Planning for Strategic Management

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Planning is, in many ways, like the building of a community recreation center. Much time, analysis, and careful thought goes into the process. What kind of building you create depends on the agency’s needs and objectives. While an agency may have a significant number of options in a one-story building, the options for use and expansion may be limited, and the cost and effort involved is also limited. Construction of a larger building may take more effort, but the reward is that the agency may increase the current and future options available for use. If a building is improperly engineered, it can be a recipe for disaster. Likewise, the scope and scale of a planning process may depend upon the agency’s needs and, while not all problems will be evident at the time of planning, a properly-developed plan allows for operation in a changing environment—just like any well-constructed building, the plan can be created to withstand unexpected factors.

These unexpected factors may take the form of the social, political, and economic contexts in which planning takes place; understanding how these contexts influence your planning process is the essence of planning. Currently, there are many factors affecting the planning of parks and recreation agencies throughout the country, and it is important to note that no planning takes place in a vacuum. Keeping an eye on the environment in which a plan is to be implemented is of the utmost importance. For example, in the first week of October 2008, the United States stock market had its single largest freefall in the 217-year history of the New York Stock Exchange. There was a global freeze in the availability of money for capital projects and energy prices were at or near an all-time high. Many states and municipalities began operating in a budget deficit, causing many parks and recreation agencies to scrap or adjust their plans to reflect their current (and perhaps unexpected) fiscal situation. Prudent managers will take into account the possible future operating environment when creating their plans.

In the different types of planning, all elements of management and planning interact with and influence each other and must be placed in the context of the social, political, and economic environments in which they are operating. This chapter examines the types of planning necessary for administrators to efficiently and effectively manage both day-to-day and long-term operations of a park and recreation agency; it also explains how those plans fit into one’s community. For example, while strategic planning may not be done as often as other types of planning, the strategic plan will be affected by the agency’s ability to execute daily operations and decisions for what or how to implement daily operations. It is important to note that planning is a good idea in theory, but it is only a good idea in practice if the right people in an organization believe it is a good idea and the organization is ready.

Role of the Manager

The manager’s roles and responsibilities in the planning process must be understood. The prudent manager’s role is one of a visionary, organizer, facilitator, and guide. Planning is the primary managerial function in an organization, since it involves deciding both the day-to-day operations and the future courses of action for the agency. Thus, planning logically precedes the execution of all managerial functions and involves a great deal of mental investment from the manager. Planning is not a simple process; it is an intellectual exercise that involves critical thinking and forethought. Planning must also be oriented and guided by an agency’s mission. Every plan specifies the goals to be attained in the future and the steps necessary to reach them.

The manager should also be a forecaster, and it must be understood that planning is forward looking. Planning abides by the adage, “look before you leap.” It is futuristic in nature since it is performed to accomplish objectives in the future, whether that future is tomorrow or ten years from the time of planning. Planning pervades all managerial activity. Although planning is a prominent function of managers at all levels, the nature of planning may vary at each level. Planning logically precedes the execution of all other managerial func-
An optimal operating environment in which the most effective plans can be created and implemented is one where social capital among all stakeholders is an integral part of the planning process from start to finish. Social capital refers to the accumulation of the deposits of trust, cohesion, and connectedness, which (as opposed to capital goods to be purchased) have value in their own right. Social capital produces the “glue” that holds a community and the park and recreation agency together—the networks, norms, and trust that enable private individuals to cooperate in pursuing public goals. Social capital is the “currency” of a community. Social capital is built by creating opportunities for individual citizens and various citizen groups to engage in dialogue and become involved in the planning process with the park and recreation agency. When agencies provide opportunities for recreation professionals and citizens to work together toward a common purpose, social capital is developed.

The inclusion of stakeholders in the planning process—such as employees from all levels, citizen groups, and recreation users—will increase the likelihood of success in the development and implementation of an agency’s plan. These groups and individuals can provide valuable input, such as fresh ideas, feedback on the performance of existing services, and the identification of gaps in current services. These inputs are invaluable in making more-accurate prioritization decisions. It is noted that “experts” are not always best placed to exclusively guide planning, so it is important to enlist users into the planning process. The inclusion of patrons and consultation with employees can also create a sense of belonging and empowerment. Facilitating an inclusive process is vital because planning itself depends on a clear understanding and effective communication between users and providers that cannot always be assumed.

The inclusion of community residents in general (as opposed to recreation users only) is also essential to successful planning.

Municipalities that engage the community in recreation planning have the potential to use their resources more effectively. Planning encourages a community to envision the future of leisure and recreation services and identify the ways to use its resources to create that vision….the result is intended to serve as a road map for the strategic management of community resources on both a short- and long-term” (Barnes, Sharpe, & Walsh, 2008, p. 22).

