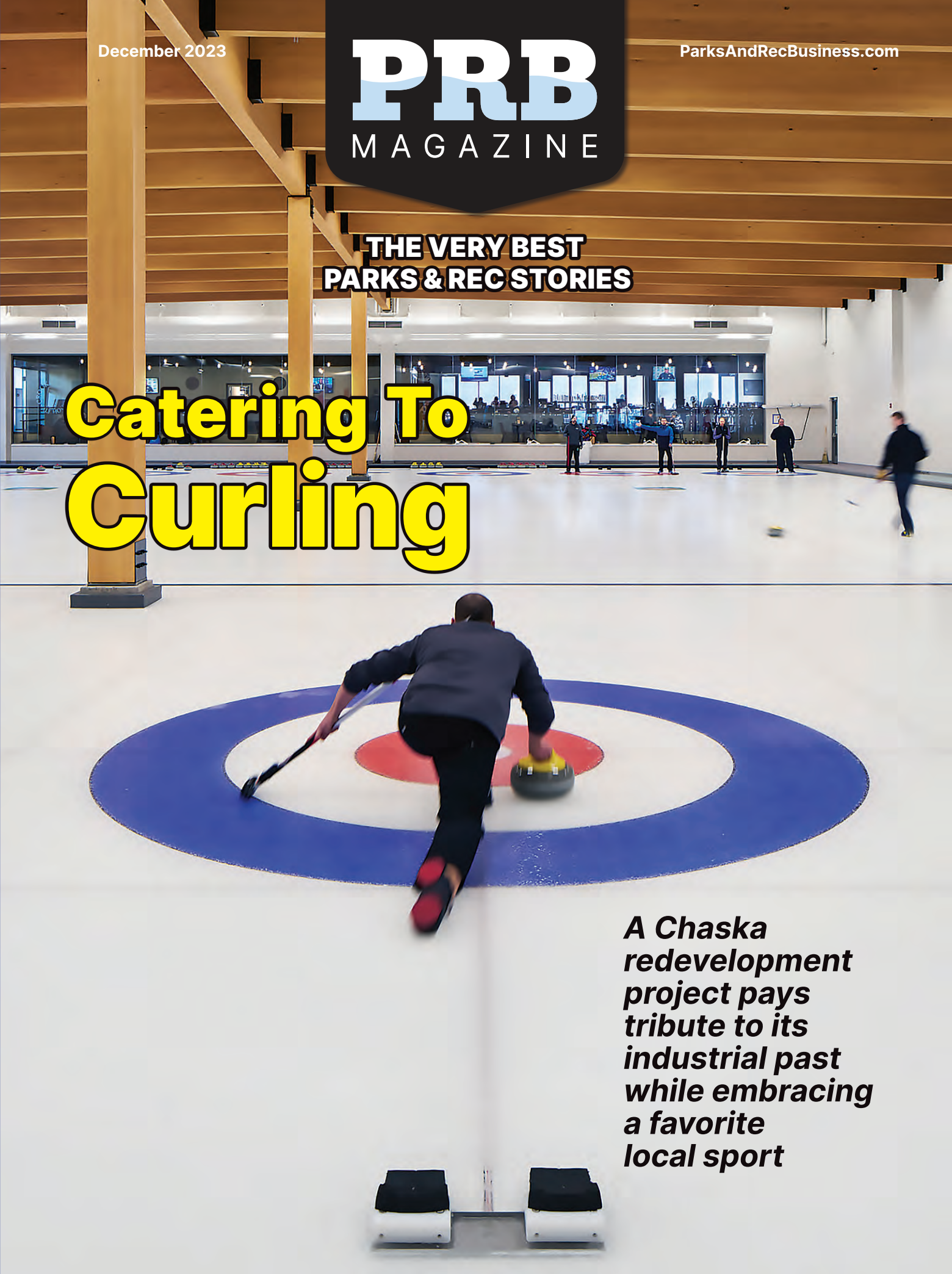


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# Features



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*"Be thankful for what you have and you'll end up having more." —OPRAH WINFREY*



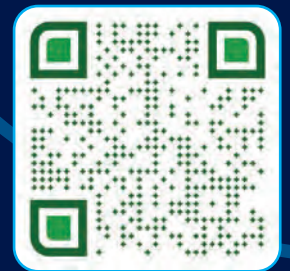
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# Publisher's Note

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## From One Place To A Better One

In “Ted Lasso,” my favorite show of all time, Ted (the main character) tells a story about his dog Hank. It goes like this:

*Well, when I was three years old, I got attacked by our neighbor's dog. I- I don't remember it happening, but my mother said it was pretty ... pretty scary, you know.*

*I do remember being afraid of dogs while growing up though. Like, if I was at a friend's house for a sleepover or something, they'd have to keep their family dog outside, otherwise I'd bawl my eyes out.*

*Then in high school our neighbor, Mr. Grady, well, his wife passed away. And he was real sad about that, as you can imagine. And he just kinda stopped taking care of their dog. Same one that bit me. His name was Hank.*

*And so, I started looking after him, you know. Feeding him, taking him on walks, playing fetch, all that fun stuff. Eventually, Mr. Grady's son moved his dad into a nursing home, and he asked if I wanted to keep Hank, and I was like, “Yeah. Heck, yeah.” And then a year or so after that, we had to put Hank to sleep.*

*It's funny to think about the things in your life that can make you cry just knowing that they existed, can then become the same thing that make you cry knowing that they're now gone.*

*I think those things come into our lives to help us get from one place to a better one.*

Like Hank, our goal here at *Parks & Rec Business* has always been to help you “get from one place to a better one”—maybe not as dramatically as Hank's story, but you get the point. Our mission in life since September 1998 has been to help you find ways to grow and succeed.

Beginning in January, we're taking just that step by moving our sister publication, *Camp Business*, from a stand-alone publication only available to summer and day camps to also include any parks and recreation agency that also runs day camps.

We're calling the new magazine **PRB+**.

The idea is that folks in the traditional summer-camp market can learn from you, and you can learn from them—helping both markets move forward and grow.

We think it's a neat idea.

I hope you enjoy the new magazine—we think it's going to be awesome.

Have a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

**Rodney J. Auth**  
Publisher



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## THIS-N-THAT

### Philly Hosts Renowned Fencer For Youth Chat

Temple University Sports Hall of Famer, Kamali Thompson, who is well known for her exploits in fencing, was invited to the Belfield Recreation Center in Philadelphia earlier this year to talk with a crowd of 25 young women about her journey, building confidence, finding your passion, and dealing with adversity.

The event was held in partnership with nonprofits Different Mindset and Urban Sports Rescue.

Growing up in Teaneck, N.J., Thompson began fencing in ninth grade after a teacher recommended it to obtain a college scholarship. Despite only playing for four years, her talents landed her a scholarship at Temple University where she was a four-time NCAA Championship qualifier, second team All-American and four-time conference champion. Thompson also excelled in the class, where she was named University's Student Athlete of the year in 2011 and 2012.

After graduating from Temple with honors, Thompson matriculated into medical school while also competing for the United States fencing team. She was a member of the 2019 National Team and was an alternate to the 2020 women's saber Olympic team. Thompson really piqued the students' interest when she spoke about the nearly three dozen countries that's she's traveled to as part of the fencing program including France, Italy, England, and Egypt.

She felt that all were important topics that most students don't get advised on until much later in life.

Khadija Hickson, director at Different Mindset who served as the moderator for the discussion, says she feels these conversations with youth are important.

"I think that it's important that youth, especially young girls, get a perspective from someone who looks like them," she notes. "Oftentimes, they get advice from older people, and they listen. But when it's someone closer to their age



that has recently put in the work to become successful, it's more impactful."

Thompson also spoke to the audience about the importance of mentoring. Peter Westbrook, five-time Olympian, 1984 bronze medalist in fencing, and founder of the Peter Westbrook Foundation, mentored Thompson throughout her fencing career and path into medicine. She currently gives back by mentoring other student-athletes at the Westbrook Foundation and encouraging high-achieving students of color to enter the field of orthopedic medicine. Less than one percent of all orthopedic physicians are African American.

Hickson also addressed the crowd about the importance of young people looking beyond sports to achieve long-term success.

"A lot of times, many young people think that they are going to be the next star athlete and it doesn't work out," she points out. "Dr. Thompson spoke how she was able to use sports

as a vehicle into something beyond playing. A lot of the girls will now say this is something they can possibly accomplish as well."

Different Mindset LLC is a Philadelphia-based non-profit that empowers young women to embrace the importance of individuality and to take ownership of their self-image and self-concept. Urban Sports Rescue, also a Philadelphia-based non-profit organization, is dedicated to the development of urban youth through positive athletic programs.

—Written by Aurelius Cousar and Rasool Hajj



### A-LIST Adds DLF Super Bents

Corvallis, Ore.—The Alliance for Low Input Sustainable Turf (A-LIST) announced the addition of creeping bentgrass to its list of approved turfgrass species and included three of DLF's Super Bents varieties: 007XL, 777 (Triple Seven) and Macdonald.

The A-LIST is a non-profit organization that conducts independent trials across the U.S. to identify and certify the best-performing turfgrass varieties under reduced inputs. The addition of creeping bentgrasses is the result of decades of work by plant breeders to develop varieties with better disease resistance,

heat and drought tolerance, and other traits that reduce the amount of water, fertilizer and pesticides required.

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## Hiking, Anyone?

After analyzing trail data, real-time reviews, and weather information, Kuru footwear notes a selection of states that offered remarkable hiking experiences in 2023:

- 1 Colorado:** Majestic peaks, alpine lakes, and an extensive trail network offer unparalleled hiking opportunities.
- 2 Utah:** Renowned for its red rock formations, canyons, and national parks like Zion and Bryce Canyon.
- 3 New York:** Offers a mix of landscapes, including the Adirondack Mountains, the Appalachian Trail, and the Finger Lakes region.
- 4 Texas:** Its diverse terrain, encompassing deserts, canyons, and coastal areas, provides a variety of experiences.
- 5 California:** From the Sierra Nevada mountains to the coastline of Big Sur, there's an unrivaled combination of natural wonders and outdoor adventure.
- 6 Washington:** Known for lush rainforests, towering mountains, and iconic trails like the Pacific Crest Trail and Mount Rainier National Park.
- 7 Arizona:** The land of the Grand Canyon and the Sonoran Desert is known for unique geological formations and an abundance of desert flora and fauna.
- 8 Massachusetts:** Its diverse landscapes, from the Berkshires to the tranquil Cape Cod, offer an array of trails and natural beauty.
- 9 North Carolina:** Boasting the Blue Ridge Mountains, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the Outer Banks, it provides an unforgettable hiking experience.
- 10 Wyoming:** Known for its vast wilderness areas, including Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park.



## Partnership Helps Scholarship Program Numbers Swell

Fort Lauderdale, Fla.—The International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF) and Every Child A Swimmer (ECAS) have partnered with Goldfish Swim School Franchising to provide more children with access to low-to-no-cost swimming lessons in more communities.

Goldfish Swim School is a swim school franchise in North America, while ECAS is ISHOF's nonprofit organization dedicated to helping families in need gain access to swim lessons. The partnership more than doubles ECAS' total footprint to 231 locations and helps amplify the individual efforts of the two organizations to further promote water-safety education by providing access to swim lessons and water-safety instruction for infants and children aged 4 months to 12 years.



## Field Notes



**STIHL Inc.** Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing **Chris Keffer** was promoted to president and CEO. He succeeds **Terry Horan**, who was appointed to the Board of Directors.



*Dalton*

**Fecon LLC**, a manufacturer of site preparation attachments and forestry accessories, announces **Ray Dalton** as the new vice president of aftermarket sales, a newly created role.

