well as to facilitate innovation. Citizens are essential to achieving political objectives. They provide political direction, support, and, in an increasing number of settings, they do the work. The park and recreation professional should anticipate citizen desires and emerging community wishes. This knowledge allows the park and recreation professional to envision what these groups can do individually and collectively to benefit the community and then act to transform that vision into reality.

The park and recreation professional must position him or herself to communicate this vision and generate support. If there is a committee that makes crucial decisions, the park and recreation professional must become a member of the committee or seek a trusted advocate on such committees. If there are social events where influential people will be, the park and recreation professional must attend and be part of the conversation. Contribute when possible, but, more importantly, listen to what is being said and by whom. Then, bring the individuals and groups who can contribute to the vision together to discuss possibilities and opportunities to benefit individuals, organizations, and the community at large. The park and recreation professional should facilitate negotiation, planning, and doing in a synergistic way. Trust, accountability, and transparency hold these political relationships together to produce lasting change.

Participation in the Policy Process

It is not uncommon for park and recreation professionals to avoid getting involved in the policy process. For some, politics is perceived as an unethical profession and best left to the “real politicians.” For others, non-participation is based on a lack of vision, an unwillingness to take risks, or a belief that “one person” can have little to impact political outcomes. Some park and recreation professionals simply do not recognize the impact public policy has on the profession, and there-

fore believe there is no need to get involved. Nothing can be further from the truth.

In recent years, federal legislation and federal regulations have had a noticeable effect on the profession. For instance, legislation such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Urban Park and Recreation Recovery, National Park Service Centennial Challenge, No Child Left Inside, and, most recently, Swimming Pool Safety has impacted how park and recreation professionals do their jobs. Legislators have also made changes in laws and regulations related to minimum wage, lifeguard age requirements, automated external defibrillator (AED) usage, criminal background check infrastructure, and the concealed carry of loaded firearms in national parks and wildlife refuges. Public policy is made by those who participate in the process. Joel Blackwell (2002) remarked: “all things being equal, politicians will go with the flow. Your job is to create the flow” (p. 4). Park and recreation professionals, citizen board members, and volunteers create flow by being active, effective participants in the policy process.

Each park and recreation agency has different problems and concerns. An unpredictable economic climate, multiple and overlapping jurisdictions, further regulation, red tape, and government intrusion into everyday life make it difficult to implement optimal solutions. Toss in the information explosion, the ebb and flow of political ideas, the speed and growth of technology, and the tendency toward crisis management, and it becomes clear why park and recreation professionals must advocate for organizational interests. Further, their knowledge of issues, influence in the community, and passion for the cause make them appropriate, if not perfect, candidates for advocacy.

Elected officials tend to listen to people who can provide the best technical and background information about a particular issue, assist in synthesizing competing interests to find middle ground, and accurately represent an identifiable constituency. Consider that during the last 30 years, legislation endorsed by the Illinois Association of Park Districts has passed 92 percent of the time (Illinois Association of Park Districts, 2008). Park and recreation professionals are experts, and politicians listen to experts. Moreover, each professional has a First Amendment Constitutional right (and responsibility) to discuss issues of concern with elected officials and to lobby for positive change. Caution is warranted, as there are limits to what individuals can do as official representatives of a park and recreation agency. The park and recreation professional should have a clear understanding of what superiors’ desire of employees when speaking on policy matters that affect the organization. In addition, the park and recreation professional should contact his or her state ethics office

for current rules and regulations prior to meeting with elected officials.

Studying the Public Policymaking Process

Park and recreation professionals study the policymaking process in order to effect change. Ultimately, it is about practicality. Managers need to know enough about the “game” to be players at the table. Being in the game provides an opportunity to give voice to the preferred problem definition and, more importantly, to advocate for policy options that benefit the organization. Alternatives may be crafted in ways to either maximize resources and benefits or minimize costs and burdens. For instance, consider a community that has seen a resurgence in art-based vandalism. Knowledgeable park and recreation professionals can convince key decision-makers that one of the root causes of the problem is a lack of programming at the community center, and that a pro-active approach providing recreational alternatives is sound public policy. An alternative may be crafted to allow additional city resources to be directed to the center to support programming, staff, and supplies. An expressive art program could be initiated or expanded to create imagery on designated city buildings and structures. In this case, resources are directed toward the community center to support programming, rather than solely to the police department to support increased community patrols and rigorous enforcement. By understanding the process, park and recreation professionals (as policy actors) can advocate for their preferred alternative to solve problems.