Pack and Schanuel (2005) further suggest that planners also can use the community’s input to identify and capitalize on the uniqueness of the community. They note that it is essential to educate community leaders, government officials, and the general public on the purpose of the plans, the costs and benefits, and, in particular,
the projected “return on investment” whether financial or community quality of life. Effective planning is the first step in achieving a community’s vision for parks and recreation, economic development and social and environmental benefits. Community involvement in all phases of the planning process includes consultation (for feedback about needs), participation (to develop the plan), and empowerment (to enact the plan).

Since developing social capital within the community is important, increasing social capital within the agency is essential as well. Although employee involvement in the planning process may require more time than a top-down approach, engaging employees to take part in the solutions has greater advantages by developing employee buy-in. Increased human capital can translate into more staff available to process the plan, greater attention to explanation of plan policies, and more information given to key partners in plan implementation.

**Communication and Facilitation**

A foundation of social capital is predicated on the inclusion of stakeholders in the decision-making process, which must be accompanied by trust and open communication among and between all stakeholders. Indeed, perhaps the most important element in the planning process is the people and their ability to openly communicate with one another. A successful plan will have a group of organized staff, trustees, administrators, board members, and employees in constant communication at all levels. Some common needs of individuals should be kept in mind during any planning process: the need to feel important, to be respected, to be informed, to receive recognition, to know the expectations held for performance, and to have influence in the decision-making process. Recognizing these needs and facilitating an environment conducive to trust and communication are imperative. Absence of trust will negatively affect even the best plans.

When planning takes place in an environment with many stakeholders and environmental fluctuations, the ability to facilitate the process is essential. Facilitation skills are extremely important, and if the organization does not have skilled facilitators on staff, hiring one should be explored. With appropriate facilitation, work can be accomplished faster and with fewer interpersonal problems. For example, a few employees might feel slightly intimidated and have difficulty expressing their thoughts in work groups. Facilitators (agency employees or professionals) can encourage members to fully participate, and the more-outspoken members may be cautioned to listen to others and not be too forceful with their own views. At the foundation of this need for effective facilitation is the absolute necessity of an open flow of communication. As previously mentioned, the lack of communication can result in serious resistance from employees and citizens to the implementation of a strategic plan and the accompanying changes. This means creating an organizational culture that proactively supports constructive engagement and information-sharing between all levels of the organization and its internal and external stakeholders.

Finally, managers should be concerned with the “one size fits all” approach to planning, as the majority of planning models and methodologies available take no account of an agency’s individual circumstances. For example, Paul Leuthold, Director of the Parks and Recreation Department for the City of Bellingham WA notes that the city has widespread support for parks and recreation, greater than that of some other municipalities. Indeed, successful planning and follow-through has resulted in the adoption of three Greenway Levies in Bellingham totaling $71.3 million dollars for the purchase of additional parks, trails, and greenways. Further, the decision was made to establish a parks impact fee in the development of housing that contributes additional funding for the parks and recreation agency. Leuthold is able to operate under a different set of guidelines than an agency that does not operate in a public where financial support is so forthcoming.

With the necessity of the aforementioned preconditions to embarking on the planning process, this chapter will look at some of the different types of planning, their importance to effectively managing a park and recreation agency, and the process used for plan implementation. While reading the following sections, please keep in mind that the successful process and implementation of all types of planning are predicated on the ability of the manager to create an environment that is inclusive and open to the ideas of all stakeholders that may be (or should be) involved in the process. While this chapter will present and discuss several types of planning, the focus is upon strategic planning. The strategic plan will act as a guide and facilitate many other types of planning, such as comprehensive parks and recreation planning, which are presented later in the chapter.

Before the details of planning are discussed, it is important to clarify the different types of planning presented in this chapter. First, strategic planning typically creates a visionary statement that provides direction for the planning process, which is then coupled with an action plan to ensure its implementation. The strategic plan is typically driven by an environmental scan such as a SWOT analysis. On the other hand, comprehensive planning provides specific short- and long-term strategies for the park and recreation agency. Comprehensive planning may be thought of as an umbrella term that includes different types of planning: long-range plan-
ning, community planning, growth and annexation planning, and emergency management planning. Since it may be necessary to have a strategic plan in place to direct and accomplish components of the comprehensive plan, strategic planning is discussed first.

**Strategic Planning**

Driven by a mission statement, strategic planning is the blueprint for the implementation of an agency vision and is guided by the agency’s fundamental directives. A strategic plan, while long-term in nature, is reactive to a constantly changing and sometimes hostile environment. Simply stated, strategic planning guides the provision of park and recreation services with the resources available, in the current operating environment, and in a manner consistent with the mission of the parks and recreation agency. Strategic planning can be thought of as a systematic process through which an organization agrees on priorities that are essential to its mission and are responsive to the environment, while building commitment among key stakeholders through inclusion in the planning process. Strategic planning guides the acquisition and allocation of resources to achieve these priorities. The following section will present the importance of strategic planning and outline the steps followed in the strategic planning process from inception to implementation.