**WAC Landscape Lighting** is collaborating with **Land F/X** software to help landscape architects, designers, and contractors specify the brand through distributors. WAC offers a range of accent lights, wall wash fixtures, bollards, path lights, wall and step lights, hardscape, and many other landscape lighting fixtures.



*Chilton*

**Munro**, a manufacturer of pumps, pump controls, and pump stations for the turf-irrigation market, named **Jack Chilton** as Central U.S. Regional Account Manager.



**Genesis Turfgrass** recently joined **United Turf Alliance** as its newest owner. Based in Glen Rock, Penn., Genesis Turfgrass serves customers in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Washington DC, Virginia, West Virginia, and New Jersey.

### JANUARY

**9-11 Northern New England Recreation & Parks Association Conference**, Whitefield, N.H.—Mountain View Grand Resort & Spa; <https://nnerpc.myrec.com>

**15-18 Mid-America Pool, Spa & Outdoor Living Show**, Indianapolis, Ind.—Lucas Oil Stadium; <https://midampool.com>

**22-25 Sports Turf Managers Association Conference and Exhibition**, Daytona Beach, Fla.—Ocean Center Daytona Beach; [www.stma.org](http://www.stma.org)

**25-27 Illinois Park and Recreation Association Soaring to New Heights Annual Conference**, Chicago, Ill.—Hyatt Regency, Chicago, <https://www.ilparksconference.com/>

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# CHANGES



# INSIDE



# AND OUT

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# IN 2024, EFFECTIVE PARK MANAGEMENT WILL REQUIRE BALANCING STAFF AND VISITORS' EVOLVING NEEDS

By Jefferey Spivey

**CHANGE** management is crucial for leaders in any field. Whether it's adopting innovative technology, navigating employee turnover, or launching new programs, successful leaders are often those who handle curveballs with ease and expertly guide their teams through unfamiliar territory.

However, evolution becomes more difficult when there are several major changes happening at once—something many parks leaders are experiencing as they prepare for 2024.

Within California State Parks, Peter Ostroskie knows this all too well. In the latter half of 2023, he transitioned from leading education and programs in the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division to an expanded role as Staff Park and Recreation Specialist for the Bay Area District.

"I'm not only running the education side, but I'm now learning about campgrounds and facilities, and all these other different avenues within a park district," Ostroskie says. He's also deepening his understanding of partnerships with local businesses, government offices, and other entities to ensure high-functioning parks.

He's in the midst of managing a significant change in his career trajectory; however, he's doing so during a shifting dynamic within the greater California State Parks. In his prior role, Ostroskie was an Interpreter III, a position with limited career paths. Employees in similar education roles were "camping out" in their jobs as a result, clogging the pipeline and limiting opportunities for new or lower-ranking staffers.

In response, the department has begun shifting its educators to other disciplines in an effort to stimulate career growth for veterans and novices alike.

"[The initiative] allows more opportunities for people like myself to go higher in the state park system, as a superintendent, park planners, all these other different processes and positions that we have," Ostroskie says. "If I remained an Interpreter III, that would be kind of it."

Furthermore, newly trained staffers can fill vacancies left by employees who have retired—a growing concern, more



*Within California State Parks, employees in education roles were "camping out" in their positions, so the department began shifting educators to other disciplines to stimulate career growth.*





**The Naperville Park District in Illinois is working on ways to show the range of possibilities within parks, such as working in finance, human resources, or marketing.**

the breadth of professional possibilities within parks, such as working in finance, human resources, or marketing, not only in the field.

Generational headwinds may also be aggravating staffing challenges. Ostroskie points out that younger employees no longer face stigmas around job-hopping and are less hesitant to leave positions for higher pay or other benefits. This requires a rethink about the best ways to reach early-career workers, not only to introduce them to careers in parks but also to position those careers as desirable long-term options.

“How do we keep people who are innovative and creative, and how do we get younger generations to really love their parks?” Ostroskie asks in motivating his department’s recruitment outreach. With younger workers taking up a larger share of the workforce, these questions must be answered sooner than later.

## ■ INTERNAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES ■

**NOT** all interdepartmental change is borne of these major shifts though. At Go Green With Us, an award-winning, statewide sustainability program dually operated by Tennessee State Parks (TSP) and the Tennessee Department of Environment & Conservation (TDEC), new initiatives have been launched to maintain positive momentum. (Go Green With Us was profiled in the February 2023 issue of *Parks & Rec Business*.)

Among the changes instituted in 2023, Go Green With Us now has a dedicated Sustainability Coordinator, a Go Green Executive Committee to implement various sustainability efforts in the Central Office and throughout TSP, a Go Green Dashboard for one-stop-shop data reporting and resources on the program, and a grant fund to help individual parks implement Go Green projects.

“We are very excited to see the creative project ideas and the positive impact they will have in parks, and even more excited to be given funding for such projects,” says Kelsey Davis, TSP’s Sustainability Coordinator.

Also new, Go Green With Us is now aligned with TSP’s comprehensive system plan, which will govern the department’s priorities through 2033. The plan includes systemwide goals for park resources, visitors, amenities, and operations.

“Go Green With Us initiatives directly support several of the objectives within the comprehensive

urgent not only for California State Parks but for other parks agencies across the country, including the Naperville Park District in Illinois.

In a roundtable discussion with Executive Director Brad Wilson, Eric Shutes, Director of Planning and Development, Tim Quigley, Director of Parks, and Sameera Luthman, Director of Marketing and Communications, there was concern about how to “attract more individuals to the profession.” The biggest challenges have been recruiting employees for custodial work, maintenance, food and beverage, customer service, and various trades.

To tackle this problem, the district recently launched a new careers brand called “Careers Grow Here,” which aims to show



**The biggest problem for the Go Green With Us initiative in Tennessee is educating visitors and convincing them to make changes to be part of making parks more sustainable.**



plan, including having parks that are welcoming and inviting to all, focusing on resource-based outdoor recreation, and providing quality facilities and amenities,” says Zach Tinkle, Area Manager for TSP and co-manager of Go Green With Us, along with Davis.

Part of what’s driving the program’s continued success is recognition. Parks achieve either bronze, silver, gold, or platinum level recognition based on their completion of recommended Go Green With Us actions. Of 57 parks, 32 have already secured platinum recognition—an impressive figure, but one that suggests new rewards are needed.

Tinkle says, “We are evaluating ways to modify the existing recognition-level structure to encourage and acknowledge the continued growth in sustainability efforts exhibited by our parks. It’s a great challenge to have.”

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## AN EVOLVING PUBLIC

**ALREADY**, many changes are at play within parks—there’s a need to recruit, retain, and inspire different generations to ensure the future of park leadership, and there’s also a need to keep duties fresh so progress isn’t lost. Still, some of parks leaders’ most notable challenges lie with the public they serve.

On one level, it’s a simple matter of communication—park visitors must be kept abreast of new regulations so they help preserve and protect the environment. Ostroskie points to confusion around off-highway vehicles in California. Previously, OHVs needed either a red or green sticker, with red-stickered vehicles being restricted to a specific riding season. But now the state is sunsetting the program, leading to anxiety on both sides of the issue. Ostroskie says the solution is giving all vehicles green stickers but he does expect confusion will continue even then.

Davis says the biggest challenge for Go Green With Us is educating park visitors.

“Guests may not understand the low lighting at night, the reduction in trash cans available, or the level of grass left un-mowed,” she says. The complexity of this communication is what motivated the very name, Go Green With Us, to suggest the public also had a duty to make Tennessee’s parks more sustainable. This communication need also inspired the Education and Outreach regulations in the program’s guidelines and a Go Green With Us column in *The Tennessee Conservationist* magazine.

Visitors’ expectations are changing, too. Tinkle and Davis point to an increased need for electric vehicle-charging infrastructure in parks, and the Naperville Park District notes the challenges of funding capital improvements for facilities and amenities that enhance visitors’ experiences.

But perhaps more abstract than these itemized needs is a reimagining of sorts around the ways parks engage citizens and the topics they discuss.

Ostroskie details the California Adventure Pass and Golden Bear Pass programs. The former gives all fourth graders free access to state parks while the latter provides low-cost entry for low-income residents. In essence, the state is changing the narrative around *who* California State Parks serve.

And to address *what* parks staff members are discussing with its broader audience, the department is focused on two priorities. First, Ostroskie says, they’re encouraging a science-based discussion around climate change. This effort includes programs about sea-level rise and wildfire resilience, with strategies



for taking action. Recent weather events, like Tropical Storm Hilary, have leant these programs greater urgency and relevance.

Second is a statewide push called “Reexamining the Past.” The initiative aims to reframe conversations about California’s history, accounting for more nuance and acknowledgement of marginalized groups. Ostroskie says certain historic events and figures—like the Spanish missions or John C. Fremont, for instance—have been romanticized, while less-flattering aspects of those legacies have gone overlooked.

Some sites across the state have been or will be renamed as a result of this cultural reexamination. In 2021, Patrick’s Point State Park was renamed Sue-Meg State Park to honor the Yurok tribe.

There’s also a California Truth and Healing Council that’s leading conversations at Sonoma State Park in a quest to reconsider the mission and the Bear Flag Revolt site on the lands.

Not all residents have been receptive to these conversations, however, either because of personal fondness for a particular site or a rejection of the initiative as too negative.

“As educators and parks, we’re really looking at how to have those conversations the right way, how to have them appropriately, who needs to be involved in the conversations, and when do we need to step out and just listen as a department,” Ostroskie says.

What’s clear is change is afoot, even if the public sometimes pushes back in ways that aren’t productive. But at other times, residents can lead the change, with insights that point to the best way forward.

Regarding the changing OHV regulations and how best to educate the public, Ostroskie says he and his department were wary of bringing up licensing programs like those in Arizona and Utah. But at one of two OHV safety summits held this year, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

“We thought as a government agency, if we came out with, ‘hey, maybe we should do this,’ we were going to get a lot of pushback,” he says. “Surprisingly, the community came to us and was like, ‘Why don’t we have something like this in California?’” **PRB**

*Jefferey Spivey is a journalist and author based in Urbandale, Iowa. Reach him at [jeffereyspivey@gmail.com](mailto:jeffereyspivey@gmail.com).*



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# The ROADMAP To Recognition

Creating  
a program  
to show  
that every  
employee  
matters

By Annie Olson



**No** matter the size of a park agency, all of them struggle with resource needs. However, what some people often don't recognize is that the most valuable resource of any organization is its employees. At the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB), a 2015 assessment of employee satisfaction resulted in the formation of a dedicated staff team to boost employee morale. This was the beginning of an effort to create a culture of recognition and appreciation throughout the agency.





## IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES

**T**he MPRB employs roughly 600 full-time, certified staff members and approximately 1,000 seasonal staff annually. Leaders took the results of the employee work culture and climate assessment seriously, working with staff members across the organization to create an action plan divided into focus areas. One of these was recognition of employees. Although three actions were included in this category, an ongoing recognition of employees has had a long-lasting impact. In February 2016, 11 employees who represent functions across the agency of all levels and tenure formed a Recognition Team. “As an employee, I struggled with feeling valued, and recognized that there wasn’t enough recognition of employees’ good work. It was important to me to have that voice, to help make sure that the employees, including me, felt valued at MPRB,” says Melissa Fly, a founding member of the Employee Recognition Committee.



The former was created by combining existing practices, applying examples found in policies from external companies, and using best practices in employee engagement. Using the Recognition Team as a policy development committee, the Employee Recognition Policy moved through policy development and ultimately was approved in 2017.

