

FACT SHEET 1: Strengthen Connections between Outdoor Recreation, Healthy Lifestyles and Economic Benefits in Communities

2009-2013 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

The Pennsylvania Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan for 2009-2013 presents research and recommendations on how to best reconnect visitors and citizens with Pennsylvania's treasured outdoors. This fact sheet outlines the challenges, and opportunities identified through the SCORP process for *Goal 1: Strengthen Connections between Outdoor Recreation, Healthy Lifestyles and Economic Benefits in Communities*.

Outdoor recreation opportunities have enhanced the quality of life for Pennsylvanians. Communities which provide park and recreation services attract businesses and have healthier economies and residents. Outdoor recreation opportunities create positive health and economic benefits for individuals and communities. Participation in outdoor recreation results in lower rates of obesity, decreased stress, lower health care costs and better community cohesiveness. While health and recreation advocates have made progress in understanding the benefits of outdoor recreation, there is still a need to strengthen the role of outdoor recreation in Pennsylvania's economy and the quality of life of its residents.

Challenges

Pennsylvania's Obesity Crisis

It is recommended that children get 60 minutes of physical activity per day but most do not. Fewer children walk or bike to school than a generation ago. Biking and walking are popular activities but safe opportunities to bike/walk have been constrained by inadequate infra-

structure, increased traffic, and longer distances to schools. Lack of greenspace, fear of strangers and general fear of the outdoors have been identified as impediments to children playing outside and as contributors to childhood obesity.

Connecting Health and Recreation

There is a need to better connect health and recreation providers. Past efforts to create new partnerships met with some success but also identified obstacles. While bringing together health, recreation and education professionals to create new community partnerships, an evaluation of The Keystone Action Zones program indicated that county-level partnership was difficult to administer successfully. Coordination with schools, unfamiliar partnerships between health and recreation, and the voluntary nature of participation were significant program implementation barriers.

Message Confusion

At the national level, recreation and health organizations have a common goal to create healthier communities



Parks Add Value

2008 research undertaken for the Philadelphia Park Alliance by the Trust for Public Land shows that Philadelphia parks generated \$18 million in added property tax revenue and \$689 million in increased equity for homeowners near parks. To view the report go to www.philaparks.org.

through healthier citizens. While there is encouragement from state agencies and funding contributors to coordinate programs, there is concern that so many initiatives may be confusing to communities. Numerous messages, funding sources and requirements can be overwhelming.

With such variety, it is difficult to determine the success of individual programs.

Complexity of Health and Economic Data, or Lack of it

Recreation professionals rarely collect data on the impact of parks or new park construction on local users or the adjacent neighborhood. Economic benefits data is similarly lacking. While the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is conducting economic benefit studies of Pennsylvania rail trails, trail advocates often struggle with how to best use the information. Pennsylvania first collected economic benefit data in 1982, but limited research has been funded over the past 20 years.

Opportunities

Smart Transportation and Safe Routes to Schools

In 2009, PennDOT funded \$16.7 million in federal Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects and launched a pilot program using Smart Transportation Principles to select projects. Safe Routes to School provides funding for infrastructure, as well as activities that educate and encourage the safe use of school walking and bicycling routes. The initiatives link investments to local land use planning and foster the development of sustainable, livable communities. The Community Transportation Initiative provides funding for projects that focus on downtown revitalization, multi-use trails, traffic calming, and transit-oriented development studies.



Close to Home Nature

Recent economic trends, including higher gas prices, have encouraged residents to look closer to home for recreation opportunities. When parks are renovated or constructed the design should assure easy access, and the natural environment should be enhanced rather than degraded. Parks should be safe, fun places that encourage outdoor activity. Sustainable and livable communities are attractive and welcoming to residents and visitors. Implementing county greenway plans and meeting Pennsylvania's goal of one million trees planted by 2013 are a few of the many actions recommended to create greener and more livable communities.

Pennsylvania's New Towns

A growing number of communities are becoming designated trail towns or river towns. By connecting trails to towns, users can visit business services and easily return to the trail to continue their journey. There is great opportunity to learn from recent efforts to connect Pennsylvania's business

community and the natural environment through outdoor recreation. There is potential to improve the business climate by linking communities to trails, rivers, parks, extensive public land tracts, historic canals and historic districts across the state.

Model Public Outdoor Places

State forest lands and parks, local parks, game lands and fishing access areas encourage stewardship as well as healthy outdoor recreation experiences. It is important to identify public outdoor recreation areas to implement smarter maintenance practices and increase visitor opportunities for physical activity and healthy living. Counties with higher obesity rates have been identified and should be targeted for more state outdoor recreation investment assistance.

Making the Case

The park and recreation community has long advocated that parks, trails and open space increase the value of nearby properties, attract businesses, and reduce health costs. National leaders from the National Recreation and Park Association, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, and the Trust for Public Land have studied the value of parks, recreation, trails, and open space. The challenge for Pennsylvania is to identify and implement appropriate national findings at the state level.

Find out how you can get more involved by visiting www.paoutdoorrecplan.com and send in your comments, suggestions and great project examples.