
Recreation and Parks

The role of government in providing public parks for Georgia’s citizens is as old as the state itself. The precedent was set by General James Edward Oglethorpe when he designed and developed the city of Savannah in 1733. The local government role became more formal in 1911, when Atlanta started the first city parks department to provide park and recreation services. Today, there are 2,340 sites managed by local governments in Georgia totaling 63,110 acres.¹

As used in this chapter, “recreation and parks” refers to youth and adult sports, festivals and special events, senior centers, recreational classes, the visual and performing arts, community centers, gymnasiums, public parks and open space, golf courses, swimming pools, greenways, trails, and other such programs and facilities.

BENEFITS OF PROVIDING RECREATION AND PARK SERVICES

Parks, open spaces, tree lined streets, museums, festivals, recreation programs, and special events all help to shape the identity of a community. These factors combined with a wide range of elements such as health, safety, education, housing, and transportation define “quality of life” and determine whether a community is a desirable place to live and work.²

According to Partners for Livable Communities,³ capital investments intended to provide recreation, entertainment, and cultural enrichment to community residents often have a low priority, particularly in times when budgets are tight. When parks, museums, libraries, performing arts facilities, and other amenities that require land and structures are allowed to deteriorate or do not keep pace with population or changing demands, a community may lose the features that make it attractive. As

amenities grow more important with urban development, their loss may be counted in dollars lost to the local economy as well as a declining quality of life.⁴

There is a common belief that recreation and park services are not necessary. Another assumption is that the benefits of such activities affect only certain individuals and not the community at large. This train of thought often leads elected officials to underfund recreation and park services. In reality, however, the public assigns a very high level of importance to the benefits garnered from the use of these services.⁵

The Georgia General Assembly mandates the development of state policies on outdoor recreation.⁶ Accordingly, Georgia's Department of Natural Resources produced the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), which identifies trends, priorities, and goals regarding outdoor recreation in Georgia. This plan is updated every five years in order for Georgia to be eligible for recreation dollars through the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

According to the results of the 2008 SCORP Survey, 88 percent of Georgians support public funding of outdoor recreation, and 74 percent of those respondents support additional public funding. The survey further revealed that 68 percent of Georgians had participated in outdoor recreational activities within the past year and that nearly three out of every four Georgians had visited a recreation park within that time frame.⁷

The popularity of parks is why county governments have become increasingly involved in funding outdoor recreation. But why should a county put time and money into these services when many civic organizations, nonprofit agencies, or the private sector already provide recreational activities? Providing recreation services has become an accepted governmental role for several reasons:⁸

- Only when recreation and park services are provided by governmental agencies and therefore offered at little or no cost can the largest segment of the population take advantage of them.
- With the growing value of land, the county is often the only organization with resources for acquiring, developing, and maintaining land for public recreation, park, and open space purposes.
- Only local government can ensure the provision of recreation and park services on a permanent basis. Private or volunteer agencies may be abolished, may remove facilities from public

use, or may divert their use from recreational purposes. Public agencies, however, have greater permanency and are subject to public control and accountability.

- The potential rewards to the county for providing adequate recreational opportunities often make them profitable investments.
- Citizens have demanded it.

Recreation and park departments provide numerous benefits to the county. These include increased self-esteem for kids through participation in youth recreation programs and sports, better physical and mental health and decreased stress for individuals, increased economic activity due to the community's attractiveness to business and industry, and an increased quality of life for the community as a whole. Further, providing recreation and park services fosters the development of a stronger environmental ethic and a better understanding of the need for stewardship.⁹

LEGAL AUTHORITY FOR CREATING A RECREATION AND PARK SYSTEM

Title 36, Chapter 64, of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated authorizes local governments to establish and expend funds on recreation and park services. Often referred to as the Recreation Enabling Law, it empowers the governing body of any county or municipality, or combination thereof, to provide, establish, maintain, and conduct a recreation system and to acquire the property necessary to establish and maintain playgrounds, recreation centers, parks, and other recreational facilities and activities. It also enables municipalities and counties to create recreation boards or commissions and outlines their powers and duties.

In order to carry out the provisions of this law, local governments, or any board they designate, may employ playleaders, playground or community center directors, supervisors, recreation superintendents, or other officers or employees needed to carry out the services. The basic provisions of the law are as follows:

1. The governing body of any county or municipality may establish a system of supervised recreation. It may, by resolution or ordinance, vest the power to provide, maintain, and conduct

parks, playgrounds, recreation centers, and other recreational activities and facilities in the board of education, park board, or other existing body or in a recreation board, as the governing body may determine.