The latter was developed in tandem with policy development. To create an awareness of expectations, policy and program training were identified as a high priority. The training included an engaging, hands-on approach, creatively articulating expectations of the newly approved policy, while providing guidance on use of tools developed for the program. Supervisor Toolkits containing the policy, thank-you notes, certificates of appreciation, and tips for showing gratitude, were compiled and made available to all staff members. Additionally, Appreciation Station kits were installed at work sites across the agency. Lastly, a recognition event and employee awards became a signature part of the program.

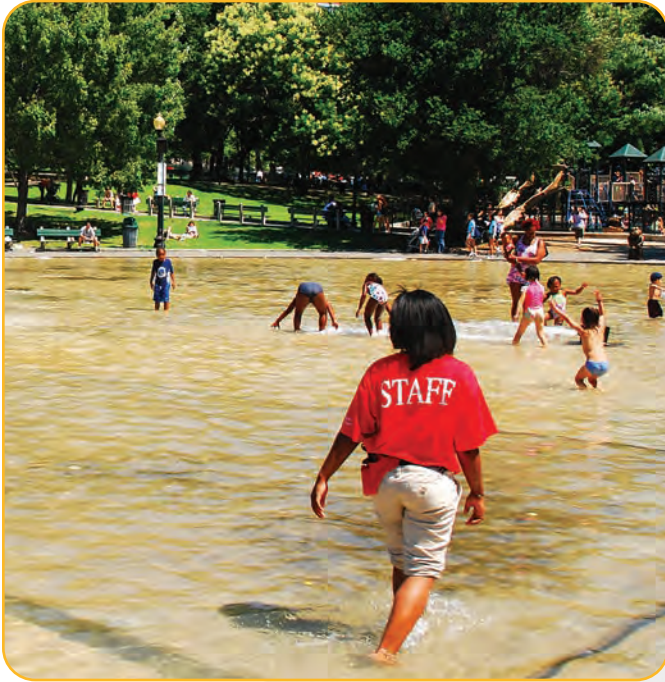


The team quickly identified two distinct work areas. The first was policy development, which became an opportunity to build accountability through a variety of methods. The second was creation of a recognition program to provide structure for supervisors and employees to show appreciation to each other. The Recognition Team was divided into two committees to research and develop an Employee Recognition Policy and an Employee Recognition Program.

## PROGRAM COMPONENTS

**T**he formation of an Employee Recognition Committee was the first step in implementing the policy and the program. The team is comprised of six appointed members by the executive team. They represent each division of the agency and are led by an appointed committee chair. Over time, the committee developed a charter that provides further structure and guidance for overall operation and sustainability of the committee. When Fly was asked about continuing to serve for subsequent terms, she noted, “I keep doing this because it is a fun assignment and group of colleagues. It is so great to see the positive impact that we’re making.”





Some components of the program have evolved because some efforts were more successful than others. For example, although Appreciation Station supplies were distributed to over 70 work sites, very few still have the supplies. These were specific boards in staff-facing areas that included colorful sticky notes and markers, allowing staff members to post notes of appreciation to their co-workers. However, Supervisor Toolkits are still being distributed with the intention of making employee recognition easy and attainable. The most successful item in the toolkits has been the High Five, which is available for any employee to use. High Fives are in-house designed and printed postcards in four colors over the image of a hand. This graphic is also available electronically. High Fives are often used as a method for recognizing a co-worker for a job well done, and are displayed proudly in workspaces. Similarly, the “Kudos” area of the employee newsletter is an additional method of sharing thanks for an employee’s contributions in a more public format. These two successful components continue to provide meaningful results.

### EMPLOYEE-RECOGNITION EVENT

Understanding that each person is motivated differently, in accordance with the policy, the Employee Recognition Committee holds a reception annually to celebrate the previous year. A \$6,000 allocation covers all event and

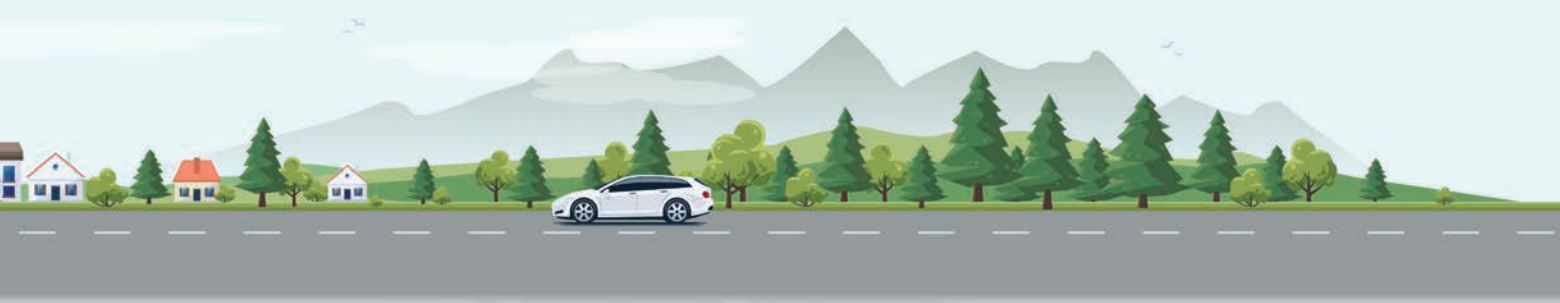
award expenses. This event kicked off in 2019, with a look back to achievements in 2018. That first year, about 85 employees attended the event; however, very few who were being recognized attended. In 2020, the event was cancelled and then ultimately revived as a virtual event until March 2023, when an in-person reception was held, hosting nearly 150 employees.

“Sitting at the welcome table and watching the people arrive to the reception was so satisfying, especially in 2023. Having been here since the beginning, it has been amazing to watch it grow and change,” says Cindy Anderson, another founding member of the Employee Recognition Committee. “There were so many people! Seeing their faces, how happy they were to be there with colleagues they don’t typically see, gave me so much joy. Then, when the Superintendent shook the hands of the employees, there was so much pride on the faces of not only the recipients but their closest colleagues. The applause was so loud and sincere. It was so heartwarming to see the joy that we brought to the MPRB.”

All employees are invited to support the achievements of their colleagues, which features highlights of the previous year, professional achievements of employees, inter-agency honors, years-of-service awards, formal awards, and wonderful opportunities to build community among staff members.







Years-of-service awards are given in five-year intervals. Implementing these awards is a challenge in a large agency with many longtime staff members. The committee determined a methodology and began distribution of these awards in 2019, for years of service through December of the previous year. Any staff member who worked continuously for more than five years was given an award for the closest five-year interval. This meant that 420 employees received an award that year. Subsequently, there are around 100 staff members annually who qualify for a years-of-service award.

Formal awards are given to employees who have been nominated by their peers in particular categories. This part of the program continues to grow each year. What began with only one or two nominations has now grown into so many that the committee has decided to expand the categories to accommodate the positive energy and emerging themes. At the 2023 event four formal award categories honored deserving employees.

### EMPLOYEES TAKE NOTICE

**A**lthough more work is to be done, employees have begun to take notice. Since implementing the policy and program, requests by staff members for the creation of numerous interagency honor categories has emerged. The popularity of peer-to-peer nominations has increased significantly. In fact, one employee was nominated by colleagues 16 times for service in 2022, resulting in development of a new award category. The cross-departmental colleague support shown both on the job and at the reception is apparent. The Employee Recognition Program's impact continues to emerge. "Peer-to-peer recognition is great. Sometimes, though, getting that recognition from someone higher in the organization is needed. The fact that leadership knows your name and what you've done to make the MPRB a better place means something. That has started to happen now through this program," Fly says.

With an intentional effort, the board continues to use an Employee Recognition Program to make a positive impact on the employee experience. Dedicated and passionate staff keep the program relevant. Shifting the culture does not happen quickly or without effort. The Employee Recognition Committee, with much help from colleagues, continues to create a culture of appreciation at work, one High Five at a time. **PRB**

***Annie Olson** has over 23 years of experience at the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, serving in different roles. She is currently the Director of Visitor Services. Although she holds many positions at the agency, the one that brings her the most joy and satisfaction is that of Employee Recognition Committee Chair. She is widely known in the field for her professional-development trainings and speaking engagements on customer-service topics. She has trained thousands of public-sector employees since 2013. Reach her at [aolson@minneapolisparcs.org](mailto:aolson@minneapolisparcs.org).*

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# Groomed For Leadership

*All I know I learned from my horses*

By Shannon Coates



**I've never heard an effective leader say that leadership is** easy—it's not. In fact, it can be incredibly difficult at times. Not only does an individual in charge have to make sure the day-to-day needs of an organization are met, but he or she is also responsible for helping each person become the best contributor possible—all while continuing to learn and grow and manage the goals and objectives of the department.

While leadership can often feel like herding cats, it is my horses that have taught me the most important lessons about being a leader. Horses are prey animals. They live in herds. As such, their survival depends on social systems and herd dynamics, as well as on their ability to read and interpret non-verbal communications and body language. Their ability to read situations and emotional energy correctly and convey information to the herd is critical to the herd's survival. Horses are incapable of lying. They mirror our energy—good or bad. For these reasons, horses can provide immediate feedback to humans regarding behavior.

I have been fortunate to spend a lot of time around horses. As a child, I thought I was just having fun, enjoying nature, and learning to ride. Now, as an adult, I realize each horse I encountered taught me an important lesson and contributed to the leader I am today. Below are five lessons I learned.



## 1 BE AWARE.

One morning last fall, I went out to the barn to feed my two horses, Luke and Beamer. I was running late and needed to get to work, so I wasn't paying attention to anything other than putting feed in their buckets and moving them into their stalls. After dumping the feed, I went to get them. As soon as I took one step outside the barn, I knew something wasn't right. Both horses, normally easy to catch, were laser-focused on something about 200 yards away. Neither would come when I called. I stood in the pasture watching but couldn't see or hear anything. After about 30 seconds, a family of deer emerged from the tree line, bounding across the field and into a neighboring property. The three of us stood there mesmerized. After the deer were gone, the horses turned and walked to their stalls on their own. I would have missed that amazing experience if I had made either of the horses move before he was ready, or I hadn't been aware enough to realize they knew something I didn't.

**The takeaway:** By nature, most leaders are highly competitive and move quickly. It can be easy not to "see" what is right in front of us. Remember to be present and aware. In fact, you as a leader must be hyper-aware of your surroundings to obtain the information you need to make good decisions for the team. If you never stop moving, if you are always over-booked, you may miss these opportunities and make decisions you will later regret. Don't be afraid to stop or say "no." It makes you a stronger leader.

## 2 COMMUNICATE CLEARLY.

Horses are large animals (many of them weighing 1,000 pounds or more) that can be pushy with each other and with their owners. It is critical they understand boundaries and rules set by their humans and by each other. As herd animals that rely on their leader for survival, there is nothing more important than clear communication. Their lives depend on it. Laramie, our newest addition, is clearly a leader—an alpha. She is not afraid to tell Luke she is the boss. Sometimes this is done by the flick of an ear or the shake of her head. Other times she will chase him. Regardless of the method, her communication is clear and concise. Because there is no confusion about the message, Luke is confident and accepting. He knows exactly what is being asked of him.

**The takeaway:** As leaders, it is important to understand we are constantly communicating with our team, whether we realize it or not. While most people rely heavily on their words, the tone used to communicate the message and a person's body-language are much more impactful. For example, if a team member asks, "How are you doing?" and you scream, "I am fine!" while slamming a door, what is the real message you are sending?