Engaging in the policy game is often like playing any other game. To play, one must know the points of entry and rules. To play well, one must develop a strategy that is context specific and based on measurable goals. The strategy must be dynamic yet flexible in order to manage constraints and overcome barriers to achieve the desired outcome. Policymaking also takes time. To be effective, the park and recreation professional must commit to being a part of the game until it is over. Of course, win or lose, there is always another game to be played.

Sources of Public Policy

By definition, public policy is a stable, purposive course of action executed by a designated “actor” to manage a problem (Anderson, 2006). It is public, in the sense that it affects a greater variety of people and interests than do private decisions. The policy is based on the notion that it is “good for everyone” (e.g., public interest), and it serves as an outside force that impacts the way people live. Public policy can take the form of federal and state laws, as well as city ordinances. Rules and regulations are policy because they are the specific

means by which laws are implemented. While court cases are not themselves public policy, they do impact how laws are interpreted and how rules and regulations are implemented.

The law is an artificial mechanism designed to channel human behavior in socially-appropriate directions. It provides guidelines or a minimum standard of conduct that must be followed. Laws come from constitutions, statutes, and court cases. Constitutions establish and ordain government systems and outline the fundamental rights and obligations of citizens. While a state constitution may grant rights greater than those the U.S. Constitution confers, it may not limit or take away rights provided by the U.S. Constitution or federal statutes. Federal statutes are laws created by the federal government. State statutes are laws created by state governments. State laws may not infringe upon any provision of federal or state constitution or federal statute. It is beyond the scope of this book to outline how a bill becomes a law at the federal and state level. Park and recreation professionals not familiar with this process are strongly encouraged to review the Internet resources provided at the end of the chapter.

At the local level, ordinances and resolutions are legitimate methods of establishing government action. An ordinance is a city or county law (e.g., dog leash ordinance, curfew for youth). It is permanent, codified, and carries more authority than a resolution. Certain ordinances must go before the citizens (e.g., taxation issues, changes in government structure). A resolution is a formal decision of the legislative body. For instance, “July is Recreation Month” in a community may be a city council resolution. A local city or county government’s homepage will likely provide information on how an ordinance or resolution is generated in the community.

Case law may be referred to as judge-made law or common law. Cases are legal resolutions based on a particular set of facts involving parties with an interest in the dispute. In general, the Court may do one of three things. The Court may make a fair determination based on some prior case decision (precedent). The Court may interpret the intent of a specific piece of legislation as compared to the way the statute is being implemented. Finally, the Court may consider whether a statute or governmental action is consistent with either the U.S. Constitution or a particular state constitution. The outcome of court cases can have a tremendous impact on the operation of park and recreation facilities.

Using authority granted by federal or state legislation, administrative agencies may issue rules and regulations to serve as guiding principles or to outline a specific course of action. For example, a state health department has the authority to create regulations that

affect community health. Park and recreation professionals must comply with these regulations by taking specific steps to confirm that pools and concessions meet certain safety and cleanliness standards.

A few basic principles are followed when determining the issue of supremacy. First, federal laws supersede state laws. Second, within a specific federal or state jurisdiction, rules exist to govern the hierarchy of legal authority based on the source of law. In particular, the U.S. Constitution takes precedence over federal statutes, federal cases, and federal rules and regulations. Similarly, the state constitution takes precedence over state statutes, state cases, and state rules and regulations. As a source of authority, the importance of case law should not be underestimated. The way the same or similar constitutional or statutory provisions have been interpreted in the past will have an enormous effect on how the current provision is construed.

NRPA's Role in Public Policy

Since 1965, one of the most important goals of the National Recreation and Park Association has been to influence public policy for parks and recreation at the national level. Over the years, NRPA's Public Policy Office has been very successful in implementing public policy goals and assisting park and recreation professionals to make a difference at the national, state, and local levels. The Public Policy Office provides information on the content, status, and likely future of Congressional, administrative, and regulatory actions. It also serves as a national source of information on how federal actions will affect state and local policies and practices. The Division provides policy guidance, conducts research, and analyzes emerging issues.