In an age when plans are frequently threatened with obsolescence by technological change and economic upheaval, some ask if it is practical or useful to do strategic planning. Opponents argue that strategic planning is only appropriate for a static world and not for the fast-moving environment of today. They question, with some justification, that by the time plans are developed and implemented, agency requirements will have changed and/or technology has moved on. Proponents say it is this rapid change that makes it all the more necessary to develop a strategic plan (Philip, 2007). The answer to those who question the need for a strategic plan is to understand that strategic planning is not a static process. Therefore, it is essential to conceive of planning as a process, not a one-time event, and to acknowledge that the plan needs to be negotiated with the understanding that it must be sustainable and comprehensive in nature. The strategic plan is a flexible and dynamic tool to facilitate systematic and holistic thinking about the agency. Like a snapshot, the strategic planning document records the status of an ongoing process at one moment in time. The net result of this effort is a greater awareness of the environment in which the agency operates and an enhanced capacity to deliver park facilities, recreation programs, and leisure services to customers and communities. The need for strategic planning is best understood when the manager realizes that it should lead to better informed decisions, and allow an agency or system to deal more effectively with dramatic changes in its environment.

As previously mentioned, the process of planning, including strategic planning, must include stakeholders, and this collaborative effort is rewarded with a tangible product: a written strategic plan that is the result of the planning process. It is typically a document that summarizes what the agency does, why it does it, what it is trying to accomplish, and how it will meet the mission and goals that represent the agency’s values. Strategic planning will not only guide agency improvements, but will also focus the use of limited resources on previously defined priorities, improve decision-making, and enhance responsiveness and performance. Agencies use the strategic planning process as a way to guide their institutions into the future and mitigate the surprises that come with economic, technological, demographic, and political change.

While there is not complete agreement on the order of the stages for strategic planning, there is nearly universal agreement on the content of the strategic planning stages. In the section that follows, five steps to achieving a strategic plan are presented. They are:

1. establishing or reviewing the mission, vision, and goals;
2. performing a SWOT analysis as part of a data collection process;
3. making recommendations and creating alternatives;
4. creating action plans;
5. implementing the plan; and
6. evaluating and planning revision.

**Planning Stages**

**Planning to Plan**

While it might sound funny, a work plan for the planning process should be established (yes, that is correct: planning to plan). This work plan should:

- outline what activities will be involved in the process;
- identify what methods will be implemented for the stages of planning (such as committees, retreats, focus groups, etc.);
- assign who is to be responsible for each task;
- identify the desired outcomes;
- define what resources will be required for the planning process; and
- establish a clear timeline for the whole process.

While all of this preplanning may seem a bit overwhelming, a Gantt Chart (See Chapter 23 and Exhibit...
Mission and Vision Statements
In the discussion of what content should be contained in a mission statement, it should be delineated that the core values and beliefs are the agency’s basic precepts about what is important in both business and life, how business should be conducted, its view of humanity, its role in society, the way the world works, and what is to be held inviolate. Teamwork and trust are promoted when managers develop a mission statement that values trust, integrity, teamwork, and dignity, which in turn develops an enhanced organizational climate that is directly linked to higher organizational performance. It should be illustrated that the more clearly understood the mission, the greater effect it will have on future planning strategies.

In a study that compared the performance of agencies with differing mission statements, Williams (2008) found that when current statements belonging to higher-performing agencies were compared with those belonging to lower-performing agencies, differences in content were found. Higher-performing agencies discussed philosophies more often, and concern for the public and employees significantly more often. Further, employees, stakeholders, and communities or society were listed as goodwill targets more often by higher performing agencies than lower-performing ones.

It is important to clarify the difference between a mission statement and a vision statement.

A vision statement is a guiding image of success. In architectural terms, if a mission statement provides a blueprint for an organization’s work…then the vision is the artist’s rendering of the realization of that mission (Allison & Kaye, 2005, p. 100).

Vision statements are intended to be inspirational and should paint an image of what success will look like. If a mission statement is a concise statement of the organization’s reason for being, then a vision statement can be understood as a goal describing what the organization seeks to become. The development of a clear mission statement will allow the manager to develop an agency vision.

For example, Wilson (2005) explains the process of working with stakeholders of an agency to create a vision statement. She notes that cultivating a shared vision to underpin the ideals of an agency is an essential step in understanding and implementing an overall strategy for the delivery of services. To ensure this process reflected the views of participants, volunteers from a stakeholder group were asked to participate in the production of meaningful statements. After collecting these value statements from stakeholders, values that reflected all the data captured by participants were used to develop a vision statement. She goes on to note that values clarification is a means of making personal values and beliefs explicit. If stakeholders feel that their individual objectives align with those of an agency, the result would more likely be an intrinsically motivated stakeholder group. Cultivating a shared vision to underpin the ideals of an agency is an essential step in understanding and implementing an overall strategy for the service delivery. One of the primary
reasons for undertaking a strategic planning process is to establish—or reaffirm—a shared understanding of why an organization exists and what its aspirations are for the future.