### 3 **LEAD CONSISTENTLY.**

As a horse owner—the leader of my herd—it is important to be consistent every time I interact with them for their safety and mine. Because summers are so hot in Texas, my horses spend their nights outside when the sun is down and the temperature is cooler, and then they come into the barn during the day to escape the heat. Every morning when I go to get them, Laramie comes in first with Luke following closely behind. One time Luke was closer to the barn entrance than Laramie, so he started walking in. After a brief scuffle, with me almost in the middle, they went to the wrong stalls with the wrong feed. Luckily, nobody was hurt, and I was able to switch the buckets, but it was a good reminder that consistency is important. That situation could have ended badly.

**The takeaway:** As a leader, it is important to be consistent with the team to create a safe environment. Consistency builds trust, which allows the team to be actively engaged in what the members are doing. It also allows room for employees to grow by asking questions and taking calculated risks.

### 4 **CONTROL EMOTIONS.**

One day I arrived home and found Beamer lying on the ground with part of a wire fence stuck between his hoof and shoe. He must have been rolling too close to a neighbor's fence and got stuck. He lifted his head to look at me, but made no effort to get up. When I realized what was wrong, I started to panic. What if he tried to get up because I was there? What if he did and broke his leg? What if he had been down so long he couldn't get up? I took a deep breath. He let me walk around him and assess the situation. He was so calm that he helped me remain calm. I knew there was no way I could free him without having something to cut the wire. The problem was the wire cutters were in the barn at the back of the property and we were near the front gate. I was afraid to leave him in case he tried to get up and follow me. I didn't know what to do. Luckily, my husband, who always carries a knife, drove in as I was weighing my options. He was able to loosen the shoe so the wire could slide out. Beamer didn't struggle at all while we worked to free him. He raised his head occasionally to check our progress but knew we were helping him. He trusted us. When he was free, he got up, shook himself off, and walked away like nothing ever happened.

**The takeaway:** Don't panic! As a leader, you will face many "scary" situations. Remember to remain calm, so you can evaluate what is happening and make a sound decision. Understand that your emotions impact the team for better or worse. Don't be afraid to acknowledge you are unsure or afraid, but make sure the team knows you will get through the situation together.



## 5 CHANGE IS HARD.

My husband and I said goodbye to our 24-year-old gelding, Beamer, on January 28, 2023. He had been struggling with health issues that eventually forced us to make the difficult decision to let him go. His stablemate, and best friend, Luke, was heartbroken. They had lived together almost their entire lives and were bonded. Beamer was the alpha of the two, so when he was gone, Luke was lost. He ran around frantically looking for Beamer and whinnying at the top of his lungs for almost a week. There was nothing we could do to comfort him. It was heartbreaking. Although I wasn't ready, we knew we had to find another horse for Luke. After several weeks of searching, we found a yearling, Laramie, and brought her home. I'll never forget how excited Luke was to see her get off the trailer. Although they reacted well to each other, as herd animals they had to determine who the leader would be. Laramie has earned that role. It is amazing to see how bonded they are in only a few short months. When you look out in the pasture, you will never see one without the other.

**The takeaway:** As leaders we are responsible for making difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions that may push us and our teams out of our comfort zones. This is



usually easier for some of our teammates than others. While change is sometimes needed for growth, it is important to communicate clearly with the team before, during, and after the change being implemented to help ensure success.

I am so grateful for everything my horses have taught me over the years. Without their lessons, I don't believe I would be the leader I am today. Leadership isn't easy, but it's worth it. **PRB**

*Shannon Coates, Ph.D., MBA, CPRE, is the Director of the city of Frisco Parks and Recreation Department in Texas. Reach her at [scoates@friscotexas.gov](mailto:scoates@friscotexas.gov).*

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# Seeking Alternative Funding Sources



## How to evaluate (and justify) potential revenue streams

By Mark Nagel

As

one final project before I retired from the city of Elko New Market, Minn., I was asked to scan the nation for potential revenue sources for evaluation, and make recommendations to diversify our current revenue base for future park projects.

As has been well-documented, most cities depend primarily on property taxes and programming revenue to fund their operating budgets; our city was no different. To do more, we needed new sources of operating fund revenue for park department facilities and programming, as well as the enhancement of those primary sources of revenue.

The goal was to identify, evaluate, and prioritize possible new revenue sources by focusing on smaller, additional, stable sources that would increase operating budget funds.





The first step was to develop criteria to evaluate and prioritize the sources:

1. Ease of approval (political hurdles that occur whenever citizens are asked to pay more)
2. Stability of income year after year (important for budgetary purposes)
3. Cost-benefit of the revenue source itself (i.e., does the cost of implementing the new revenue source outweigh the possible revenues from that source?)
4. Showing that the money is going to park and recreation needs, thus meeting the “transparency” criterion
5. Meeting the goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Note: These are only five of many evaluation criteria that can be used to fit a city’s specific needs. This approach adds objectivity to any recommendations for pursuing new funding sources with a parks commission and/or city council.

### Ranking The Possibilities

The table below shows some of the potential funding sources that other cities have used to diversify their revenue, matched against the above criteria (or more). Using a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being poor and 10 being excellent, one can objectively rate each option for a city. Options can then be weighed (for example, ease of approval might be worth 20 points instead of 10 points). The total points for each option set the priorities to add these funding sources. To increase validity, other staff can rate the options, or better yet, the park board or commission as a group can build a consensus for a new funding selection.

So, how does this work on two examples of the identified funding sources in the chart? A common one

in Minnesota is the “Utility bill round up to the nearest dollar,” in which participants in the program authorize the city to “round up” the monthly utility bills to the nearest dollar OR add a fixed donation amount. First, looking at the cons, there are set-up costs, marketing costs, and ongoing staff costs to consider, but what are the potential revenues? Using a small city with a population of about 5,000 as an example—the Minnesota average for customers that “round off” is \$11.88/year, so if 850 of the 1,700 households sign up, then the amount the city would obtain each year would be about \$10,100. It has proven to be a stable source of revenue in other cities, so in 10 years, this would amount to \$101,000. Now we have your attention! We gave this source 45 points to recommend to the council to implement.

Let’s try another possible source of revenue and match it to the criteria. Parks-endowment funds, park-development funds, and capital-improvement funds have a common thread: it is an established line-item in the city’s budget that designates funds that can only be generally used for park and recreation improvements, new equipment, and equipment repairs.

How broad that definition is depends on the fund-contribution policy. For example, some cities use donated funds from citizens; others take general-fund reserves and transfer about \$500,000 for a park-development fund; and some small cities make a budgeted transfer on an annual basis—about \$15,000—to build that fund. Then, a city continues to build the fund principal, while only using the interest income for projects. That becomes a steady, stable source of annual income that parks and recreation departments can budget for projects. We gave this one a total of 42 points.

From these two examples, even a small city might have \$25,000/year more revenue for park projects and repairs. What’s more, that number is generated every year to grow over time!

Fund Source/Criteria	Revenue Produced	Revenue Stability	Implementation Costs	Ease Of Approval	Transparency	DEI Concerns
Utility Bill Round Up						
Parks Endowment						
Public/Private Partnership						
Community Foundation						
Local Option Sales Tax						
Motor Vehicle Excise Tax						
Real Estate Excise Tax						
Grants						
Park Donations						
Park Project Sponsor						
Crowdfunding						



## More To Explore

Here are additional funding methods:

- **Public-Private Partnerships** for park amenities are popular throughout the country. One example of a city partnership is a privately-owned climbing wall on city property. In exchange for using the city-owned property, a company pays a percentage of its revenues to the city for parks projects. In another city, space is provided for an indoor playground that is run by a private company in exchange for a percentage of the revenues; it's a "win-win" for both the city operating budget and the private company's bottom line.

- Many states establish a **Community Foundation** that includes funding park projects as part of its bylaws. Then annual contributions to specific projects are made by the foundation—saving operating fund dollars.

- Many states have **Local Option Sales Taxes**, which, for example, in Minnesota—with legislative and voter approval—allow cities to add a half-cent sales tax to fund specified park capital projects. This enables cities to use operating funds for other needed projects. A "selling point" is that once the project(s) debt is paid off, the sales tax can expire.

- Another avenue might be a **Motor Vehicle Excise Tax**. Cities in Minnesota can add on a \$20 excise tax to the sale of any new/used motor vehicle within the city, which then can be designated for park projects. This funding

source can be more elastic depending on the economy, so budget conservatively.

- Some states allow local governments to collect a **Real Estate Excise Tax**, where a set amount (or percentage) of the sale of a new house or the sale of an existing home is collected for park and recreation purposes. This source of revenue can fluctuate with the housing market, so it's prudent to budget these funds accordingly.

- Even the success of "tried-and-true" funding sources like **Grants** can be increased by a full-time or part-time grant writer for specific projects. The more grant dollars secured means more operating dollars to use on other park programs.

- **Park Donations** are another common approach. The key to growing this revenue source is a proactive city outreach that links community members' donations to specific park needs. As with increasing grant revenue, more dollars in the operating budget can be freed up for other park purposes.

- Or try a **Park-Project Sponsorship**, where an individual or business provides major funding for an agreed-upon park facility; the individual/business then names the facility.

- Let's go even more "outside the box." How about Crowdfunding? This approach has been successful when





used for small, recreational infrastructure projects. A well-documented and clear public need are the keys to success for crowdfunding, along with a well-established online platform.

The surface has only been scratched for ways to increase revenue and evaluate the sources in terms that decision-makers understand. Adding ones appropriate to a community will help diversify revenue sources; allow the existing revenue sources to be used for needed projects/ programs that are difficult to fund; increase the visibility of programming and facilities; and improve the quality of life in a community.

This will also show decision-makers that everything is being done to improve parks and recreation in a community while being fiscally responsible. That may make it easier to convince the decision-makers to increase primary sources of funding, too. **PRB**

***Mark Nagel** is now retired as Assistant City Administrator from the city of Elko New Market, Minn. He is also a Senior Community Faculty Member for Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minn.*

***Chris Austin**, a profit-growth pricing expert and a former economics professor at Normandale Community College in Minneapolis, Minn., contributed to this article.*

***Tom Terry**, City Administrator for the city of Elko New Market, Minn., contributed to this article.*

An advertisement for Poopbags. The background is dark green. At the top, the text "The Original poopbags®" is displayed in white and green. Below this is a large QR code with the Poopbags logo in the center. Underneath the QR code is the text "poopbags.com/commercial" with a globe icon. At the bottom is another QR code with the Poopbags logo in the center, and below it is the text "sales@poopbags.com" with an envelope icon.





# A TRUE BRAND FAN

## *Tips to create simple marketing messages that work*

By Ryan Wille

It takes a lot of effort and planning to stand out in today's world full of people constantly being treated as potential customers. Studies show the average person is exposed to roughly 4,000 marketing messages every day, and the number is growing.

While many people can relate to a limited budget and limited time in this industry, the truth is that effective marketing rarely requires either of these. The most effective marketing opportunity is the ability to build a relationship with members of a community. As experiential-based organizations, our job is to focus not only on what happens at the time of marketing but also what happens after—the human experience,







which is the reason many chose these roles to begin with. Marketing is the first step in engaging the public in a manner that turns them from a guest, learner, or visitor into a fan, volunteer, or donor.

Taking this approach in marketing and promoting the Quad City Botanical Center in Rock Island, Ill., has paid dividends since pivoting out of COVID. Many visitors have been turned into the most coveted type of customer, program participant, or learner—a true fan.

Each measurable outcome has had record highs, with guest and learner satisfaction earning the organization a NetPromoter score in the high 80s year after year as the fanbase turns into advocates for the organization’s mission.

