



City-County Summit



PARKS WORKING GROUP

Parks and greenspace are an integral part of any community. Offering recreational, natural, and historic resources, parks also contribute to the local economy and are a “quality of life” asset that attracts businesses and residents alike to a region. The City-County Summit’s Working Group on Parks focused their discussion around whether that asset could be enhanced through a sharing of services, coordination, cooperation, or consolidation. While the group was not comfortable with making a recommendation with what little information they had, they did gather a great deal of information and outline issues and a process for moving forward.

Allegheny County Parks

Allegheny County has an extensive parks system consisting of approximately 12,000 acres. The nine parks welcome more than 11 million visitors each year. North and South Park were created in the 1920’s. Deer Lakes, Harrison Hills, Boyce, Settler’s Cabin, Round Hill, and White Oak Parks were added in the 1950’s. Hartwood Acres, the County’s ninth park, was added to the County’s system in 1969.

The County’s Parks & Recreation Department works cooperatively with the County’s Public Works Department for parks maintenance. The Department also receives the assistance of three groups which each play a part in the overall parks system. A seven-member Parks & Recreation Commission advises the Director on budget issues, fees and charges, personnel recruitment and training, and general operating responsibilities.

The second entity is a network of Councils of Friends at each of the nine County parks. These groups consist of community members with an interest in the parks. They provide the park with a voice to the Director and the Parks & Recreation Commission. The groups are also responsible for communicating with and working together with the existing volunteer organizations in each park.

The third entity is a Fund for Allegheny County Parks. This, not-yet-created, group is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization charged with securing financial resources to support department objectives. Those resources are to be restricted to parks and recreation services.

The County Parks System has a budget of \$6.69 million with approximately \$584,000 designated for the Special Events division of Parks. Revenues from the Parks total \$4.74 million and the Parks will also receive \$14.73 million from the Allegheny Regional Asset District this year (\$13,998,600 in operating costs and \$727,000 in capital). The Parks capital budget totals almost \$3.6 million.

City of Pittsburgh Parks

The City of Pittsburgh has four parks that are designated as regional parks which comprise 1,700 acres and reflect a history of over 100 years of parks and recreation in the City. Highland Park became the City’s first park, created parcel by parcel, in 1893. Schenley became the City’s second park when land was donated to the City in 1889. Riverview Park followed shortly after in 1894 with the City of Allegheny’s purchase of Watson Farm. Frick Park, the City’s largest park, was added to the City’s system in 1908.

The City's Parks System is comprised of two departments and a non-profit organization which each play a part in the overall parks system and its administration. The Department of Parks & Recreation employs the individuals who work at the parks, does special event planning, plans recreational activities, and coordinates volunteer operations.

The Department of Public Works has an assistant director who oversees the parks and is responsible for park maintenance, construction projects, park permits, and forestry. This individual also works directly with the third prong of the Parks system, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy.

The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy was created in 1996 and formed a public-private partnership in 1998 with the City to identify key projects and build momentum for park restoration. The organization is responsible for providing professional advice on preservation, maintenance, protection, and restoration and provides comment during budget proceedings on park issues. The Conservancy also establishes and manages projects with the parks, solicits funds for capital projects and operations, and enters into project agreements with the City for each project.

The City Parks System has a budget of \$2.59 million. Revenues from the parks in 2003 totaled \$663,000 which included fees from swimming pools, centers, and summer food service. With the closure of the City's pools and senior centers, the 2004 budget reflects revenue of only \$55,000 for summer food service fees. The City Parks will also receive over \$5 million from the Allegheny Regional Asset District this year (\$4,417,700 in operating costs and \$727,000 in capital). The Parks capital budget includes three projects totaling \$1,325,000.

Creating a Regional Parks System

While initial discussion included consideration of providing a joint administration for Parks & Recreation, the structure of the City's Parks System does not lend itself to such a move. The Departments and non-profit involved in the administration of the City's park itself all serve additional functions and are deeply entwined. A separation of just that portion of the operation would not be cost effective or efficient. The option, then, would be a complete separation of the City's Parks System or County's Parks System and its inclusion as part of the other, initially. Due to the size of the County's Parks System, the working group members focused on the City's four parks becoming part of the County's system.

In order to move such a proposal forward, there are numerous issues to address. While a parks system can assist in economic development and improve the quality of life, such benefits already exist with the current parks system. The inclusion of the parks would mean that the County can boast a park in the City of Pittsburgh resulting in good public relations, but such a move must also make good fiscal sense.