2. The governing authority may appropriate general funds to conduct, equip, and maintain recreational lands and buildings. Staff may also be employed to manage the recreation and parks system. In addition, grants, gifts, money, or property for recreational purposes may be accepted by the agency responsible for recreation programs, with governing authority approval required when acceptance of real estate will subject the county to additional expense.¹⁰
3. Ten percent of the qualified and registered voters of a county may sign a petition requesting the governing authority to provide a supervised recreation system and to levy a recreation tax for that purpose, subject to approval by referendum. Once the levy has been approved, in order to remove the recreation tax, the county must adopt a resolution to that effect, subject to approval by referendum. After the tax is removed, the funding for the county recreation system can be determined at the discretion of the county governing body.¹¹
4. The governing authority may propose that bonds be issued for the purpose of acquiring lands, buildings, or equipment for recreation purposes. Special purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST) funds may also be used for recreation and parks capital projects if approved in a voter referendum.¹²
5. Counties and cities, as well as school boards, may jointly establish and maintain a recreation system.

COMPONENTS OF A RECREATION AND PARK SYSTEM

A recreation and park system is a major contributor to the overall quality of life in the county. In order to help ensure the professional competence and effectiveness of park and recreation agencies, the Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) developed best practices standards organized into 10 major categories: agency authority, role, and responsibility; planning; organization and administration; human resources; finance management; program and services management; facility and land-use management; public safety, law enforcement, and security; risk management; and evaluation and research.¹³

Structure and Organization

The most commonly found structure for public recreation, park, and leisure service departments includes the following elements:

- *Organization and Administration.* Organization is the structure that clarifies the lines of authority and areas of responsibility for the agency to accomplish its mission. Administration is the process that ensures that an agency's resources are used to attain its predetermined goals. It must also provide maintenance for the care and upkeep of the areas, facilities, and structures; ensure that they are accessible; and protect the health and safety of the users.
- *Parks and Facilities.* Parks are areas of land and water not intensively developed for residential or economic purposes. They are set aside for their aesthetic, environmental, recreational, educational, or cultural value and may also serve transportation and historic preservation purposes. Facilities are the buildings and structures in parks needed to deliver recreation services (e.g., swimming pools, ball fields, community centers, and performing arts centers).
- *Programs and Services.* The activities or experiences offered are designed to enable the individual to maximize the use of his/her leisure time. These may be active or passive in nature and range from sports to the performing arts to environmental education.

Open Space

Closely related to recreation is the provision of open space by the county, especially in urban counties. In its broadest definition, open space is considered to be space that is not used for buildings or structures. Without open spaces, our communities would be unrecognizable and unmemorable.¹⁴ People in urban areas need open space for many different purposes: to conserve water and other natural resources, as a reserve for often unpredictable future needs, to prevent building in undesirable locations in order to avoid flood hazard or a wasteful extension of services, for pleasant views from urban areas, for a sense of urban identity, for buffers against noise and other nuisances, and above all, for recreation, which can be combined with many other uses.¹⁵

Counties can utilize state conservation funds, if available, to finance land acquisition for passive recreation such as boating, hiking, camping,

fishing, hunting, jogging, biking, or similar outdoor activities.¹⁶ Grants and low interest loans are available to counties to implement approved projects through the Georgia Land Conservation Program, which is administered by the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA). For more information on land protection and conservation tools, see Chapters 9 and 10 on planning and environmental management.

RECREATION AND PARK SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

Once the decision to establish a recreation and park department has been made, the county governing authority must decide how it will be structured and who will be responsible for its operation. As previously noted, the county commission may, by resolution or ordinance, vest the power to provide, maintain, and conduct parks, playgrounds, recreation centers, and other recreational activities and facilities in the board of education, park board, or other existing body or in a recreation board. Though not mentioned in the enabling legislation, the county commission may establish an advisory board in lieu of a policy board. In either case, the ordinance or resolution must clearly define the specific functions, organization, and responsibilities of the recreation and parks department. The department can operate as a line department reporting directly to the county administrator, to the chair of the board of commissioners, to the entire board of commissioners, or to a recreation and parks policy board. If a policy board or an advisory board is created, bylaws should be developed for operation of the board.

Regardless of how the chain of command is set up, counties can utilize an advisory committee as a way of involving citizens with the department. When a county and city operate a recreation and park department jointly, a policy board, with members appointed by each government, is recommended.

Functions of a Recreation and Park Policy Board

The Recreation Enabling Act provides for the establishment of a policy board (also known as a legal board) and defines the powers and duties of the board, the number of board members and how they are appointed, the selection and replacement of individual members, and the length of a member's term.¹⁷ A county that decides to have an advisory board or committee rather than a policy board should also address these four points in the local ordinance or resolution creating it.

Recreation and park policy boards have five major functions:

1. **Policymaking.** The board sets policies to govern all phases of the department's operations. These policies should specify how the board wants to use its resources (human and fiscal). Equally important, the policies should be designed to assure the health, safety, and well-being of participants.
2. **Program planning, review, and evaluation.** The board establishes long-range goals, approves yearly operating objectives, and annually reviews and evaluates the progress made toward achieving its goals and objectives.
3. **Financial management.** The board is responsible for assuring that sufficient income is generated from various sources to carry out the programs and operate the facilities that are approved by the board. Normally, the department's director develops the budget, and the board, after reviewing and modifying it as needed, recommends it to the county commission, which has final approval.
4. **Evaluation of the performance of the director.** The policy board provides an objective evaluation of the department's director. The county commission, the policy board, and the director must have a clear understanding of the director's responsibilities, authority, and duties.
5. **Community relations.** The board is obligated to make recreation programs and facilities available to all citizens within its jurisdiction who want to participate. It should maintain high standards for the programs conducted and facilities operated and ensure the accessibility, safety, and welfare of participants. The board should make itself known to the community through reports, earn respect through the integrity of its management, and achieve acceptance by striving to serve everyone in the community and by involving the community constructively in planning and evaluating its programs and facilities.