## FISHING FOR ANSWERS

There are two main pieces to marketing and ultimately creating a fan. To use a familiar fishing reference, those two steps are the “hook” and the “release.”

As one might assume, the “hook” is the moment a member of the community is drawn to something and decides to get involved. This could be a special event, a new exhibit, a unique plant in the collection, or simply a basic attraction to a garden’s mission of bringing people and plants together. For anyone reading a marketing message, your job is to set the hook.

Something to ask when creating a marketing piece is if something you are attracted to, or something the



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community will be attracted to. This simple question can prevent one from going down a dangerous road of prescribing interests to people and not listening to what the community wants and expects.

Many times, the answer to this question leads to two simple approaches—simple and welcoming. Simple is vital because of the number of marketing messages people are exposed to each day. Welcoming is necessary to convince people there is something for them at your facility.

With today's technology, most people can create a busy logo or put trending music in a short video to compel users to share it, but it will be forgotten as soon as users view the next short video. Simple things stand out, so take advantage of this. Marketing messages should not be busy, confusing, or designed because an artist likes to see it on a laptop screen; messages should make people feel good.

Also regarding the hook, never be afraid to ask people what they want, or what they think. They will tell you and have fun doing it. Ask people in programs how they heard about the message. Stop a random guest in the hallway and ask if that person would rather see postings on social media about park-equipment upgrades or videos of a pond being stocked in the spring. You will be blown away by the reactions of customers—in a good way. This is a surefire way to





**Realizing that people are willing to provide their opinion will immediately produce an increase in guest satisfaction.**

create a higher level of connection between an organization and its guests. Realizing that people are willing to provide their opinion will immediately produce an increase in guest satisfaction. Just make certain to listen to the results of the questions.

Once people are hooked into the organization, there is only one chance to make a smooth release back into the pond of consumers. The goal here is to release guests feeling better than the moment they became hooked. If you can accomplish that, you have just created a fan.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

The job of parks and recreation professionals is to create an environment that makes guests and learners want to return. This can probably be accomplished in a variety of methods, but the simplest ways prove to be the most effective:

- Listen to the results of surveys.
- Treat every guest like you want that person to come back.
- Teach everyone at least one thing they didn't know when they walked into the facility.
- Ask questions.
- Show appreciation.
- Ask guests to return.
- Highlight another seasonal event guests might enjoy.
- Thank them for their support of the program.

Stand out by being simple, being a human, and genuinely treating guests or learners like you want them to return. That is the most affordable and most meaningful way to create fans of a brand. **PRB**

*Ryan Wille is the Executive Director at the Quad City Botanical Center in Rock Island, Ill. Reach him at [rwille@qcgardens.com](mailto:rwille@qcgardens.com).*

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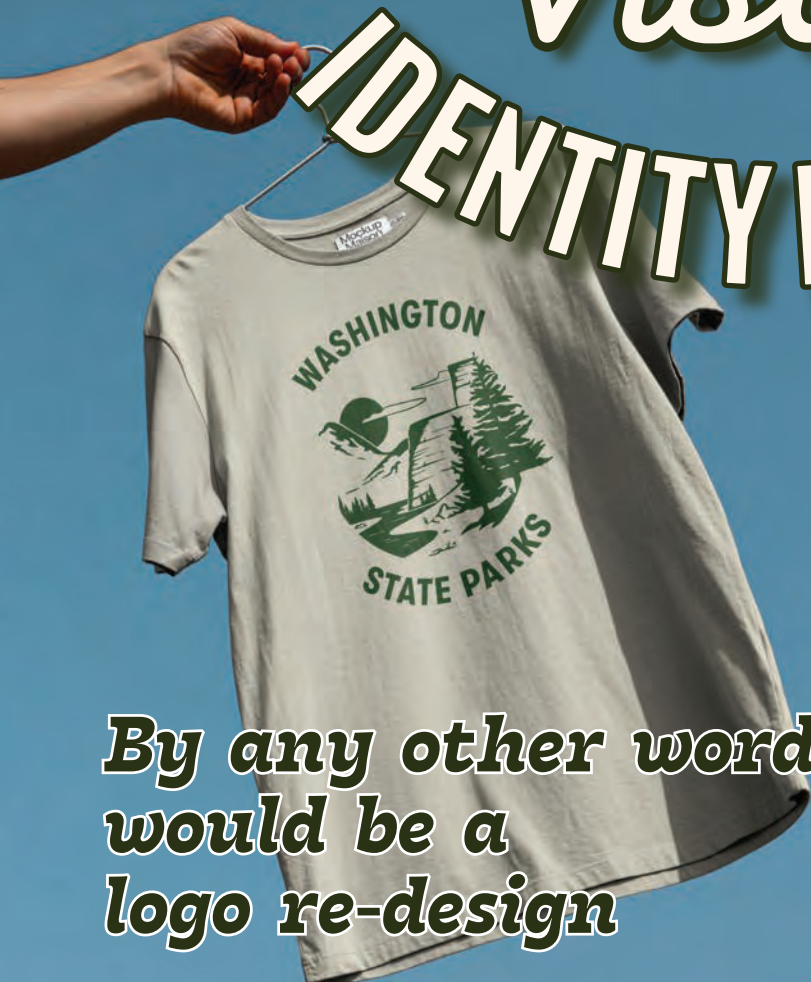
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# A Visual IDENTITY REFRESH



*By any other word  
would be a  
logo re-design*

**By Sara Green, Shannon Palmer,  
and Stephanie McDermott**



Since 2020, state parks have seen massive upticks in visitors. The pandemic forced people to self-reflect and find new ways and places to interact. As a result, the outdoors became a safe haven for many, and state parks became an avenue for those looking to reconnect with nature. Washington State Parks (Parks) was no exception and saw 43,840,590 visitors in 2021, a 14-percent increase from 2019. Encouraged by the record numbers, agency officials saw an important opportunity to re-examine how it presented its mission and values to the public.

Parks' visual identity has remained relatively unchanged since the 1960s, when an employee sketched the original logo for practical purposes—a recognizable shield for uniforms and park entrances. The logo served its purpose and was well-loved by many, but did not represent the growth the agency experienced over the years, nor did it celebrate the 120,000 acres of diverse natural landscapes across the state.

Parks officials wanted to emphasize the reconnection with nature and outdoor recreation spurred by the record number of visitors during the pandemic. There was a desire for the logo to strengthen the belief that the outdoors should be welcoming and accessible to all—from seasoned nature enthusiasts to first-time adventurers—and represent the range of memories and emotions tied to these remarkable places. Parks leaders needed a North Star, a point to focus on and work toward, to ensure people from all around the state, of all ability levels, would feel welcome and wanted in the outdoors.

Foregoing expensive advertising and billboards, Parks invested in itself, allocating part of its creative-services budget for research and a visual-identity refresh. Wanting to work with a local business to capture the essence of its cherished brand, Parks turned to the Seattle-based creative agency People People to identify a clear path forward.







## INFORMED BY RESEARCH

To understand what held the greatest importance for Washingtonians, the team developed a research strategy that focused on understanding and prioritizing the emotional themes that connect people to Parks. The creative team used an online survey that could be rapidly and broadly distributed yet still invited personal responses to support the exploratory orientation of the work. Participants were solicited via an email list of more than 600,000 people. The agency minimized the survey length to reduce barriers to participation, and survey recipients were not offered an incentive to respond.

Participants were given optional, multiple-choice demographic questions and three fill-in prompts:

- What is your most memorable experience in Washington State Parks? Or, what is your most memorable experience being in the outdoors?
- Sometimes a picture says a thousand words. Would you like to share a photo of the outdoors/nature that holds meaning for you?
- The Washington State Parks logo is pictured here. How do you feel when you see it? Does it represent anything in particular to you?



A method called qualitative coding was used to categorize responses based on common themes and patterns. More than 6,000 replies confirmed that Washingtonians deeply value the state's natural beauty and appreciate the classic look and feel of the original logo. Respondents reflected on emotional connections to their state parks, with many sharing heartfelt memories and significant life moments experienced in the outdoors.

Following the survey, Parks engaged the market research firm Fieldwork to help recruit people for 10 focus groups to ensure creative decisions were based on the experiences of a variety of demographics.





## A SYMBOLIC LANDSCAPE

With research complete, the team set out to depict a landscape where the viewer could imagine a true range of emotions.

“The research allowed us to test our visual ideas by asking ourselves, ‘In this landscape, could someone imagine getting married while another remembers nursing heartbreak?’” People People strategist Kate Schenot explains: “Would this image feel like it could encompass the best moment in someone’s life, and offer someone peace and healing from their worst pain? Can it look like a fun place for a casual jog while also feeling appropriate as a place of profound feeling?”

The resulting logo is geographic fiction, combining elements from western and eastern Washington, such as Mount Spokane, columnar basalt formations, picturesque coastlines, and the official state tree, the Western Hemlock. The layout and typography were modified, and the color palette was



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updated with brighter, warmer tones. GT Walsheim font was selected as the primary font for its readability and subtle nostalgic nods. As requested by Parks, the original shield remained, but a curved shape was added to soften the overall composition. The text was also reoriented to sit at the bottom of the container for unity and legibility, and a small “1913” was added to represent the year Parks was founded. The final design captures the wild and welcoming spirit of Washington State Parks—inviting people of all backgrounds to connect with nature and create lasting memories.

“Our new brand is rooted in our past, has a solid foundation in the present, and will lead us into our next chapter,” says Stephanie McDermott, Parks Brand and Creative Marketing Manager. “The adjustments to our logo—evolving landforms, broadening our color palette, unifying our text—signify this new era.”

McDermott embarked on a month-long, brand roadshow to celebrate the visual identity refresh, visiting each of the Parks’ regions to introduce the new look. Using the remaining project budget, Parks purchased complimentary “swag” for its employees, generating





internal excitement with branded vests, T-shirts, mugs, stickers, and sweatshirts. Parks strategically soft-launched the new logo and visual identity on social media and the website first, with plans to slowly roll out the rest over a two-year period. Uniforms and park signage will be updated on an as-needed basis to avoid unnecessarily adding to landfills.

## CURIOSITY, COLLABORATION, AND COST-EFFICIENCY

**P**arks' rebranding started from a place of curiosity, questioning whether its narrative aligned with the communities it serves and whether its visual elements mirrored its core values. A successful rebranding requires diligent groundwork, research, strategy, and vision. Design emerges organically when rooted in data rather than in personal biases.

Parks intentionally solicited feedback and early buy-in from various stakeholders, which made the rebranding an overwhelmingly positive experience. It built lasting relationships with communities from around the state and encouraged active participation from a wide variety of park staff members, including mechanics, rangers, and corporate employees in order to foster a collaborative and holistic approach. With one dedicated point person serving as the conduit for communication, Parks streamlined its efforts for maximum efficiency.

Parks managed to keep costs down by taking a hands-on approach to a significant portion of the design work in-house. Utilizing the creative agency's brand guides and templates, Parks maintained a balanced budget while crafting a revitalized visual identity that resonates authentically with its past and future. **PRB**

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# Ensuring Equitable Access



## ADA requirements for digital parks and recreation communications

By Brian Stapleton



**In** today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, technology holds a paramount position in the functioning of local governments, influencing every facet of their operations. From streamlining administrative tasks to enhancing civic engagement, technology assists in modernizing and serving communities more efficiently. One of the most significant impacts of technology on municipalities is revolutionizing communication channels. Digital platforms enable government agencies to connect directly with residents, disseminate vital information, receive real-time feedback, foster transparency, and build trust.