Through outreach activities, the Division keeps park and recreation professionals, citizen advocates, and policymakers informed about breaking news related to parks and recreation. Through the NRPA website, members and nonmembers can access information to use when speaking with lawmakers, read the latest news from Capitol Hill, and locate links to legislative contact and tracking information. The Public Policy Office also manages the RecreACTION Network, an issue-specific, grassroots advocacy program, and publishes *Dateline Online*, a recurring e-newsletter. A listserv distributes Action Alerts to encourage the membership to communicate with politicians regarding initiatives before the legislature. Members may also use the list to share ideas and solutions or ask for help with state and local policy issues. Information about how to contact the Public Policy Office and to locate policy information and legislative alerts from NRPA is provided in the resource section at the end of chapter.

Advocacy

Implementing a successful advocacy campaign, whether it be a local referendum or a major federal bill in joint committee, takes strategy, planning, and choreographed implementation at the most politically-beneficial time. While this may seem daunting to the novice advocate, keep in mind that understanding political action makes it possible to take advantage of opportunities when they are available in order to achieve specific goals. Peter Murphy (2002) aptly pointed out, "99 percent of all people complain about government and sit back and do nothing, and 1 percent roll up their sleeves and try to make the system better, the odds are in favor that you can make an impact" (p. 3). Making an impact begins with understanding what advocacy aims to achieve and utilizing basic strategies to influence the system.

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is broadly defined as any attempt to influence someone or support something to bring about change. Advocacy is concerned with conveying a message to a variety of audiences in multiple ways. For example, educating neighbors about important community issues, writing a letter to the editor, or providing information at a civic group meeting are all methods of advocacy. A particular form of advocacy, legislative advocacy or lobbying, is any attempt to influence public officials, including members of Congress, state legislators, and city council members. Federal, state, and local governments play an extensive role in making policy decisions that affect park and recreation organizations. Therefore, representation of park and recreation interests in policy discourse is necessary. Individuals and organizations that take political action affect what elected officials hear. What elected officials hear, contributes to what political business is accomplished.

Many park and recreation professionals have the mistaken impression that they are not allowed to lobby, especially if they work for a local or state government agency. This is simply not true. Every citizen, even those who work for government agencies, has the right to lobby elected officials. Park and recreation professionals should understand that they have the right and responsibility to educate elected officials about public policy decisions affecting parks and recreation, the impact of budget decisions, and the effects of all types of legislation. However, lobbying conduct is strictly regulated and the total amount of lobbying time cannot exceed certain limits. More information may be obtained from one's state ethics office and the Clerks of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.

Furthermore, many people belong to or are represented directly or indirectly by advocacy groups. Advocacy groups try to get a fair shake, an advantage, or specific legislative outcome; or they may try to stop something from being done that would have an adverse effect. Often park and recreation organizations rely on business associations, trade associations, and non-profit organizations to play a substantial role in advocating for agency interests. The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is one such non-profit public benefit organization that promotes the interests of its membership.

Advocacy Requires Leadership

For the park and recreation profession, advocacy is more important than it has ever been. This is because: a. other priorities will receive funding and precious resources unless the park and recreation profession's goals remain on the national and state agendas; b. once funding is lost, it is virtually impossible to regain (e.g., the Urban Park and Recreation Recovery program); and c. the need for parks, outdoor recreation, and conservation continues to grow. Effective advocacy requires effective leadership.

Effective leadership means using power and influence wisely to achieve realistic goals. The park and recreation professional must appreciate the complex forces at work inside and outside the organization and know when, and to what degree, to push new ideas or new ways of accomplishing goals. Further, the park and recreation professional must cultivate a culture or atmosphere of shared commitment to positive change.

Being an effective leader also means having strong human relations skills, particularly an ability to manage conflict appropriately. Conflict is a natural part of the policy process. In fact, conflict is a natural part of any group process. Being able to handle conflict, or what some call crucial conversations, is critical to influencing federal and state legislation or local ordinances. A crucial conversation is a conversation where opinions vary, stakes are high, and emotions run strong (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002).

Park and recreation professionals clearly and regularly have crucial conversations in the areas of politics, public policy, and advocacy. For example, in several recent fiscal years, park and recreation professionals have advocated to save the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Many politicians disagree with the need to fund the LWCF or support other funding priorities (opinions vary); clean air, water, and open space are at the risk of being lost (stakes are high); and park and recreation professionals are very passionate about preserving open spaces, public land, and public funding (emotions run strong).

