

The Knowledge Now series features practical research on timely topics from the Colorado Municipal League.

PARKS AND RECREATION PROGRAMS: SMALL TOWNS DELIVERING BIG RESULTS

By Allison Kincaid, MBA, Colorado Parks & Recreation Association executive director; and Andy Rice, CPRP, Alamosa parks, recreation, and library director and Colorado Parks and Recreation Association Small Communities Section co-chair

THE PARKS & RECREATION FIELD is a diverse profession encompassing everything from park and facility planning and maintenance to programming for youth, adults, and seniors in a variety of formats such as aquatics, recreational sports and therapeutic recreation.

Large parks & recreation agencies have several staff members responsible for overseeing and contributing to all of these facets of the experience the agency provides for the members of its surrounding communities.

Smaller agencies, however, often serve more rural communities and do so with smaller budgets and far fewer staff. For this reason, a common characteristic of these agencies are “jack of all trades” directors and managers. Facility management, human resources duties, strategic planning, and grant-writing often

intermingle with occasional field maintenance, lifeguarding at the indoor pool, or tidying up a recreation center lobby. Naturally, with typically less personnel and resources, a variety of skills, methods, innovative partnerships, and flexibility are required to accomplish organizational goals and effective leadership.

When large agency employees might walk down the hall to ask their peers a question about their work, small agency professionals who are isolated in rural communities rely heavily on technology to serve this purpose. Learning best practices and innovative methods from industry peers — whether via a conference or email — is a tried and true method for professionals to grow their knowledge. Recently, the Colorado Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) has implemented a multimedia web platform allowing members to meet

and host presenters via video conference. Another valuable tool is offered by the National Parks and Recreation Association’s (NRPAs) “Connect” web forum that allows members from across the country to pose questions to be answered by peers across the country with daily updates.

In addition to mastering multiple skills, maximizing virtual and in-person professional networking opportunities, and staying abreast of industry trends, small parks & recreation agencies maximize the value of strategic partnerships within their communities. The following case studies demonstrate the success these agencies can have when taking advantage of community partners and finding creative ways to offer parks & recreation experiences to the diverse members of their unique communities.





WHERE RECREATION IS COMMUNITY-DRIVEN

By Hannah Bihl, New Castle recreation director

WHILE RECREATION DEPARTMENT BUDGETS IN SMALL TOWNS ARE BY NATURE LIMITED, THE RECREATION program does not have to be.

The formula for success in New Castle is based on three elements: gaining town council support; leveraging grants from state and nonprofit programs; and tapping into community resources and expertise.

New Castle Recreation creates instructor services agreements, with instructors typically receiving a percentage (from 50 to 80 percent) of the participant registration fees. By utilizing the talents and knowledge of local citizens, New Castle has found a way to deliver a wide variety of activities to residents through instructor-based programs.

Community members are enlisted to conduct recreation classes or special interest programs from fly fishing or mountain biking to creative art and enrichment classes. The result has been that New Castle residents benefit from a broad menu of recreational and leisure program choices. Residents who want to stay fit can enroll in Zumba, thai chi, yoga, or "HIIT cardio sweat class." If that is not enough to get your blood flowing, there are a variety of sports programs including youth and adult flag football, soccer, basketball, and, of course, pickle ball.

New Castle has been fortunate to have parks and recreation considered a budget priority by its town council. That support has allowed the Town to leverage outside dollars from the federal mineral lease program and Great Outdoors Colorado to fund a multi-use sports park that includes a playground, tennis courts, and, yes, pickle ball courts. The New Castle Community Center received another \$25,000 grant from the Garfield County Federal Mineral Lease District in 2015, following an earlier grant in 2013, to complete a makeover of the interior of the facility in early 2016. The project included new commercial grade kitchen appliances, new flooring in the kitchen, restrooms, an entry way, new restroom stalls, along with 64 new folding chairs.

Community cooperation goes a step farther with an agreement between the Town of New Castle and Garfield School District RE-2 to allow facility use and access.



DOING MORE WITH LESS

Andy Rice, CPRP, Alamosa parks, recreation, and library director and Colorado Parks and Recreation Association Small Communities Section co-chair

MAKING THE MOST OF LIMITED RESOURCES IS WHAT WE DO IN SMALL PARKS AND RECREATION departments. The City of Alamosa employs a number of strategies to bring residents a high quality of life through parks and recreation and improve visitors' experiences.

Typically, park and recreation agency partnerships with academic institutions focus on joint-use agreements and effective communication/marketing. However, higher level synergistic opportunities exist. For example, Alamosa Parks and Recreation (APR) partners with Adams State University (ASU) with

- an adaptive sports program through the ASU HPPE (Health and Human Performance) Department, where future scholastic physical education (PE) teachers get hands on pedagogy training while developmentally disabled residents get a fun and effective PE program, with facility and equipment provided by APR, improving the breadth of population served;
- student internships, practicums, and community service; and
- joint partnerships with ASU, the Boys and Girls Club, and a Local Foods Coalition, which are leading to a new era of outdoor recreation by getting kids and families unplugged and enjoying the outdoors.

Not every small town has a university; however, retired folks, club sport entities, and service clubs often can form similar relationships. Often, all it takes is an "ask."

Flexibility in parks and recreation facilities are crucial. The City of Alamosa owns the 1,200-plus acre Alamosa Ranch, which is composed of a working cattle ranch that is leased out on a yearly basis, 27-hole disc-golf course, planned archery range, and pedestrian/cycling trails along the Rio Grande River. The Alamosa Ranch also is used to enhance open space and water storage — rather innovative in its multi-use.