Beyond communication and information accessibility, the evolution of tech plays a pivotal role in optimizing various government services, from automated billing and payment systems to online permitting processes, streamlining bureaucratic procedures, and improving overall speed. Embracing technol-

ogy empowers local governments to adapt to the ever-changing needs of their communities, ensuring that their services remain relevant, accessible, and inclusive in this fast-paced digital era.

For parks and recreation departments, embracing digital platforms allows them to engage with the community, offer resources, and share information effectively. However, in pursuing technological advancement, it is crucial to ensure digital communications are accessible to all residents, including those with disabilities. Just as recreation professionals diligently comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements for physical facilities, they need to prioritize accessibility in digital operations. The significance of ADA-compliance and the recent updates to Section 508 standards governing digital accessibility is substantial.

ADA and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 were groundbreaking legislations that aimed to end discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all aspects of public life. These acts obligate state and local governments to provide qualified individuals with disabilities equal access to programs, services, and activities. The essence of ADA is to foster inclusivity and ensure that people with disabilities can participate in community life without barriers.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act complements ADA's objectives by focusing on digital accessibility.





Public entities must ensure that all electronic and information technology, including websites, emails, online catalogs, and PDF documents, is accessible to individuals with disabilities. The primary intention is to offer equal opportunities for individuals with various disabilities, including visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive.

To guide public entities in meeting digital-accessibility requirements, the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (Access Board) established the Section 508 Standards. First published in 2000, the standards apply to electronic and information technology developed, procured, maintained, or used by federal agencies. However, the standards' influence extends beyond the federal domain as state and local governments often consider the standards a benchmark for ensuring accessibility.

The Section 508 Standards consist of technical criteria specific to various types of technologies and performance-based requirements, focusing on the functional capabilities of covered products. By adhering to these standards, parks and recreation departments can create a digital environment that accommodates all residents, fostering an inclusive community.

## What Is Covered

Recognizing the ever-changing landscape of information and communication technology (ICT), the Access Board periodically revises and updates the Section 508 Standards to keep up with emerging digital advancements. Effective January 18, 2017, the most recent updates apply to public-facing and non-public-facing materials. For parks and recreation departments, this means that all digital communication must be accessible:

**WEBSITES.** From the official parks and recreation website to event registration pages, all website content must adhere to accessibility standards to ensure equal access to information.

### ONLINE CATALOGS AND ACTIVITY DOCUMENTS.

Digital catalogs and documents showcasing activities and programs must be accessible to individuals with disabilities.

**DIGITAL MEDIA.** Parks and recreation staff often use digital media, such as images and videos, to promote events and activities. Ensuring accessibility for all users is essential.

**SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT.** With social media being a prevalent platform for community engagement, it is crucial to make posts and content accessible.

**BLOG POSTS AND ONLINE ARTICLES.** Any written content published online should be accessible to individuals with disabilities, including those using screen readers.

**NON-PUBLIC-FACING CONTENT.** While public-facing content is vital, non-public-facing materials like program announcements, employment opportunities, questionnaires, and educational materials must also meet accessibility standards.







Non-compliance with the standards may lead to financial penalties for local governments. However, it is essential to understand the concept of the “safe harbor” provision. Existing information and communication technology (including content) that comply with the original 508 Standards need not be immediately modified or upgraded to adhere to the revised standards. However, the safe harbor exemption is temporary. Once digital content undergoes any updates or alterations, it must conform to all the regulations outlined in the updated Section 508.

Promoting digital accessibility is a legal obligation and enhances resident trust. By complying with ADA requirements and adhering to Section 508 Standards, parks and recreation departments can create an inclusive digital landscape that ensures equitable access to resources and information for all community members, regardless of their physical abilities. Embracing the latest updates to the Section 508 Standards empowers parks and recreation departments to lead the way in fostering accessibility and inclusivity.

## Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

To ensure robust accessibility, the updated standards incorporate the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1. Developed by the W3C’s Web Accessibility Initiative, WCAG 2.1 is a globally recognized standard for web content accessibility. By embracing it, parks and recreation departments can ensure their websites meet the highest accessibility standards.

WCAG 2.1 builds upon the previous version, WCAG 2.0, and includes additional success criteria to address new technologies and accessibility requirements. The guidelines are organized around four principles, often referred to as “POUR”:

- 1. PERCEIVABLE.** Information and user-interface components must be presented so users can perceive and understand. This includes providing alternatives for non-text content (e.g., images), captions for multimedia, and an assurance that content is adaptable to different user needs (e.g., text-size adjustments).
- 2. OPERABLE.** User interface components and navigation should be operable by all users, including those with motor or mobility impairments. For example, keyboard accessibility should be provided, and sufficient time given for users to read and interact with content.
- 3. UNDERSTANDABLE.** The content and operation of the user interface must be clear and easy to understand. This involves using straightforward language, providing consistent navigation, and avoiding confusing design elements.







**4. ROBUST.** Web content should be developed using standard, accessible technologies to ensure compatibility with various user agents, including assistive technologies.

WCAG 2.1 guidelines are organized into three conformance levels, allowing developers and organizations to choose an appropriate level of accessibility:

**LEVEL A (MINIMUM).** Meets the most basic accessibility requirements.

**LEVEL AA (MODERATE).** Addresses a broader range of accessibility needs and is recommended for most websites.

**LEVEL AAA (HIGHEST).** Provides the highest level of accessibility, but not all guidelines can be met for all content.

The guidelines are comprehensive and cover various aspects of web content, including text, images, audio, video, forms, and navigation.

Keep in mind that accessibility is an ongoing process and adherence to WCAG 2.1 guidelines is crucial in ensuring that websites and web applications are usable by all users, regardless of abilities.

Implementing accessibility measures is challenging, but the benefits far outweigh the effort. Embracing technology and accessibility measures will help modernize government operations, streamline administrative tasks, and foster transparency and trust within the community. With the right resources and expertise, parks and recreation departments can create digital spaces catering to diverse user needs, enhancing community engagement, and ensuring everyone can enjoy the programs and activities offered. **PRB**

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# DIVERSITY, EQUALITY, INCLUSION

*A framework for implementing these principles in today's park design*

By Troy Houtman

**W**ith many changes in programming, ADA-access, and opportunities to inclusively serve all members of a diverse community, a paradigm shift has occurred, and it's time that it is recognized in the way parks are designed.

The use of DEI (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion) should be considered in playing an important role in how people play and activate parks in both urban and suburban locations. People “gather” for more diverse events, including music, theatre, and special events, such as PRIDE days. People get together to create opportunities to educate and promote equity with health-and-wellness programming. They congregate to celebrate history,

art, and entertainment. Parks provide an opportunity for all to enjoy a quality of life without barriers, exclusions, or biases.

At a very basic level, ADA is a foundation for inclusion in design. However, equally important is to address DEI for those who will be using the park. Programming, historical context, and presentation of information are critical for achieving a high level of DEI. Chester I. Lewis Park in Wichita, Kan., was developed to celebrate the life and legacy of a local noteworthy African American leader. Its design demonstrates how DEI principles can be achieved in today's park design.



Chester I. Lewis Park in Wichita, Kan., was developed to celebrate the life and legacy of a local noteworthy African American leader. Its design demonstrates how DEI principles can be achieved in today's park design.



## A History Lesson

Chester I. Lewis, an army veteran and graduate of University of Kansas Law School, was born in Hutchinson, Kan., in 1928. His father served during WWI and later became editor of the *Blade*, a newspaper in Hutchinson that provided information for the Black community. His father's work had a profound impact on Lewis's future and his efforts for equality and representation of the African American community.

After graduating from law school, Lewis moved to Wichita and worked on a lawsuit against the city for its segregation of swimming pools. He won his first case, based on an 1874 law forbidding discrimination in public places.

He used other cases to address racism in the school system, employment, and housing. He developed a support system to counsel and mentor young African American students. Victories in lawsuits







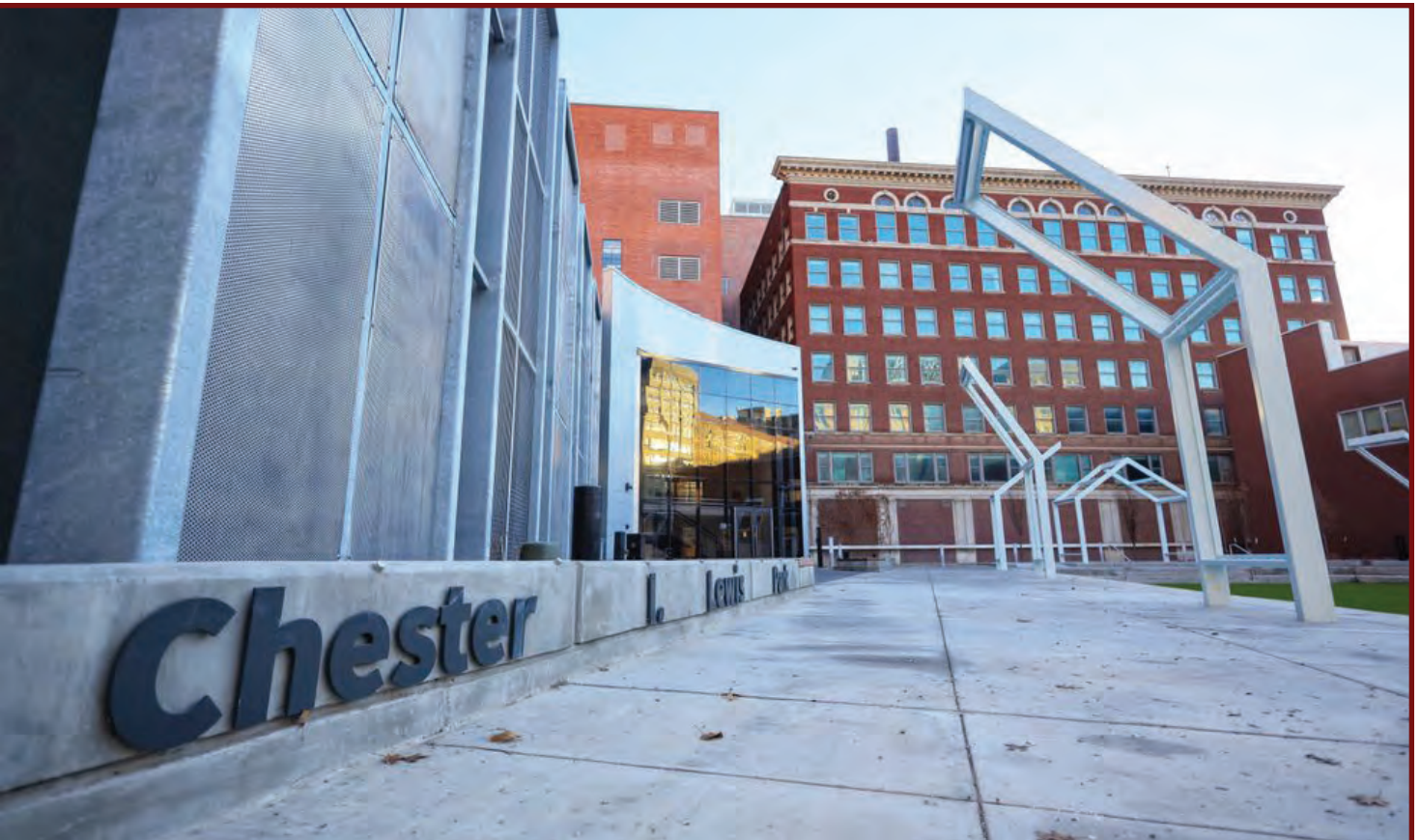
against Boeing, the city of Wichita's police department, Coleman, and Cessna offered more opportunities for Blacks and set the stage for social justice. By the time he was 40 years old, Lewis had filed 60 lawsuits, most of which he won, which made lasting changes. He also displayed real leadership during the 1958 Dockum Drug Store Sit-In on Douglas Avenue in Wichita. He trained and guided students for a non-violent, lunch-counter sit-in, protesting a lack of service of Blacks. Three weeks later, the effort was successful, and services were provided. This lesser-known civil rights act occurred prior to many others across the county.