Demonstrating effective leadership means park and recreation professionals must be representatives of the profession, educators of elected officials and constituents, and persuaders of change in the community. To effectively persuade an elected official, park and recreation professionals must focus on developing long-term, trusting relationships. Blackwell (2002) offers excellent advice when he says "issues will come and go and you will win some and lose some. But the relationships you build will serve you for a long time, win or lose" (p. 61).

Advocacy Strategies

As busy individuals, park and recreation professionals are inclined to see advocacy as a chore they can do when they have more time. However, for advocacy to bring about change, it must be done by all who care—all of the time. Doing one small thing every day will eventually lead to the desired outcome. Experience shows that an advocacy campaign is most effective when it incorporates the strategies listed below (Bodey, Brylinsky, & Kuhlman, 2008; Schaumleffel & Tialdo, 2006).

Strategy 1: Identify Critical Issues and Formulate a Game Plan

The advocacy process begins by identifying critical issues and shaping a message. Park and recreation professionals must clearly identify: why the issue is important? In particular, how are the community at large and the specific organization helped or harmed by the issue? What real and potential alternatives exist? What are the preferred or desired outcomes? And, where is there room for compromise?

Facts and figures matter; so do sources. Know the facts and express them accurately and positively. Tailor a "one-minute" message for the primary target(s). Tell the target(s) why you care about the issue and why they should too. Keep the statement focused and concise. Support the recommendations for change with clear, data-driven evidence. Park and recreation professionals should contact affiliated national and state organizations who may be able to provide current statistics, timely information, and helpful materials on a variety of issues to support advocacy efforts. For example, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) proposed an amendment to the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act that would have prohibited the use of any stimulus funds for community parks. Parks and recreation professionals, with the assistance from NRPA's Public Policy Office, reacted quickly by contacting their senators to share specific facts and figures on how this amendment would likely impact his or her local community; they then made recommendations for how their senator should vote on the amendment.

To identify primary targets, the park and recreation professional should draw a target power map. Such a map includes supporters, opponents, and neutral players. Consider the following: Who will be affected? Who would want to know? Who might help? Each individual's level of knowledge about the issue; power, influence, and connections; and level of demonstrated support or opposition toward a particular issue should be identified and listed. Advocates will need to determine how individuals or committees who have the authority to make changes in policy could benefit by resolving the issue. Outlining this information allows the park and recreation professional to shape the message, select communication channels and methods, and build strong alliances.

Advocates can progress toward long terms goals by tailoring the implementation plan to coincide with other influencing factors (e.g., personnel changes, campaigns and elections, national and state public forms). Talk about the change you want to see happen in your network, and focus your effort on swaying the "undecideds," rather than spending too much time convincing the opposition. Remember the old adage: "It is not what you know, but who you know." Use your network to your advantage. In any case, it is important to develop a thick skin. Taking a position can evoke criticism, but it is best not to take it personally. If you look on the bright side and maintain a sense of humor, advocacy can be fun.

Strategy 2: Communicate with Elected Officials

Once an issue is identified, a message is articulated, and a strategy is in place, there are many ways to communicate with elected officials, including letters, e-mail, telephone calls, and individual or group meetings. Park and recreation professionals need to provide fact-based background information to either support or oppose a policy decision. Clearly identify the groups and individuals who will argue in opposition and explain why they oppose what you are seeking. Be sure to politely tell the elected official exactly what you want him or her to do, and when you want him or her to do it. The next step is to ask the elected official to clearly state what he or she intends to do to support or oppose the issue, and why. The park and recreation professional should reiterate this information in a follow-up communication to the elected official. Ultimately, the goal is to shape the legislators' or city council members' response to an issue well before the opposition has an opportunity to trigger a reply of their own.

Inviting elected officials to tour your facility or attend special events is another excellent way to communicate with elected officials. During these visits, the park and recreation professional has an opportunity

to provide information on how parks and recreation facilities and programs make a difference in the lives of people, and how their constituents would fare if particular decisions were made. Also, park and recreation professionals should keep elected officials well informed throughout the year by including them on all e-mail and mailing distribution lists. Even when not advocating for a particular issue, it is important for the legislator or city council member to be aware of your views and ongoing interest in issues that affect the community. Park and recreation professionals should also work to develop and maintain good relations with staff aides. If you cannot easily get "face time" with the elected official, keeping the staff well informed is the next best thing.