Deferred Maintenance Costs

The City currently has \$50 million in costs of deferred maintenance for each of the four parks, for a total of \$200 million. The County also has deferred maintenance costs, but those total \$100 million for all nine parks. A joint endeavor would begin with \$300 million in deferred maintenance costs for thirteen parks. The State government could play a large part in addressing this issue by providing funds for a regional park system that could be allocated for reduction of the deferred maintenance costs. In an effort to encourage ongoing intergovernmental cooperation and regional parks and recreation system, additional financial incentives may be offered through the PA Department of Conservation & Natural Resources.

Regional Asset District Funding

As previously indicated, the County currently receives \$14,725,600 in funds for the Allegheny Regional Asset Board. The City receives \$5,144,700 for a total of \$19,870,300. Act 77, the law that created and governs the Allegheny County Regional Asset District (RAD), provides that the district may assume the financial functions of the city and county with respect to the support of, among other things, regional parks. The key word, however, is *may*. Support of the parks is not guaranteed and discussions would need to be held with the members of RAD Board to determine if a regional park system would receive the continued financial support of the district and, if so, whether such an endeavor could result in additional funding.

Structure

Organizational and structural issues would also need to be addressed to create an efficient and cost-effective regional parks system. The current structure involves five departments, ten formal organizations, and a non-profit and can be recreated to establish a world-class operation. This can be accomplished through identification of all functions, programs, and services of the existing entities and an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of each. This process would also need to involve representation from each of those entities as well as labor to ensure that all concerns and issues are addressed and that strong organization emerges.

Fringe Concerns

In addition to the three major issues detailed above that have to be addressed in order to move such an idea forward, there are additional fringe concerns. While the working group did not go into detail on these items, we simply acknowledge that each would need to be discussed. The list is not inclusive but simply represents some of the concerns or issues raised by members: Public Safety, Environmental Concerns, Programming, Existing Volunteer Groups, Integration of Master Plans, Trail Systems, Intergovernmental Cooperation, and Public-Private Partnerships.

Summary

As previously stated, the members of the Parks Working Group were not comfortable making a recommendation with the limited information available to them in this time frame. The information is intended to provide at least an outline of future steps that need to be taken in order to pursue the establishment of a regional park system. Members of the working group are both willing and able to continue to move forward in their discussion of such an endeavor if it is determined that it would be beneficial to this effort.

Continued discussion and attention should be paid to the issue of parks and greenspace. Often these resources are the first to suffer when there are financial concerns within a governmental body, yet parks play an important part in our community and in the economic development of the region. The parks have often been referred to as one of the jewels of this region. They must be treated as such if they are to continue to serve their purpose.

Parks Working Group

The Parks Working Group was chaired by County Council Member Joan Cleary. The group first convened on Thursday, February 19, 2004 and reconvened on Thursday, March 11, 2004. Working group members include County Parks & Recreation Director Andy Baechle, Rep. Dave Levdansky, Councilman Jim Motznik, Sen. John Pippy, Councilman Luke Ravenstahl, Council Member Tom Shumaker, and Sen. Jack Wagner.

Background

As a part of the state legislature's response to the ongoing fiscal problems being confronted by the City of Pittsburgh, Senators Jane Clare Orie and Jack Wagner approached members of Allegheny County Council and Pittsburgh City Council about convening a meeting where policy makers would have opportunity to talk about possible cooperation between the two entities. On February 12, 2004, representatives and members of the Governor's Office, State Senate, State House of Representatives, Allegheny County Council, Allegheny County Chief Executive, and Pittsburgh City Council attended an initial meeting at the Allegheny County Courthouse.

At the February 12th City-County Summit, participants discussed various opportunities for shared services, consolidation, and cooperation. As part of that discussion, it was determined that working groups would begin convening to address each of these opportunities in more detail. The participants set a 40-45 day window for each of those groups to report back to the full group with specific recommendations that could be presented to the Oversight Board.

Eight working groups were established: Economic Development, Facilities, Information Technology, Parks, Public Safety, Public Works, Purchasing, and Tax Collection. Four of the groups were chaired by a member of County Council; four were chaired by a member of City Council. Each group had representation from the General Assembly, the County's Legislative and Executive branches, and the City's Legislative and Executive branches and began meeting shortly after the Summit.

Each Chair was charged with completing its task and submitting a report to the organizers of the Summit by Friday, March 26, 2004. The City-County Summit would reconvene on Thursday, April 1, 2004 to allow each Chair an opportunity to present a summary of the working group's recommendations to the full body. These recommendations will then be presented to the Oversight Board, with copies to Chief Executive Dan Onorato and Mayor Tom Murphy.