Functionally, a vision statement should be written in a narrative format and describe for what the ideal organization should strive to become; it proffers an image of the organization’s future and provides a contrast between where the organization is and where it wants to go (see Compendium 7-1). In support of the vision statement, the mission statement reflects the ideals presented in the vision statement existence, but it goes further to clarify the agency’s purpose in light of the new vision. The mission of an organization is a concise, functional statement relating the purpose or reasons for its existence. The agency enacts its mission through the implementation of organization goals and objectives. (See Compendium 7-2 for examples of value statements.)

**Goals and Objectives**

After the mission and vision statements are created, goals and objectives should then be developed. These goals should be based on the values stated in the mission and vision statements. While goal statements vary for different departments, program areas, and facilities, there are some general rules in how they should be written.

Goals and objectives generally last for decades, but may be updated annually. They must always be linked back to the organization’s mission and vision. To be effective, they must be distributed and discussed with all appropriate personnel. Establishing goals and objectives, and routinely updating them, helps to ensure direction and unity of purpose. They serve as a basis for measuring progress. Without goals and objectives, there are no real benchmarks for evaluation. While the organization as a whole will have goals and objectives, they should also be written for each program or service. The goal links the mission with the vision, and the objective is a measurable statement of how the agency intends to meet the goal within a given time period.

Goals and objectives reflect how the organization is going to carry out its mission to achieve its vision. They become the connection between the mission and the vision, or said another way, how the organization intends to organize work in advancing toward the preferred future. In the planning process there is an important distinction between goals and objectives. Goals are broad, general statements of desired outcomes that are generally not measurable. Goals can be written for each of the functional mission statements and for each major area in an agency. Again, inclusion in the process of goal formulation is imperative. Personnel from various levels within the organization should give input to the development of organization goals and objectives. This input has great value in improving the relevancy of goals and objectives statements; further, it ensures that employees have contributed to the organizational planning. The usefulness of a strategic plan will rely upon understanding and acceptance of the goals by stakeholders. It is worthwhile to reiterate that if this phase of the planning process does not include the views of the public, any plan is likely to fail. People not involved in the goal-development process at the beginning cannot be expected to understand or support its products.

Objectives, on the other hand, are more concrete statements of specific outcomes that are part of achieving a goal; they provide written measurable components for the goals. Objectives also determine which tasks will be done in what sequence, while determining priorities as a necessary part of systematic planning. They enumerate the things that must be accomplished to realize the goals and define how the goals are to be achieved. Objectives are formed through analysis of the goal statements and break them down into workable parts. Objectives are the ends to which the activity is conducted—they are the results to be achieved.

As part of the National Recreation and Park Association’s (NRPA) Strategic Planning process, vision, mission, values, goals, and objectives are defined as follows:

- **Mission**—a concise statement of the organization’s reason for being, perpetual;
- **Vision**—10–30 year goal describing what the organization seeks to become; an audacious goal that is tangible, energizing, and highly focused;
- **Values**—essential and enduring tenets of the association; a small set of timeless, guiding principles;
- **Goals**—timeless, unbounded statements describing the conditions or attributes to be attained; and
- **Objectives**—measurable, attainable milestones to achieve on the way to accomplishing the goal.

Analyzing, and perhaps reestablishing, the mission, vision, goals, and objectives establishes a symbiosis between the agency’s mission, its strategy for fulfilling that mission, and its approach to implementing the plan. Once the mission, vision, goals, and objectives are defined, we must assess whether the way the agency is currently being managed and operated is helping to accomplish these goals and promoting the agency’s values. (See Compendium 7-3 for examples of goals and objectives for a strategic plan.)
SWOT Analysis and Data Collection

The next step in the strategic planning process involves the collection and interpretation of information. In the collection of information it is important to note that the strategic plan must be a fluid process since planning takes place in a particular time period, and the most competent planners constantly search for the most recent and valid sources of information. It may be nearly impossible to have the latest data, and even when the most recent data are obtained, it may be nearly obsolete before the plan can be implemented. Performing the data collection should include information from three primary sources: internal to the agency (employees, management, board, and volunteers); external to the agency (program participants, community leaders, and agency partners); and objective data (community or program participant surveys, financial records, socio-demographic trends, etc.). During the data collection phase, the agency must continuously assess whether they have sufficient and accurate information to make informed decisions regarding the strategic plan both in the short-term and in the long-term.

Performing this information collection is often framed in the practice of a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis. The foundation of a SWOT analysis is data-gathering, during which information is collected from internal and external stakeholders about their expectations and perceptions of the organization. Further, empirical data are collected to supply information for the decisions to be made in the continued planning process. With emphasis on having the right information, managers can maximize opportunities and avoid threats to the agency. At its most basic level, a SWOT analysis can help provide information to analyze the current situation in which the agency is operating. A SWOT analysis is typically divided into the internal and external audit or assessment of the agency.