### **A New Lease On Life**

Prior to renovation, the modest park honoring Lewis lacked care and was often vandalized. Several art pieces were installed without relevance to the park's namesake. The size and location of the park made it difficult to find. Additionally, there was a stigma because of its use by







the homeless, little use by the public, and deterioration due to lack of funding.

The opportunity to redesign the historically significant park was funded from a capital-improvement budget, tax-increment financing, and donations. The \$2.2-million budget included money for art, an increase in the park size, and the creation of a more user-friendly design.

Art consultant Anthony Joiner—who described the old park as “one-dimensional”—assisted in choosing two artists, Matthew Mazzotta, nationally recognized, and Ellamonique Baccus from Wichita, who has worked on projects with African American subjects. “It will be the artwork that sets this park apart for others,” Joiner says. No other park has as much art integrated into the design, which will bring in even more users. To skeptics, this decision is a radical change, but it will meet the needs of many while creating new partnerships, new programming, and education about history and the future—all while making a great gathering space in downtown Wichita.

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Installation of artificial turf reduces the amount of concrete and solid gray block, which in the past dominated the park.



In addition to art, the design includes a stage for small performances and speaking events. Installation of artificial turf reduces the amount of concrete and solid gray block, which in the past dominated the park.

### **Design, Materials, And Maintenance**

Several design aspects were encouraged by

Lewis's family, who weighed in on much of the new look of the park. It was also important to the family that there be more opportunities for education, art, and the history of Lewis. Landscape architects from LK Architecture, a firm in Wichita, addressed these components and worked them into the park space for gathering, learning, and entertaining. As the park footprint expanded, there was a new interaction with Douglas Avenue. Working with the family was important and provided a bridge for social justice and representation of the African American community.



Other stakeholders included new neighbors, Kansas College of Osteopathic Medicine, and several other businesses adjacent to the park. They provided critical input in creating a style to match the new infrastructure. Students, staff members, and instructors will use the park as an entry point to the new medical school. Their expectations, as well as those of others near and adjacent to the park, helped address safety and security factors.

Park staff members contributed to the design in operations and maintenance enhancements, addressing items such as infrastructure and the materials selected. Staff provided direction on location and the type of lighting for ease of replacement and dealing with vandalism. Location of power outlets at programming sites was paramount for security and accessibility, and for using power washers and other maintenance equipment. Drainage was discussed in order to make snow removal easier and reduce flooding in the park. Artificial turf was specified, as the space is intended for gathering—not athletic endeavors—so it will be beneficial in reducing irrigation and grass-management expenses. Wi-Fi in the park was also critical for users and future programming.

A vital component of the project was the selection of the construction and contracting team. The park department utilized a Contract Manager at Risk (CMAR) approach, since there were few major components (barring the art). McCown Gordon of Wichita was selected for its background, knowledge of local vendors, and expertise; the company performed well and understood the sensitivity and significance of the project. One lesson learned for any similar projects is to hire an art consultant and select the artists at the beginning, to assist with a more cohesive design of both the infrastructure and art.

Although small at only 0.40 acres, this park is moving the needle in addressing DEI, and is an example of using all resources to create a vision for the future. This park sets a new standard for Wichita. **PRB**

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# CATERING TO CURLING



***A Chaska redevelopment project pays tribute to its industrial past while embracing a favorite local sport***

By Tom Betti and Tracy Nicholson





## “CHESS ON ICE”

has come a long way from the frozen ponds of Scotland.

While the sport of curling rewards great skill and precision, Chaska, Minn., wanted to reward the community with a great place to play, practice, compete, and celebrate. With a design led by 292 Design Group, now JLG Architects, the Chaska Curling & Event Center opened its doors in the winter of 2015, alongside a vibrant redevelopment of Firemen’s Park in downtown Chaska.







Construction on the Curling & Event Center kicked off simultaneously with the redevelopment of Firemen’s Park, aimed at creating a prominent lakeside destination.



## WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

Touring the park and center today, it’s hard for anyone to imagine the site was once an industrial brickyard, later referred to as “the jungle.” In the 1950s, when the city’s brick industry went bust, the park was home to the deteriorating remains of a clay hole and beehive kilns from the principal brickyards.

After the Minnesota River flooded, the fire department received permission from the property owners to clear the land and create a park. Each weekend after, more than 20 firefighters sought out donations and labored with pickaxes and shovels to clean up the park and build a beach, baseball diamonds, and a picnic shelter—opening the park in 1955. Initially, the city leased the land from Christian and Charles Klein, but in late 1961, shortly after Charles’s passing, the land was donated to the city. (Olson, 2008)



## RE-ENVISIONING RECREATION

More than 60 years have passed, and the glory of Firemen’s Park has been sorely diminished. While it is still a source of historical pride, it is no longer a vibrant community destination. However, in 2008, another group of firefighters approached city council about preserving the park. (Olson, 2008)

Although in a beautiful setting, the park had its challenges. Its location, adjacent to industrial business and across a busy highway from downtown, made its walkability difficult, and over time the park slowly lost its luster. The city would later purchase the remaining industrial sites and embark on a new vision for the park with a public/private partnership.

## FUN FACT

Chaska’s Curling & Event Center is meaningfully constructed with a yellow brick that reflects the history of the city, and more specifically, the park, the former site of a booming brickmaking industry in the early to mid-1900s. The iconic yellow clay was mined from what is now a spring-fed lake, providing beautiful vistas for photos and outdoor interest for guests.





The city recognized the park's potential and set a long list of goals:

- Preserving the past
- Igniting renewed interest
- Stimulating economic development
- Providing new recreation space
- Celebrating tradition
- Engaging the community with indoor and outdoor gathering space.

To bring those goals to life, city officials enlisted the help of a local architectural firm that at that time was called 292 Design Group. The team, led by Mark Wentzell, Erik Olson, and Madeline Wentzell, worked closely with the city to identify an interest in amenities and activities, with curling at the top of the list.

“We talked a lot about what was going to happen at the center and Firemen’s Park, and it was really important that it had something for everyone in the community, not just curling enthusiasts. We saw how popular curling was in other Minnesota communities like St. Paul, Duluth, and Blaine, but there was nothing for curlers at the time in Chaska,” says Wentzell. “We knew it would be a big draw, but we also knew we had to create inclusive space for a variety of interests and purposes, not only appealing for special occasions, dining, and daily use, but also for those who want to go for a stroll, swim, fish, relax at the beach, or explore the park through nature walks.”

Construction on the Curling & Event Center kicked off simultaneously with the redevelopment of Firemen’s Park, aimed at creating a prominent lakeside destination. Critical to the project, the city removed the dated industrial buildings and replenished the eight-acre Clayhole Lake, creating a beach for swimmers, scenic boardwalk, and two fishing piers. The lake reaches 23 feet in depth and is now home to a thriving population of sunfish, bluegill, black crappie, and the occasional largemouth bass.

## FUN FACT

Curling dates to the early 16th century in Scotland. In 1924, the sport made its Olympic debut, but only as a demonstration sport. The popular sport did not gain momentum in the United States until 1961, with participation in the Scottish Cup Series that later formed a global administration.

The U.S. eventually became a member of the International Curling Federation in 1967. The 1998 Olympic Games in Nagano, Japan marked curling’s first official presence with both men’s and women’s tournaments.





## A WARM WELCOME WITH A VIEW

Within Firemen’s Park is a new, six-lane curling arena, an ice sheet made for melting (running and brushing). To benefit both players and the community, the city-owned center includes a cozy Welcome Hall, community gathering spaces, locker rooms, players’ lounge, a private restaurant with views of the arena and Firemen’s Park, and a 320-seat banquet space and catering kitchen.

According to Wentzell, it was always the intention to design the event center as if it belonged in the park, referencing the pitched roof lines, gables, and expansive windows. “The Welcome Hall was particularly important to the project; we wanted a lot of glass so it would be as open as possible to the park setting,” Wentzell explains.

“As you come in the doors to the center, you turn down the hallway, and the Welcome Hall halts at the park with views directly out to the lake. Once you’re in the Welcome Hall, there’s an overlook where guests can get a glimpse of the curling action on the ice. Near the restaurant, Crooked Pint Ale House, guests pass by the event center, so the Welcome Hall was key to the design of the building.”

To incorporate the city’s signature yellow brick within the design, the team dedicated an expansive interior wall to repurposed regional brick, providing historical character amid the warmth of timbers and sleek, modern lines. On the exterior, the team overruled the traditional red roofs of city buildings and chose a more neutral palette of soft gray metal and timber columns for an organic approach that seamlessly blends with its surroundings.



## EVERYONE’S INVITED

Today, the Curling Center is home to over 1,200 members, one of the largest curling memberships in the country. Here, guests and spectators have an open invitation to watch live curling games from the Welcome Hall or the Crooked Pint Ale House that overlooks the arena. While league games are played on Sunday through Friday evenings from October through April, spring and summer leagues run from May through September. The center also hosts several bonspiels and competitions throughout the year, learn-to-curl classes, corporate teambuilding events, and a successful junior curling program.







## REDEVELOPING FIREMEN'S PARK

With a collaborative redesign led by Wentzell, the surrounding Firemen's Park is equally welcoming year-round, inviting visitors to enjoy outdoor terraces that overlook the lake, adjacent park, and lakeside pavilion. During winter months, the park is home to a lighted, 60-foot holiday tree and ice skating on the lake. In the summer, the park is rocking with a waterfront concert and event stage, including lawn seating for over 1,000 attendees. Firemen's Park also boasts a fountain splash pad, Clayhole swim beach, concessions, a tree colonnade, and two fishing piers. The park's pedestrian bridge was designed to span and cantilever over the lake, creating a picture-perfect backdrop for family gatherings, weddings, and corporate events.



## EMBRACING THE PAST, IGNITING THE FUTURE

At Firemen's Park, the original caretakers are forever commemorated within a historical garden designed with an arched shape and yellow brick that mimics the site's kilns. Today, when a fireman retires, the name is dedicated on plaques that climb up stylized red ladders along the Firemen's Walk. Further preserving and displaying the site's history, the team also took great care to position a historic bell at eye level inside the Welcome Hall of the center—a meaningful relic that hails from the city's original firehouse.

Seven years later, resident usage and visitor interest have far exceeded the city's expectations, filling the calendar with competitions, weddings, outdoor concerts, and other celebrations. Participation levels and city revenues are higher than anticipated, and downtown redevelopment interests are continually growing to align with its success. The Curling & Event Center has been a resounding hit, attracting the attention of both national and international media, Olympians, and curling enthusiasts. **PRB**

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By Bill Plessinger

# Take The Helm

## *How do you know when you're ready to lead?*

I had been at my previous parks and rec position for more than a decade when I landed a great job in central Ohio for a Gold Medal-winning agency, with more responsibility and many more employees to lead. It was tough saying goodbye. The position and the people had been good to me. Before the move, I kept asking myself, “How do I know if I'm ready?” At the going-away party, my old boss put both hands on my shoulders, looked at me, and said just two words. “You're ready.” That was his goodbye present. I still think about those words, 15 years later. We are both different people now—he is retired, and I have gone from a bachelor to a married man with a now-fourth grader.

