



## The Research Bureau

### **Maintaining Municipal Parks: Thinking Outside the Picnic Basket**

Across the Commonwealth and most of the nation, the economic downturn is limiting the revenue available to municipalities to maintain and improve their core services: public safety, public education and public infrastructure. Under such conditions, park maintenance is likely to get short shrift. Yet parks and recreational facilities serve an important function, especially for those living in urban areas. They facilitate physical activity, which can enhance an individual's overall health; they can increase property values and help to attract and retain businesses and residents; they also serve a social benefit enabling residents to associate informally or through organized cultural events such as concerts and festivals.

Unfortunately, Worcester's parks, and no doubt others in the region, have not escaped the current fiscal constraints that result in deferred parks maintenance and deteriorating park conditions:

- The total number of positions in the Division of Parks, Recreation, and Cemetery decreased from 67 to 56, or 16%, between FY98 and FY07.
- Total spending for this division as a percentage of the City's total budget decreased by more than 7% between FY00 and FY08.
- During the same time period, the City added seven parks and six playgrounds resulting in a 27% increase in mowing and other maintenance duties.
- Worcester spends less per capita on parks and recreation than any of the other eight cities<sup>1</sup> that were surveyed. These cities were selected because their park acreage per capital is similar to Worcester's and because of their innovative programs.

In comparing park maintenance in Worcester and eight other cities, we observed two major methods for generating revenues in addition to tax levy funds:

- Increasing the fee structure for use of facilities depending on type, user, day, and length of use. For example, different types of sports facilities could have different fees depending on their maintenance costs. Or facility and building use fees can vary with demand. For example, permits for large group picnics and park use for weddings could have different rates for weekend and weekday use.
- Developing partnerships with other non-profit institutions, businesses, and residents.

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<sup>1</sup> Cities surveyed were Boston, Providence, New York, Pittsburg, Carson City, NV, Laguna Niguel, CA, Philadelphia and Indianapolis.

Partnerships can be formed by a municipality for a variety of purposes:

- They can be used for park maintenance. By teaming up with non-profit organizations, businesses or educational institutions, partnerships can enable park agencies to improve the maintenance of existing facilities, build new ones, and obtain support for continuing or expanding programming.
- Partnerships can be used to raise revenue through park facilities and concessions. For example, at Roger Williams Park in Providence, the Zoological Society and Friends of the (Natural History) Museum generate revenues from concessions which are then used for park operations and capital expenditures.
- Joint-use agreements have been formed between a city and a school district to share the same facilities thereby eliminating duplication of facilities and programs. The fields built in conjunction with Worcester Technical High School are used by the public during non-school hours and when no school games are scheduled.
- Partnerships also come in the form of management agreements. A city enters into a formal agreement with another entity detailing the responsibilities of each group. The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and the Central Park Conservancy in New York are examples of this kind of arrangement.

The complete report discussing these findings can be found at [www.wrrb.org](http://www.wrrb.org)

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