Strengths and Weaknesses are considered an internal analysis of the agency. The purpose of the internal audit is to identify the weaknesses that need to be managed or avoided as the plan is formulated. The audit also analyzes the strengths on which an agency can capitalize to accomplish the desired future. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses will help refine the goals to focus on areas that need improvement, and enable the agency to capitalize on its strengths.

Finally, opportunities and threats look at the external environment in which the agency is operating. By exploring opportunities, the agency is able to identify areas in which the agency can diversify its services or obtain additional funding. Threats analysis highlights situations that may inhibit an agency from successfully delivering its intended mission, vision, and goals.

During the SWOT analysis process an agency must answer the following questions:

- What does the agency do well? (Strengths);
- Where can the agency improve? (Weaknesses);
- What external opportunities exist with respect to pursuing the agency mission? (Opportunities); and
- What external threats hinder the pursuit of the mission? (Threats).

Answering these questions will create a baseline of information for the agency. If adjustments to the plan need to be made, this baseline will provide the reasons and the background for the adjustments. The process will provide objective data that cannot be interpreted as a whim of management; decisions can be logically supported and defended by using the process.

At this point in the strategic planning process, a mission for the agency has been created and steps have been outlined to deliver on that mission. There should be a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the technical, managerial, and financial capabilities and of the opportunities and threats that are present in the current operating environment. This information will allow the agency to identify a range of options to best fulfill the goals and values as outlined in the next step of the strategic planning process. (See Compendium 7-4 for a SWOT Analysis.)

Recommendations and Alternatives

Having information and data collected during the SWOT analysis means little without the understanding what to do with it. Now, the manager must put the understanding of that information into practice and decide what services the agency is to provide, how to provide those services, what relationships need to be established, and which publics are going to be the focus of the agency’s services. One goal of strategic planning is to fully consider the widest possible range of alternatives over a long time frame and not to choose the “quick fix.” This involves thinking about options that can be implemented within the agency’s current position, and alternatives that may require reorganizing or fundamentally changing the agency’s managerial, operational, and physical structures. In order to thoroughly assess the options and determine their feasibility, the long-term economic, regulatory, and implementation impacts the options will have on the system must be considered. The optimal choice is one that will achieve the goals at the lowest possible cost and allow for success in a dynamic environment. The prudent manager will explore different ways to deliver services and in doing so may consider answering some of the following questions.
• What services does the agency need to deliver?
• Are there ways to reduce cost among decision alternatives?
• Are there ways to increase funding without impacting those stakeholders that rely on the services?
• Does the service delivery respond to the needs of the public?
• Will the decisions improve quality of service delivery?
• Does one alternative better represent the agency over another alternative?
• Will it benefit the customer and the parks and recreation resource?

When answering these questions and while analyzing alternative methods of delivery, both quantitative (budgetary parameters, survey data, numbers of participants, etc.) and qualitative (agency values, political environment, flow of open communication) factors should be taken into account. Creating recommendations and identifying alternative ways to deliver services is an important step, but this does not mean that the plan will address every circumstance or provide a solution for every challenge. There may be elements that don’t work, or problems that arise that need additional analysis and action. Or, changes may need to be made if the results are not serving the agency’s and the stakeholders’ best interests. Once appropriate alternatives have been found, the next step in decision-making is to evaluate the alternatives and select the ones that will contribute to the attainment of goals.

**Action Plans**

Strategic planning and the development of action plans involve two different types of thinking. Strategic decisions are fundamental, directional, and over-arching. Action plan decisions, on the other hand, primarily affect the day-to-day implementation of strategic decisions. The output of action planning is often a set of plans that assign the steps needed to enact the plan, and includes an assignment of that element of the plan to a specific person or persons. While strategic decisions usually have longer-term implications, operational decisions usually have immediate (less than one year) implications. Action planning (which may also be termed operational or work planning) is performed to facilitate the actual implementation of the strategic plan and is created to incrementally achieve the mission set forth in the strategic plan. The specific assignments and tasks for the action plan are typically established during the implementation stage of the strategic plan.

If strategic planning is the blueprint of the hypothetical building referred to in the introduction of this chapter, then action planning is the work plan for the actual construction. While the strategic plan helps the management team create the vision for the future of the agency, it is only through action planning that this vision comes alive. Action planning clearly defines what an organization intends to accomplish, how and when this will take place, and who will be held accountable. The purpose of an action plan is to achieve short-term operating results, to implement the current year’s portion of the organization’s strategic plan, to ensure that all parts of the organization are pulling together, and to involve and get commitment of all key people in meeting organizational objectives. Defined, an action plan is *the document identifying specific results to be achieved within a given time period (typically one year) and includes the specific actions and resources required to accomplish these results.*

Action planning should be thought of as a subset of a strategic plan. The action plan often serves as the basis for, and justification of, an annual operating budget request. For example, a five-year strategic plan would need to have five sets of action plans funded by five sets of operating budgets over the course of five years. Further, the action plan provides an outline for resource allocation, which may be modified to reflect policy decisions or financial changes made during the budget development process. Action plans should outline the activities and budgets for each part of the organization for the period of the strategic plan. They link the strategic plan with the activities the organization will deliver and the resources required to deliver them. Like a strategic plan, an action plan addresses four questions which are asked at the program level, rather than the agency level:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How do we get there?
- How do we measure our progress?