The question of being ready is relevant for any change, challenge, or endeavor. Starting a new job. Completing boot camp. Running a marathon. Being a parent. You might succeed, you might fail. Just because you try doesn't mean you will win. Life is not like the sports leagues where people complain about every child getting a participation trophy. So why try at all?

### Leadership And Anxiety

If there is one thing I have learned in the last year, it's that anticipation is not reality. Reality can be worse, but for me anticipation revolves around worst-case scenarios. Entrepreneur Seth Godin put it best: “Anxiety is experiencing failure in advance. Worry is not preparation. Anxiety doesn't make you better.” Wondering if you will be ready is not training to be ready.

Thinking about returning a phone call to an unhappy patron versus making the actual phone call are two different things. You can worry about it or get in there and make the call and move on with life. Thinking about what type of leader you will be is one thing; getting in there and performing is a different story. You can be like Captain Ahab with a singular vision carried out through power and domination, cruelty, and oppression. Or you can take the Ted Lasso approach, where leadership is positivity, those with different ideas are included, and there is a willingness to forgive those who have failed.

### What's The Worst That Can Happen?

My dad taught high school English in the same classroom at the same school for 33 years and never wanted to do anything else. That was his happy place. For most





people, there is a longing to see if there is something better, and whether they can make a bigger difference and live up to their capabilities. Hockey Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky said, “You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take.” What’s the worst that can happen? You apply for and don’t get the job, you move on. You try and fail, you move on. If you don’t try, you will never know if you had it in you. But that doesn’t mean throwing caution to the wind. At the Grand Canyon earlier this year, a sign warned people not to attempt to hike from the rim to the river and back without being prepared. There were dangerous possibilities:

- Permanent brain damage
- Cardiac arrest
- Death.

This is an extreme example.

### Are You Ready?

Are you ready to be a leader? Are you ready to make hard decisions? Are you ready to choose between outcomes where there will be loss and lives could be ruined? Leaders don’t sit on a fence. They must take sides. They must make decisions. They must take action when no one else will. Leaders are commonly described with action verbs. They are the climbers on the career ladder. If you’ve been on a ladder, you know the higher you go, the higher the stakes. The climb is not for everyone. Just watch the ladder failure videos on YouTube.

Leadership is not only getting others to do what you want through positional strength or influence. It is seeing what needs to be done and doing it.

### Winning And Losing

How do you know if you are ready? All the training in the world can prepare you, but there are some things you won’t see. At one conference, as the keynote speaker was being introduced, the individual handing off the microphone said, “Good luck.” As the speaker climbed the stairs to the stage he said, “I don’t need luck.” And he didn’t. He killed it. But hubris can be blinding. At some point, you will be wrong, and you will fall, and you won’t see it coming.

### How Do You Know?

The answer is you won’t know if you are ready. You won’t know if you can do it until you get out there and do it. I used to think people looked to a leader to make the right choices. Now I think people look to a leader to make choices—period. Don’t waffle or vacillate; take a side, make a choice, and move ahead. Teddy Roosevelt once said, “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.” Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. In the end, only fate will decide that. **FRB**

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By John Engh



# Mastering Motivation

*Take a step  
back and look  
at what players  
need to aspire  
to be great*

**W**hen I run into people from my youth-sports days, they tell me what a great coach my dad was and how they still remember some of the ways he motivated them to work harder and be better.

It's funny because my dad was never actually a coach for any of my teams—at least not in the traditional sense; he wasn't even an assistant. It all began with my older brothers who both wrestled in school. As a one-time, nationally ranked high-school wrestler, my dad never missed a match. In fact, he showed up at many practices to help the team. But since he wasn't a teacher, he wasn't allowed to coach. What I think he realized during that experience was what he really brought to the table was an ability to motivate athletes far beyond teaching fundamentals or specific moves that might help them win a match. I can still see him on the bench right next to the head coach, talking to each wrestler before they took the mat.





### Recognizing Strengths

Those who haven't read one of my dad's many books might not know that, before he had seven children and a career as a teacher, he was a high-school football coach. He is the only person I've ever heard of being hired to coach a football team without ever coaching football! He admits he didn't really know much about creating offensive schemes or the fundamentals of tackling, but he loved the game, and he knew how to identify strengths and weaknesses in his players. In fact, one of his statements that still rings true outside the sports world is "you create plays based on your players." There was one great athlete on that team, and he rode that player to an undefeated season in his first year.

Ten years later, all his kids were competing in sports at different levels. I played everything, but I loved baseball. And while my dad loved watching my teams play, he was never an official coach. But it seemed like once a week at the end of a practice, the coach would gather all the players for a 10-minute, motivational speech from my dad. Hearing the same stories my siblings and I had heard many times, I was a little annoyed, but my teammates were into every word. "You guys can be better, you have to love the game if you want to be great, you all have the ability to be the best on this team and to be a leader!"

### An Inspiration For Many

It's important for coaches—and really for all of us in our jobs as leaders in recreation—to take a step back and focus less on the games and the skills and understand what players need to be motivated. And, more importantly, to determine what staff members need from us in order for them to aspire to be better than they were yesterday.

Recently, on a plane ride with my wife, I discovered I was seated near two brothers whom I had played baseball with when we were 12 years old. After exchanging greetings, one of the men told me my dad was a great baseball coach.

My first thought was to remind him my dad was never his coach. But I didn't because I would have been wrong! **PRB**



*John Engh is executive director of the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) in West Palm Beach, Fla. He can be reached via email at [jengh@nays.org](mailto:jengh@nays.org). To join more than 3,000 communities by starting a NAYS Member*

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By Ron Ciancutti

# Combat Loneliness With Love

*Reach out to the elderly and children with messages of kindness and caring*

*And the waitress is practicing politics,  
As the businessmen slowly get stoned,  
Yes, they're sharing a drink they call loneliness,  
But it's better than drinking alone."*

—BILLY JOEL, "THE PIANO MAN"

Dale rolled over in bed and glanced at the clock. It read 6:02 a.m. It would be another hour before sunrise. He swung his feet to the side of the bed, tugged the one blanket he slept with into place, and headed to the bathroom. The daily ritual included a shave, a shower, some meds, vitamins, and a quick clean-up of the bathroom. He headed down to the kitchen. It was now 6:30. He made a single cup of coffee, two eggs, and one piece of toast, eating them while standing at the sink. He rinsed the plate and cup and went outside to feed the birds that were waiting around the feeder. At least they appreciated Dale. He gave the garden a quick spritz and sat at the picnic table to watch the rising sun. Now widowed for three years, he thought about calling his daughter who would be heading to work, but he had called her the day before and could sense she politely tolerated him.

Dale bowed his head and said his morning prayer. He was grateful for his health, his home, his successful retirement, and the years he and his wife had together. He knew he was fortunate in many ways. Despite all that was so good, he was just so darn lonely. He valued his acquaintances at the coffee shop and the people at the grocery store, but he didn't know any of their last names and only a few first names. At least he had his memories, right? He just wished he had the chance to make some new ones, perhaps a fresh chapter in his book of life.

I have sensed that, on one extreme, the elderly,



widowed, and retired are dealing well with loneliness; meanwhile, many children and young adults seem to be developing new sources of loneliness.

## Sadness Statistics

I submit that the rise of social media and the decline of face-to-face communication are also leading to much isolation and loneliness in this country. Social media creates a distorted view of reality, where people only share their best moments and work to bury their problems and difficulties beneath what I call "the shade of omission." People read these enhanced versions of others' lives and feel their own lives are comparatively worthless. The social isolation it produces leads to stress. These conditions suppress the immune system, which can lead to depression, infection, diabetes, inflammation, and even heart disease. According to the AARP Foundation, these are as harmful as obesity and smoking.

Add to this mix reports from CIGNA that indicate half of all Americans report feeling lonely most of the time with suggestions that this number is increasing.

It is interesting to note, however, that 25 percent of adults from ages 18 to 29 report "chronic" loneliness, while only 9 percent of Americans 65 and over wrestle with that problem. The conclusion is that older folks have less dependency on social media and still enjoy friends and family on a face-to-face basis. Didn't COVID teach all of us the danger and fallout that comes with such isolationism?

Reports from the [www.thetreetop.com](http://www.thetreetop.com) website reveal:



- 12 percent of Americans say they have no close friends
- 47 percent report no real meaningful relationships in their life
- 57 percent report eating all their meals alone.

The Kaiser Family Foundation notes that at least 22 percent of American adults deal with feelings of isolation and loneliness every day, which means more than 1 in 5 are living with these feelings as they work, play, and deal with life. Is it any wonder that commercial television is inundated with advertisements for help meds, counseling, and mental-health clinics? If they're not telling us it's OK to have issues, they're asking whether we're avoiding them. Yikes, what a self-fulfilling mess.

And though I hear the constant refrain of "depression" in commercials these days, coming up fast seems to be the hand-in-hand partner called "anxiety." Well, doesn't it make sense that all of this isolation may lead to an inability to properly socialize?



### Put Down The Phones

Parents really need to step up here before it is too late. I know the peer pressure to give a child all the phone freedom he or she desires is enormous for fear a child will be "left behind," but strap on the parent boots and get in the game. Part of a parent's job is to fill a kid's mind with good things, and that includes putting one's foot down and saying, "Put down that phone and read this book."

Here are my suggestions regarding social media and kids (and I know there's a tidal wave of resistance):

- Hold out as long as possible before issuing a child a cell phone (I like age 16, but good luck with that).
- Try limiting phone use, at least at certain times, like "no phones at the dinner table."
- Use parental controls wherever possible. I know kids seem so mature, but they're still kids.

• Employ friends and family to keep watch as well. There's nothing wrong with saying, "OK, gang, let's put the phones down and get outside and on those bikes."

• Network with other parents who may notice your kid coming over to their house just to get Mom and Dad off the child's back about which websites and apps are being used.

I have a friend who gave his kids cell phones but had the devices put in his name. If he calls his kids and they don't answer, he immediately goes to the phone website and cancels the service. Within minutes his kids call him from a friend's cell and report that the line is having trouble. He explains there is no trouble, that he has canceled service. "If I call you and you can't answer me, you have no phone, period." Add to that the multiple parent controls and transparencies, and he hasn't had a problem going forward. That's parenting: no fight, no challenge, simply establishing who is in charge.

Hopefully, with strategies like these, we attack the problem at the root. I watch my daughters deal with their kids on this topic all the time. It sure doesn't help that the younger ones are many times more capable with technology than anyone born after 1985. But my daughters hang in there and fight the good fight; they know their children need guidance.

### The Power Of Human Interaction

Sadly, though, there's little that can be done about older, retired, lonely folks who make up the rest of the statistical tree. If the children and grandchildren care enough to visit the elderly and take them places, it is a blessing; yet, many seniors have no such support. I have found that, as my family ages, there are robust programs as well as transportation available in most cities if seniors know how and where to source them. My aunt, who normally resists things like that ("I hate BINGO!"), was coaxed into a group-knitting function one Christmas at city hall, where about 60 ladies made hats and scarves for needy families. She met two women with whom she still keeps in touch and calls often. Sometimes, just one friend can make a real difference.

The upcoming holidays are a particularly emotional time for many. Find room in your heart to reach out to those whom you know are lonely; the rewards will come back to you in truckloads. It will make your day when you make their day. If we don't take care of each other, who will? **PRB**



*Ron Ciancutti worked in the parks and recreation industry since he was 16 years old, covering everything from maintenance, operations, engineering, surveying, park management, design, planning, recreation, and finance. He is now retired. He holds a B.S. in Business from Bowling Green State University and an M.B.A. from Baldwin Wallace University. He is not on Facebook, but he can be reached at [ron@northstarpubs.com](mailto:ron@northstarpubs.com).*

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