The City of Alamosa also is building a semi-enclosed multi-use pavilion and ice rink adjacent to the Alamosa Family Recreation Center. Without buy-in from off-season leisure pursuit groups such as roller-derby and rodeo enthusiasts (and significant grant and partner funding), this regionally important project would not have come to fruition.



In local government, "You can't please them all;" however, taking stock in successful endeavors keeps one motivated and validates efforts. Making the public and leaders aware of successes builds support and can be crucial to long-term funding opportunities as tax and other state monies are allocated.

Similar to community partnerships, many parks and recreation departments use a variety of grant opportunities to provide diverse and quality recreational facilities and programs. Alamosa and the San Luis Valley are an economically challenged region of Colorado with per capita income of about two-thirds of the state average. But this strong-knit community works hard and values its recreation. Just about all of the recreational facilities, from the recreation center to the skate park, have significant grant funding, allowing revenue to focus more on quality programming. Grant-writing is labor intensive and competitive — developing a broad-based coalition of support and perseverance will lead to success. Regardless if the ask is big or small, seek out like-minded organizations to leverage resources, further the mission of parks and recreation, and give residents quality leisure pursuits.

SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Angie Wade, Wray recreation director

WRAY IS A SMALL TOWN IN NORTHEAST COLORADO WITH A RECREATION DEPARTMENT OF ONE FULL-TIME director, seasonal summer staff, and a host of volunteers. What the Wray Recreation Department lacks in size, it makes up for in substance. The department provides many activities for people ranging from toddler to adult — and manages the Wray Aquatic Center in the summer months.

For Wray, community collaboration has been the key to success and sustainability of programs. City-owned fields serve as home to the Wray Eagles High School baseball and softball teams. Wray RD-2 School District's many outdoor athletic fields and gyms are available for municipal coordinated activities such as flag football, soccer, volleyball, and basketball. Other City departments assist with facility maintenance and coordinating events. The Wray Rehabilitation and Activities Center (WRAC) is a nonprofit exercise and restorative health facility that often partners on additional programs, allowing both entities to pool resources to best meet the needs of the community.

Wray believes in openly communicating with and listening to the needs of the Wray community. Youth programs and Wray Aquatics Center brochures, made available in English and Spanish and updated annually, list the programs and activities offered. In addition, a very successful All-Call system sends updates, cancellations, or changes to an activity via telephone and email. The community also can find information on the Wray Recreation Facebook page, in the local newspaper, on the radio, and on our City of Wray's website.

This past year, the City of Wray celebrated the 52nd Annual Wray Daze, which hosts a long-standing tradition of "Bike & Trike Races" and the newly added "Basketball Knock-out Tournament" at City Park.

Wray believes in challenging the status quo and offers not only sports-related activities, but also programs such as "Chefs in Training" and "Tots of Fun" classes where parents and young children play and learn together, as well as "Holiday Cookie Plate Decorating" for artists of all ages.

To remain financially viable, the coaching staff is made up of volunteers — both parents and community members who contribute their time and talents. The amazing support of volunteers in Wray enables its recreation department to offer as many programs as possible. While Wray is proud of the opportunities and service offered, it is always interested in interaction with other municipalities to continuously improve and enhance services to the community. The challenge of daunting capital improvements requires leveraging state and federal grants, local trust funds, private donors, and municipal resources.

Wray is a community and City with a deep founded spirit of service and pride. Sustainability quite often does not come from money or funding. In Wray, sustainability comes from people, passion, and vision.



GOCO GRANTS CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARKS & RECREATION

Rosemary Dempsey, Great Outdoors Colorado director of communications

PARKS AND RECREATION FOLKS FROM CITIES AND TOWNS across the state turn to Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) for Local Park and Outdoor Recreation capital improvement grants, which can provide up to \$350,000 to help build and improve community parks and playgrounds, outdoor recreation amenities, and outdoor athletic facilities — and fund land acquisitions. GOCO also offers planning grants that help municipalities develop strategic plans and site plans for parks, trails, and more.

Applicants must provide at least 25 percent of the total project cost in matching funds, at least 10 percent of which must be a cash match. And what some prospective GOCO partners do not realize is that Conservation Trust Funds (CTF) from the Department of Local Affairs (another source of funding from Colorado Lottery proceeds) can count as matching dollars. That means Lottery dollars work hard for Colorado's great outdoors.

To support their proposed GOCO-funded projects, parks and recreation teams also turn to grants from private foundations, including the Gates Family Foundation, Colorado Health Foundation, and El Pomar Foundation; to state grant opportunities, such as state trails grants and Fishing Is Fun grants from Colorado Parks and Wildlife; and federal grants. Rural Philanthropy Days, regularly scheduled events, can help small parks and recreation departments interface with several funders in one session.

Partnering with neighboring municipalities or counties that will benefit from a potential project could make a GOCO grant application more competitive, which is important in the GOCO grant process where demand is often three times greater than available funding.

The GOCO staff is available to help applicants think big when it comes to a dream outdoor recreation project, and can provide technical assistance through the grant application process. GOCO offers grant-writing workshops and draft application review, provides samples of successful applications, and is available to answer any questions.

Learn more at GOCO.org/grants or contact Local Government Program Manager Jake Houston at jhouston@goco.org.





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