The action plan defines how the agency will operate to implement the strategic and monitoring plans—what the capacity needs will be, how resources will be used, how risks will be handled, and how sustainability of the project’s achievements will be ensured. An action plan does not normally exist as a single, stand-alone plan; rather, the key components are integrated with the other parts of the overall strategic plan. The key components of a complete action plan include analysis or discussions of four areas.

1. **Human and other capacity requirements:** the human capacity and skills required to implement the project, and the current and potential sources of these resources. Also, other capacity needs required to implement the project (such
longstanding criticism of the planning process is that plans are lengthy documents that lack usage, and failure to implement plans has long been considered a significant barrier to effective planning. Only with effective implementation can the benefits of this process be realized. Recognition of the major factors affecting implementation can help municipalities get their plans off the shelf and into their communities. Thus, stakeholders need to be shown what actions are being performed, what actions need to be put into effect, and how best to initiate them. An agency must link recommendations with their resource base to create action, and to identify potential partners with expertise in particular domains. This process requires extensive contact and information exchange among all parties.

Plan implementation is more likely when there is high organizational capacity, strong public support, and a conducive political environment. The long-term sustainability of the strategic plan hinges on the ability of the agency to take action on existing recommendations. The strategic plan is a valuable document that can be applied to decision-making and has the capacity to create action if applied. Unless information and data lead to informed decision-making and action, the whole process may become ineffective. Effective implementation strategy should begin with all key stakeholders reading the strategic plan. To derive maximum benefit from their plans, agencies should ensure that the plans are proactively put into practice and problems at the implementation stage are identified. Again, a Gantt Chart may aid in clarifying roles and responsibilities for implementation. Finally, implementing the plan involves identifying challenges that could arise during and after implementation, and developing alternative action plans to address these challenges. (See Compendium 7-6 for a sample Strategic Plan.)

**Evaluation of the Strategic Plan**

The evaluation process begins after the implementation of the plan and should not be viewed as a one-time event; it involves assembling a variety of best practices, public funding, support, and involvement, and a dedication to the participatory planning process culminating in a recreation strategic plan that is regularly updated. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will help assess whether the agency is operating the way it should. The plans should be reviewed, revised, and updated on no less than an annual basis to reflect any financial, managerial, technical, or strategic changes affecting the agency. The plan must also include contingency planning and a process to review it frequently. Remember, strategic planning is a continuous process that can result in continuous improvements that allow the agency to deliver on the values and goals that define it, and should

**Implementation of the Strategic Plan**

A primary cause of planning failure is the not placing enough importance on plan implementation. Indeed, a
allow the agency to respond more effectively, quickly, and creatively in the future.

Roe and Roe (2004) suggest that the evaluation process should:

1. support program goals and objectives;
2. lead to program improvement; and
3. whenever possible, develop evaluation capacity and understanding among planning participants.

They further suggest that goals, methods, and emerging findings should be available to everyone throughout the process of evaluation planning, and the agency will need to work proactively to transform evaluation feedback into real-time dialogue for agency employees and interested stakeholders. Through a commitment to this process, the agency may be able to provide key employees with frequent performance data that may allow them to monitor their own performance and identify opportunities for improvement.

Although some evaluation programs are no more than simply tracking and counting, others are more complicated. The field of parks and recreation draws from an ever-expanding array of evaluation approaches and techniques, triangulating traditional evaluation methods (i.e., archival review, participant observation, surveys, key informant interviews) with the collaborative methods of empowerment evaluation (i.e., facilitation, coaching, training, and advocacy). This synergistic methodology and the process of evaluating service delivery for the purpose of facilitating parity, inclusion, and representation, frequently calls for innovation in the methods of data collection, analysis, and reporting (see Chapter 23, Evaluation and Action Research). If the plan is not flexible and some systematic procedure for revising the plan on a regular basis is not in place, then the plan may become useful only as an expensive paperweight. The agency should be committed to evaluation as a continual, emergent process that documents success (or failure) of planning elements and creates an ongoing monitoring process. Instead of focusing on a strategic plan, agencies should emphasize strategic planning—a verb rather than a noun, an ongoing and people-centered activity, rather than a finished product.

While a strategic plan is the foundation of an agency’s planning process, it is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. A strategic plan is unlikely to have much impact without a supporting action plan to serve as an implementation vehicle. Action planning is used to clearly define what an organization intends to accomplish, how and when this will take place, and who will be held accountable. It is, therefore, the means by which an agency’s strategic plan is implemented. (See Compendium 7-7 for Strategic Planning Update.)

**Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Planning**

As noted above, comprehensive planning is used to provide specific short- and long-term strategies for the parks and recreation agency; it may be thought of as an umbrella term for different types of planning, such as: long-range planning, community planning, growth and annexation planning, and emergency management planning. The principal rationale for a comprehensive park and recreation plan is to provide an optimal delivery system for an agency’s park and recreation services. In order to determine what an “optimal delivery” is for a particular community, many different content areas will be taken into consideration, such as spatial analysis of current and future parks, socio-demographics for a given community, financial resources (both operating and capital budgets), and the cultural and natural resources available.

The idea of a comprehensive park and recreation plan stems from park and recreation systems planning. Systems planning assumes the existence of an overall, comprehensive, long-range development plan for an entire planning entity (such as a city, county, or park and recreation district). It is then further assumed that there is a master plan for each of the associated subsystems upon which the park and recreation master plan relies. Some examples might include a master plan for streets, utilities, building departments, or public health. Each of these master plans is dependant on each other, and should be considered in a coordinated effort for all planning activities.

For example, a comprehensive park and recreation plan may be developed for the purpose of defining present and future recreation needs for community residents. It sets in motion the action plan for achieving the short- and long-term goals of the park and recreation agency in meeting the recreation and park needs of its citizens; it establishes priorities for parkland acquisition and development, facility management, coordination with other public and private entities, and the provision of recreation services. The comprehensive plan is also used to set policy and guide the development of master plans for public infrastructure (land use, wastewater treatment, transportation systems), services (affordable housing, youth services), and facilities (parks and trails, recreation facilities, libraries). These master plans typically cover a substantial time period, from as few as five or ten years, up to 20 years or more.
An example of comprehensive planning is provided by Paul Leuthold, Director for Parks and Recreation in Bellingham WA. Paul notes that Bellingham’s Comprehensive Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan (PRO Plan) is updated on six-year intervals. The planning cycle is typically designed for a six-year period but also includes a longer term, in their most recent case, a 14-year term. Their PRO Plan provides an inventory of existing facilities, identifies potential land and facility demands, and provides a funding strategy to reach prescribed goals and objectives. This document is used consistently to guide land use decisions, distribution of parks, land set-asides in relation to annexations and/or land development proposals and the compilation of the City’s Capital Facilities Plan (budget). The process includes many principles of strategic planning since it encompasses the department’s vision, mission, goals and objectives, while facilitating a comprehensive communication between the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, staff, stakeholders, and supporters. The surrounding regional park, recreation and open space facilities are also inventoried and considered, but not included in specific calculations within the PRO Plan (such as Level-Of-Service, cost estimates, implementation, etc.). Input from citizens, as well as other recreation providers (public, as well as nonprofit) are also solicited and included in the planning process. The PRO Plan is developed separately from the City’s Comprehensive Plan, but is adopted into the Comprehensive Plan as a separate chapter. Leuthold further notes that many strategic planning components are melded into their comprehensive planning effort. Their process is collaborative, participant-driven and includes the governing board (serving as the steering committee), staff, customers, and citizens (via citizen surveys). Although the comprehensive planning process includes the mission statement, other criteria used to develop the department culture, such as guiding principles and value statements, have been developed outside this planning realm (see Compendium 7-8).

As a further example, New York City’s Central Park developed a comprehensive plan as part of the city’s park and recreation system, and presented recommendations for achieving improvements for the park consistent with the original vision for Central Park. The plan identifies and evaluates existing park and recreation areas; assesses the need for additional parkland, open space, and recreation facilities; and establishes goals and objectives for recreation programming. The intent of the plan was to provide a logical, comprehensive blueprint for further development of the City’s park system and services. The improvements suggested in the plan do not constitute a final blueprint; rather, they are subject to continual review. The value of this type of a comprehensive plan is that it will prevent the kind of piecemeal restoration that had previously occurred throughout New York’s park system (see Compendium 7-9 for Central Park Plan).

Other Planning Efforts

In addition to participating in large-scale comprehensive planning efforts, a park and recreation department actively participates in a variety of specific planning processes contained under the umbrella of comprehensive planning, such as:

- Growth and Annexation Planning,
- Redevelopment Planning,
- Special Area Master Planning, and

These types of planning efforts often encompass comprehensive planning strategies, but are more specific in nature. They often include citizen advisory groups (serving as steering committees) or stakeholder organizations for the purpose of generating specific information or for advocacy. Many of these plans are project-specific and, upon completion of the plan, these ad hoc steering committees dissolve. For example, site planning is the mainstay planning effort for the development of neighborhood parks, community parks, and trails in designated areas of a city. They work closely with neighborhood organizations in an attempt to generate input into the planning process. A completed document may include a park layout, budget estimates, and establishment of a development timetable. Further, work plans may be developed for these subcomponents of the comprehensive planning process. For a work plan, each division of a parks and recreation agency (such as the Administration, Park Operations, and Recreation and Design & Development programs) may produce action plans on an annual basis in an effort to coordinate responsibilities, establish short-term goals, prepare operating budgets, and assess progress. Finally, it is important to remember that the park and recreation agency may participate in the planning efforts of a variety of other agencies, including county, state, and national park and recreation agencies, private and special interest groups, and agencies such as the Department of Natural Resources.