Strategy 3: Build Coalitions

The greater the number of people working to support a policy decision, the more likely a successful outcome will result. The key is to build alliances with organizations and people with similar missions, goals, and objectives. Strive to build alliances with non-traditional partners. Share ideas with colleagues, seek friends in unusual places, and make an effort to expand grassroots support to build coalitions. This is called building social capital.

By increasing the number and type of supporters, there is a greater chance of convincing the elected official of the wisdom of supporting a suggested policy direction. Coalitions are particularly important to small organizations because they connect the agency's mission to a larger vision, bring staff members together with other influential people, and combine resources for greater efficiency. The cornerstone of a successful advocacy campaign is to communicate a consistent, reoccurring message that resonates with the intended audience. "It Starts in Parks" and "The Benefits are Endless" are reoccurring messages frequently used in campaigns developed by the profession to build public awareness and support.

Coalition building is very important, but there are other ways to garner support for a particular initiative. The park and recreation professional can acquire an endorsement from organizations or individuals that may not be able to fully commit to coalition membership. For example, an endorsement may be obtained from local or national organizations (e.g., American Red Cross), community or civic groups (e.g., Rotary Club), or influential people in the community (e.g., former mayor). Giving testimony at public hearings is a key part of the legislative process; therefore, it is often helpful to solicit groups or individuals who have a similar message to testify. Finally, the park and recreation professional can ask elected officials to send "Dear Colleague" letters. These letters are a form of internal

lobbying where one elected official urges another to support or oppose a specific policy initiative. An effective Dear Colleague letter is always bi-partisan, and they frequently carry an exceptional amount of weight with federal legislators.

Strategy 4: Use the Media to Generate Awareness

Spreading messages through mass media is an essential way to communicate with constituencies. Media attention creates a public issue, garners community support, and produces political capital. To the extent possible, park and recreation professionals want to garner “earned” media; that is, articles or programs about an issue written by national or local news media. Some other basic approaches to generating awareness through the media include: submitting guest columns or opinion editorials to print and electronic newspapers and magazines; distributing news releases or holding press conferences; participating in radio or television news programs or calling in when the issue is being discussed; maintaining an advocacy section on the agency’s homepage; and advertising in local, state, and national publications. Stable media relations are critical to the overall success of park and recreation agencies, particularly in the area of advocacy. Moreover, providing elected officials with opportunities for positive media coverage in conjunction with your agency creates a win-win situation.

Strategy 5: Timing Your Advocacy Efforts

One of the most important factors in effective advocacy is timing. As a general rule, the sooner advocacy efforts about a particular issue are mounted, the better the results will be, although late efforts should not be dismissed since they can also be successful. Typically, it is much easier to influence policy that has not yet been formed than to change the text of legislation that is approaching final draft stage. During the issue’s life span, there will be peaks in public awareness related to the volume of media coverage. As public awareness and concern increase, so does the interest of elected officials. Politicians tend to be the most receptive in the months preceding an election. However, it may be best to wait until after the election if the issue is perceived as a “vote loser”.

Strategy 6: Engage in Community Organizing

Park and recreation professionals should be concerned with more than federal and state legislation or local ordinances. The members of the profession must be able to effectively use advocacy strategies at the grassroots level; that is, at the neighborhood association, ward, community, and township levels, through community

development, community organizing, and local capacity-building. Luther and Emery (2003) write, “community building, and what others call local-capacity building, (is) local citizens having the capacity to take collective action towards community improvement by working to increase the skills of individuals, strengthen reciprocal relationships, and make networks within and outside the community open and responsive to needs” (p. 2).

Local leaders, including park and recreation professionals, need to be able to successfully organize their constituents by identifying critical issues, gaining public participation, fostering solidarity, implementing programs, and evaluating their progress. To enhance the level of local capacity, strong partnerships should be developed with other public, nonprofit, and private agencies to create synergy and to build social capital. Promoting broad-based involvement of local individuals in the civic life of their community is a critical step to keep communities vibrant.