Recreation and Park Authorities

The Constitution of Georgia provides for the creation of development authorities and community improvement districts.¹⁸ Community improvement districts are managed by a governing authority and are created to provide several types of governmental services and facilities, including parks and recreation. The General Assembly may authorize the administrative body that oversees a district to incur debt and to levy

taxes, fees, and assessments within its jurisdiction only on real property used nonresidentially.¹⁹

DETERMINING WHICH RECREATION AND PARK SERVICES TO OFFER

There are a variety of methods for gathering information about recreation and park services. Depending on the resources of the county staff, these methods can be used in-house or they can be contracted.

The most common way to determine people's attitudes about the provision of recreation and park services is to collect information through a survey. Surveys can vary in length and be administered in several ways: by telephone, through a Web-based survey tool, by e-mail, or by mail. Each method has good and bad points, and there are costs that should be considered when determining which method is best for your county.

In addition to obtaining specific information about recreation and park issues, it is important to understand the demographic makeup of the county. Demographic information is usually available through the county's planning office, regional commissions, local libraries, colleges and universities, or on Web sites (through ACCG, the Department of Community Affairs, and the U.S. Bureau of the Census, for example).

A community's residents are the best source of information about what kinds of recreation and park services are needed. Therefore, a community-based decision-making process is often the most effective means for determining the kind of services citizens desire.²⁰ It places the people who live in the county on the planning committee and invites them to open forums to discuss the issues. It is a strategic process for determining where the county is now, its preferred future, and how to get there.

The strategic plan develops the vision and mission for recreation, parks, and leisure services along with goals, objectives, and an action plan. It is broader in scope than the site plan, which is the design for an individual park or facility. From this, a comprehensive plan that looks at the specific long-term and short-term dimensions of the recreation programs and the physical resources of the delivery system is developed.²¹ Both of these plans should be included in the county's comprehensive plan.

SUMMARY

The role of county government is to ensure the quality of its citizens' lives through the organization and delivery of services. Important among these services is the recreation, parks, and leisure delivery system, which

contributes to the overall quality of life for the community and provides a significant contribution to the county's economy. A community's open spaces, parks, streetscapes, cultural facilities, and recreation programs are all part of its leisure services delivery system. These amenities help create a sense of place, making a community one in which people want to live, work, and raise their families.

NOTES

1. *Georgia Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2008–2013* (Atlanta: Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 2008), 22.
2. R. H. McNulty, D. R. Jaconson, and R. L. Penne, *The Economics of Amenity: Community Features and Quality of Life* (Washington, DC: Partners for Livable Places, 1985).
3. See www.liveable.com.
4. McNulty, Jaconson, and Penne, *Economics of Amenity*.
5. J. Harper, G. Godbey, and S. Foreman, "Just the Facts: Answering the Critics of Local Government Park and Recreation Services," *Parks & Recreation* (August 1998): 78–81.
6. OFFICIAL CODE OF GEORGIA ANNOTATED (O.C.G.A.) §12-3-1.
7. *Georgia Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2008–2013*, 26.
8. G. Lutzin Sidney, ed., *Managing Municipal Leisure Services* (Washington, DC: International City Management Association, 1980), 1–12.
9. L. Allen, B. Stevens, K. Hurtes, and R. Harwell, *Benefits-Based Programming of Recreation Services: Training Manual* (Ashburn, VA: National Recreation and Park Association, 1998).
10. See also O.C.G.A. tit. 36, ch. 71, on development impact fees.
11. O.C.G.A. §36-64-15.
12. O.C.G.A. §48-8-111(a)(1)(E).
13. *National Accreditation Standards*, 4th ed. (Ashburn, VA: Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies, National Recreation and Park Association, April 2009).
14. P. Harnik, *Inside City Parks: Report from the Trust for Public Land and the Urban Land Institute* (Washington DC: Urban Land Institute, 2000).
15. President's Commission on National Goals, *Goals for Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 239.
16. O.C.G.A. §12-6A-1 et seq.
17. O.C.G.A. §36-64-5.
18. GA. CONST. art. IX, §7.
19. GA. CONST. art. IX, §7, ¶3(c).
20. Daniel Hope and Steven L. Dempsey, "Achieving Consensus in Planning Recreation and Park Services," *World Leisure Journal* 42, no. 4 (2000): 56–64.
21. B. Van der Smissen, M. Moiseichik, V. Hartenburg, and L. Twardzik, eds., *Management of Park and Recreation Agencies* (Ashburn, VA: National Recreation and Park Association, 1999), 100.