Conclusion

Through planning, park and recreation agencies achieve the realization of successful program implementation. With practice, understanding the intricacies of this process allows the park and recreation professional to
visualize, analyze, and deliver services to a broad range of constituents, keeping in mind the financial climate in which the agency is operating. In Chapters 8, 11, and 20 of this text, you will learn more about other types of planning, such as program planning, physical resources planning, and budgeting. Throughout the planning process, the agency will have learned many lessons that they can incorporate into their future planning actions. Some potential lessons:

- Integrate the plans and the budget to provide the incentive and means to achieve the agency’s goals.
- Ensure that the agency’s plans drive its budget requests, but prepare contingency plans so that plans may be adjusted to conform to actual appropriations.
- For contingency planning, provide detailed information on how potential changes in the political environment might affect programs and offices.
- To facilitate use by most audiences, issue plans in versions of several lengths and levels of complexity.
- Include key internal and external stakeholders in the planning process to facilitate a well-rounded base of information and increase constituent buy-in.
- Ensure specific departments create supporting plans that focus on agency-wide annual performance plan actions, including outcome measures.
- Involve senior management, including field executives, in determining measures, their use, and their assessment.

It is again worth reminding the manager that instead of focusing on simply producing a plan, agencies should emphasize planning—a verb rather than a noun, an ongoing and people-centered activity rather than a finished product.

Some concluding thoughts are provided from a question-and-answer session with Paul Leuthold.

What do you see as the barriers to good planning?
Paul Leuthold:

- Plans can be inflexible over time. A plan may have a six-year primary lifecycle, but recreation interests may change within that time period.
- Stakeholder participation. Public meetings often do not attract an accurate representation of the public we are attempting to serve. It is difficult encouraging teens and young families to become involved in the process simply because they have little free time to do so.

- When is enough enough? Despite meetings, public hearings, surveys, and work sessions, there is usually criticism that the process was not inclusive enough.
- Identifying trends versus recreation basics. As demographics and recreation interests change, there is always a stakeholder group that advocates for something new and different. It is difficult to determine if these are viable, long-term needs that necessitate investment of time and capital.
- Trust in the process. Plans are completed by steering committees, recommended to Advisory Boards, then to the Planning Commission, and ultimately to the City Council. If there is distrust at any stage of the process, the plan cannot be developed in a timely manner.

What are the best ways to facilitate successful planning?
Paul Leuthold:

- A clear vision of the goal(s) is required.
- Stakeholder input is imperative. (If you cannot obtain it in person, utilize surveys or other methods.)
- If a plan document is the final product, it must be succinct and clearly understood.
- Ensure that the plan is implementable. (If you can’t afford to build the Taj Mahal, then don’t plan to do so.)
- The plan must be implemented in a timely manner. Public opinions, stakeholders, neighborhood representatives, demographics, politicians, budgets, etc. change over time. Each of these changes impacts the plan. If any of these parties feel that they were not included in the planning process or are in disagreement with the plan, successful implementation is questionable.

What do you think professionals need to know about planning?
Pducible:

- Answering many of the most important questions that facilitate the management of an agency is the basis for good planning. “Where are we? Where do we want to be? How do we get there?” These are questions specifically addressed in a department’s planning process. Identification of mission statements, visioning, and guiding principles all can be accomplished separately, but are typically included, in some form or another, within the plan.
- I also believe that all planning efforts support and build upon one another. Strategic planning frequently supports the goals and objectives
that have been identified in a comprehensive plan. The strategic planning process is a tool to implement these goals and objectives. Typically, there are specific timetables (usually short-term), financing tools, division action plans, and employee work plans (that also can be included in performance appraisals) that are included in the strategic planning process. They clearly identify who is responsible for doing what and then provide a date for accountability. Typically, strategic plans do not necessitate a final planning document rather they clearly articulate prescribed goals and objects and a methodology for accomplishing them.

One final thought. The park and recreation manager is again encouraged to consider—through the planning process and into the time of service delivery—service to underserved portions of the public. It may help to think of this in terms of the “ought to”—as in, “We don’t serve this particular group of people, but we ought to.” It is all too easy to continue to serve the same groups of the public because it is what has been done for years. This “ought to” mentality can be facilitated early in the planning process while vision, mission, and values statements are being established and brought to fruition through the action planning and finally to program implementation and service delivery.
References


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