When striving to build community, the park and recreation professional should distinguish between communities of place and communities of interest. Communities of place are the physical locations where agencies are housed and are the places where they live, work, and play. Communities of interest are independent of spatial boundaries. Communities of interest are often situated within a community of place. Thus, park and recreation professionals, through NRPA, act as a community of interest to advance parks, recreation, and conservation efforts to enhance the quality of life in communities of place. Advocacy efforts typically focus on communities of interest. It is useful for park and recreation professional to remember that sometimes other communities of interest may organize to promote competing policy initiatives over those of public parks and recreation.

How Do Park and Recreation Professionals Get Started Advocating?

The successful advocate is perceived as having integrity; that is, viewed as being honest, credible, trustworthy, and reliable. Always be truthful and do not promise more than can be delivered. Beyond professional integrity, the park and recreation advocate must be informed, develop relationships with elected officials, educate the community, and know where to draw the line.

Be Informed

The best first steps a park and recreation advocate can take is join the electronic newsletter list for the RecreACTION Network, complete the NRPA advocacy toolbox online course, and become familiar with NRPA’s and respective state association’s current leg-

islative platform. Next, explore the Internet resources offered at the end of this chapter; register for as many relevant legislative list-servs and e-newsletters as possible, and be able to articulate clearly and concisely the top ten reasons parks and recreation are important and the positive impact it has on the community. As interest in legislative advocacy grows, park and recreation professionals should consider using NRPA's legislative advocacy information system and attending the NRPA Mid-Year Legislative Forum in Washington DC.

Look for allies and strategic partners in an effort to build advocacy support. Often, like-minded organizations have many of the same goals in promoting the values of public parks and recreation. For example, the International Mountain Bicycling Association, the Outdoor Industry Association, and the American Hiking Society, just to name a few, have been steadfast advocates for public parks and recreation at the national level. Local chapters of national organizations often support local initiatives for public parks and recreation programs.

Develop Relationships with Elected Officials

New advocates should begin to build long-term, positive relationships with federal, state, and local officials. This is a necessary step regardless of their current stance on legislation effecting the profession, political affiliation, or dominant political tendencies. Building this relationship may start with a letter to congratulate the elected official on their legislative successes, or an invitation for the elected official and staff to tour a park or recreation facility. The park and recreation professional can express appreciation for their hard work and the impact it has had on the local community. Be sure to let the elected official get to know you, the agency, and the people you serve in the community. Provide examples of success stories and offer invitations to upcoming events. Similarly, it is prudent to reach out and establish positive, trusting relationships with local media personnel and organizations as well. (See Compendium 4-4 for a sample letter to a legislator.)

When visiting with an elected official, park and recreation advocates should "plan ahead for their visit; be prompt, patient, and polite; be prepared; be political; and be responsive" (Dolesh, Vinluan, Kovarovics, & Phillips, 2007, p. 31). Respect the 5-minute rule, which is (whether by email, phone, or in person) to take no more than five minutes, unless specifically asked. Professionals should always follow-up with elected officials by sending thank you notes and by being available as a well-informed resource on current issues.

It is most important to remember a political connection extends beyond relationships with the elected

officials and includes their staff, secretaries, and interns. Frequently, the advocate will meet with young staffers and interns in their early 20s. It is paramount to show respect for all staff in an elected official's office, as they are the gatekeepers to what and how information is presented to the elected official. Use creativity and ingenuity to invite elected officials and staff to take advantage of local programs, such as a mountain bike or kayaking excursion in a local venue, to tangibly demonstrate the value and benefits of public parks and recreation. Remember to scrupulously observe all restrictions when providing anything of value to elected officials or covered staff including transportation, meals, fees, and other costs of services.

Educate the Community

Politicians pay the most attention to individuals who elect and reelect them. Thus, park and recreation professionals must cultivate the "power of constituency." This means that park and recreation professionals should spend time educating citizen board members, volunteers, local service clubs, and residents about the political issues affecting the agency's ability to achieve its mission. Educating community members may be in the form of holding town hall meetings, posting on electronic message boards and forums, sending personal letters, and the like. Park and recreation professionals must also learn to speak the language of politicians (i.e., dollars and cents). The proximate principle, for instance, suggests there is a positive relationship between open spaces and property values (Crompton, 2005). Articulating the benefits of parks and recreation in terms of economic impact is vital to being successful in the public policy process.

