

# Identifying Local Officials' Priorities for Parks and Recreation



*A Conversation Guide and Survey*



## Overview

The purpose of this guide is to provide you with tools for learning about how elected officials and local administration are thinking about parks and recreation. Understanding their perspectives can help you communicate the benefits of parks and recreation services in a way that they are receptive to. For example, if elected officials in your community view parks and recreation as being essential for youth development, you may want to highlight the ways that your programming supports and educates young people. On the other hand, if your elected officials are primarily focused on generating revenue in the community, you may want to highlight programs and events that bring people to the community, such as tournaments and races, or amenities that increase community desirability, such as parks and trails.

## Narratives of Parks and Recreation

Research with parks and recreation professionals suggests that there are eight main narratives that people hold about parks and recreation. These narratives are outlined in the table below.

Your elected officials and local administrators are likely to subscribe to one or more of these narratives. Which narrative(s) your local officials hold is likely to impact the kinds of events and programs they view as most important, how they evaluate success, and how they expect you to make decisions. Understanding their narrative(s) can help you communicate effectively about your work.

### Narratives Table

Narrative	Description
Taxpayer Service	<b>Parks and recreation exists to meet the needs, expectations, and requests of taxpayers, and to realize the priorities of local administration (e.g, city council).</b> Recreation programs are offered in an economically responsible manner, balancing community needs with responsible use of taxpayer funds.
Economic Driver	<b>Parks and recreation exists to support the economic health of the community.</b> This occurs when amenities like parks and fitness centers draw new residents to the community or when parks and recreation agencies contribute to tourism, typically through competitions like youth sport tournaments or triathlons, which attract short-term visitors to the area.

<b>Recreation for All</b>	<b>Parks and recreation exists to ensure that all community members have access to opportunities for personal fulfillment in their leisure time.</b> Programs and facilities are offered as free or low-cost options to create opportunities for community members who cannot afford higher-cost recreation opportunities. Programs and facilities are designed to meet the American with Disabilities Act standards, and should be available to all people regardless of their identities.
<b>Health</b>	<b>Parks and recreation exists to promote physical and mental health in the community.</b> It does this by maintaining publicly accessible space and offering free or low-cost programs where people can engage in a range of health-promoting activities. Some spaces and activities directly benefit health, while others have indirect effects (for example, by reducing social isolation or improving participants' knowledge of health).
<b>Quality of Life</b>	<b>Parks and recreation exists to provide an outlet for all community members to pursue self-actualization.</b> It offers a space to engage in self-determined leisure pursuits and provides opportunities for individuals to rejuvenate themselves and find joy and satisfaction in intrinsically motivated pursuits.
<b>Community Building</b>	<b>Parks and recreation exists to foster community connection.</b> This occurs through events such as youth sport games, where multiple generations of a family attends events; special events, such as cultural festivals, that bring together the community; regular recreation programming, where individuals can make new friends with people who share similar interests; and facilities and open space, where friends and family gather.
<b>Social Welfare</b>	<b>Parks and recreation exists to promote social welfare by creating opportunities for people to engage in productive leisure activities</b> that benefit them and the community while limiting the likelihood that people engage in unproductive leisure. A primary focus is on ensuring that youth have access to positive developmental opportunities that support their ability to contribute to society.
<b>Sustainability</b>	<b>Parks and Recreation exists to foster environmental, social, and financial sustainability,</b> aiming to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs.

It is important to note that these are not the *only* narratives that exist about parks and recreation. Additionally, many people hold more than one narrative about the purpose of parks and recreation. For instance, an elected official may view the primary purpose of parks and recreation as promoting quality of life, but they may also believe that parks and recreation needs

to meet the expectations of taxpayers and be delivered in an economically responsible way. Both of these narratives may impact how they view the work your agency is doing.

## Conversation Guide

One way to learn about your local officials' views is by having informal conversations with them. The questions below can help you start this conversation.

- **From your perspective, what is the purpose of parks and recreation?**
- **If parks and recreation disappeared, what would our community lose?**
- **What priorities should guide provision of parks and recreation services?**
- **What is the best evidence of “a job well done” in parks and recreation?**

## One Question Survey

Another way to learn about your local officials' views is by asking them to take a brief survey. This may be a good approach if you have limited time or are trying to assess multiple peoples' views at once.

The survey below can help you assess the priorities of your local officials when it comes to parks and recreation. Each answer corresponds to one of the primary narratives of parks and recreation. See the Survey Key below for a guide on which answers correspond with which narratives.

You can print paper surveys, use an online form (like Google Forms), or use a live polling system (like PollEverywhere) to deliver your survey. Depending on which approach you take, you can evaluate the survey responses in the moment or at a later time. You can even use the survey as a jumping off point for a deeper conversation.

Keep in mind that most people will have trouble choosing a single answer. If you are interested in understanding the person's primary narrative about parks and recreation, ask them to select the one option that best aligns with their views, understanding that this may oversimplify their views. If you are interested in understanding their views more holistically, ask them to select the top three options that best align with their views.

## Survey

**From your perspective, what is the best way for the parks and recreation department to decide what kinds of programs and events to offer the community?**

- Based on the needs and wants of taxpayers.** You'll prioritize programs and events that community members have expressed interest in.
- Based on economic considerations.** You'll prioritize programs and events that will generate the most revenue for the community.

- Based on accessibility.** You'll prioritize programs and events that are low cost or that meet the needs of community members that have limited access to recreation opportunities.
- Based on what will most contribute to health.** You'll prioritize programs and events that improve participants' physical and mental wellness.
- Based on what will create a sense of community.** You'll prioritize programs and events that help people connect and build a sense of belonging.
- Based on what will most contribute to participants' quality of life.** You'll prioritize programs and events that help people achieve rejuvenation, joy, and satisfaction.
- Based on what will support youth.** You'll prioritize programs and events that help young people develop important skills like teamwork and resilience, and that reduce their likelihood of engaging in unproductive leisure activities.
- Based on what will be most sustainable for the community.** You'll prioritize programs and events that meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations.
- Other.** Please describe.

### Survey Key

Survey Response	Corresponding Narrative
Based on the needs and wants of taxpayers	Taxpayer Service
Based on economic considerations	Economic Driver
Based on accessibility	Recreation for All
Based on what will most contribute to health	Health
Based on what will create a sense of community	Community Building
Based on what will most contribute to participants' quality of life	Quality of Life
Based on what will support youth	Social Welfare
Based on what will be most sustainable for the community.	Sustainability
Other	For you to determine