Know Where to Draw the Line

All park and recreation professionals play a vital role when advocating for the cause. However, it is necessary to highlight the need for public employees to take special care when contacting members of Congress or state legislators. The First Amendment protects the right to lobby, but federal and state regulations significantly limit the latitude public employees enjoy when speaking in an official capacity. Therefore, one must distinguish between the role of a federal or state agent and the role of a concerned private citizen. While the individual may identify his or her official position and convey information related to agency activities, the public employee should also make it clear that his or her statements represent personal views as a concerned citizen rather than agency policy. It is strongly recommended that park and recreation professionals contact their state ethics office for specific information before conducting lobby activities.

Conclusion

Undertaking any public policy endeavor can be complicated. But, in the realm of politics and advocacy, the rewards and benefits can be extraordinary. Park and recreation professionals who develop their political skills and embrace the process can be very effective at instituting changes in public policy that have benefits

for generations to come. Remember, use your “political muscle,” and it will grow as you generate support among likeminded individuals. Stay positive, focus on taking progressive steps, and celebrate the small victories along the way. Perhaps, anthropologist Margaret Mead said it best: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has” (as cited in Lesky, 2003).

Resources

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Internet Resources

- American Camp Association—Public Policy
<http://www.acacamps.org/publicpolicy/>
- American Hiking Society—Politics and Advocacy
<http://www.americanhiking.org/policyAdvocacy.aspx>
- Congress.org
<http://www.congress.org/>
- Contacting the Congress
<http://www.visi.com/juan/congress/>
- Crucial Conversations
http://www.vitalsmarts.com/books_more.aspx
- Lobbying Disclosure—United States House of Representatives
<http://lobbyingdisclosure.house.gov/>
- National Parks Conservation Association, Take Action Center
<http://ga1.org/npca/home.html>
- National Recreation and Park Association—Advocacy
<http://www.nrpa.org/content/default.aspx?documentId=7>
- National Recreation and Park Association—Recreation ACTION Network
<http://ga0.org/nrpa/join.html>
- Personal Political Power
<http://www.joelblackwell.com/>
- Public Disclosure (Lobbying)—United States Senate
http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/g_three_sections_with_teasers/lobbyingdisc.htm
- Thomas Legislative Digest
http://thomas.loc.gov/home/abt_thom.html
- Trust for Public Lands
http://www.tpl.org/tier3_cd.cfm?content_item_id=978&folder_id=191
- United States Government
<http://www.usa.gov/>
- White House, The
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

Authors, Consultants, and Contributors

Dr. Kimberly J. Bodey is an associate professor, member of graduate faculty, and sport management concentration coordinator in the Department of Recreation and Sport Management at Indiana State University. She teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in administrative theory and management practice, organizational leadership and ethics, and policy development and governance. Dr. Bodey is a member of the national taskforce to study coaching education policy in the United States. She has presented and published on how to use the National Coaching Report as an advocacy tool, and is a member of NASPE's Sport Steering Committee. Dr. Bodey has also served as a program advocate, meeting with Senate leaders in Washington, DC on behalf of the National Youth Sports Program.

Dr. Nathan A. Schaumleffel is an assistant professor and member of the graduate faculty in the Department of Recreation and Sport Management at Indiana State University. He serves as coordinator of the recreation management and youth leadership concentration, Campus Executive Director of the American Humanics nonprofit management program, and Project Director of the Indiana Rural Recreation Development Project. Dr. Schaumleffel serves on the NRPA Public Policy Committee and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Planning (SCORP) Committee. He also is President and CEO of the Recreation Development Network and co-Director for Indiana State University's Center for Recreation Management.

Richard Dolesh is the Chief of Public Policy for the National Recreation and Park Association in Washington DC. He is responsible for national public policy development and contributes to the national legislative and advocacy program of NRPA. Rich represents NRPA on a number of national coalitions including: serving on the steering committee of the Sustainable Sites Initiative, a partnership of the American Society of Landscape Architects; the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center and the U.S. Botanic Garden; the National Review Group for Safe Routes to School; and the Coalition for Recreational Trails. Rich is a frequent contributor to NRPA's *Parks & Recreation* magazine, and has written numerous articles on parks and natural resources for publications including *The Washington Post* and *National Geographic Magazine*.

