

**What Business Leaders think about Parks and Recreation:
A recent survey of Chambers of Commerce reveals strong business support**

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The purpose of this article is to report noteworthy findings from a survey of business leaders and to suggest methods by which park and recreation professional may use this information.

Introduction

A little more than a year ago, a number of public agency and non-profit administrators met with staff of the California Department of Parks and Recreation to discuss subjects of interest to the park and recreation profession. The Department's Planning Division would take a lead role in producing a series of workshops, guidebooks, and articles to present research findings and related material to park professionals.

One of the first efforts was to survey four significant decision-making audiences – California legislators, city mayors, county executives, and the chair of the county boards of supervisors. The survey results from these four targeted audiences are identified in a report prepared by the Department of Parks and Recreation, *California Leaders' Opinions of Parks and Recreation 2002*.¹ In addition to this survey project, two additional statewide surveys targeting the chambers of commerce (representing the business community) and school superintendents and were implemented. The findings from the survey of school superintendents will be released by the California Department of Parks and Recreation in Summer 2003.

In October 2002, the executive directors of California's 411 chambers of commerce were queried on their personal views of park facilities and recreation programs in their communities. The confidential survey considered factors of opinion, importance, satisfaction, and the perceptions of residents on issues of local interest, including parks and recreation and other perceptions of related quality of life subject areas. Of those surveyed, 207 chambers responded for a solid return rate of just over 50 percent. Responses came from chambers located in 44 of California's 58 counties.

The recreation providers have an interest in knowing how the business community feels about publicly provided park facilities and recreation programs; for example:

- How do local park and recreation programs rate when compared with a variety of value statements, such as creating jobs, or supporting property values?
- What is their opinion regarding the relative importance of local issues such as education, crime, population growth or loss of open space over the next five years?
- What are their satisfaction levels regarding current conditions of recreation facilities in their communities?
- What opinions are held regarding park and recreation facilities and services?

What was learned?

When asked for their opinions, a resounding 95 percent of the responding business leaders reported agreement that recreation areas and programs improve the quality of life in their communities. Over 80 percent agreed recreation areas and facilities increase nearby property values and help reduce crime and juvenile delinquency. Nearly 60 percent reported that recreation areas and facilities play an important part in the decision of businesses to locate in their communities.

Not surprisingly, considering the survey audience, when asked to rate the importance of various local issues over the next five years, 99 percent of business leaders assigned high importance to improving the local economy. Over 90 percent thought it was also important to provide more and better schools and to replace or upgrade existing public infrastructure.

Respondents were split as to whether enough recreation areas and facilities exist for convenient use in their city. Fifty percent of the respondents agreed there were enough facilities, while 30% indicated that there were not enough available for convenient use in their community.

Responses were further viewed as having come from large metropolitan, small metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas. Respondents from large metropolitan areas (group of counties as defined by the Office of Management and Budgets OMB as having a population of one million or more) and small metropolitan areas (metropolitan areas of less than one million persons) were more satisfied with current community conditions and the availability of park facilities and recreation programs than non-metropolitan areas. More than two-thirds of the respondents from non-metropolitan areas indicated satisfaction with the availability of park facilities and recreation programs in their communities.

Business leaders from small metropolitan counties reported the highest percentage (72 percent) of agreement that there were enough recreation areas and facilities available for convenient use in their cities. Ninety-five percent of the respondents from non-metropolitan areas reported the highest satisfaction with the protection of agricultural lands and open space areas while 79 percent of the respondents from large metropolitan areas reported agreement with protected lands and open areas. Almost 40 percent of all respondents were much less satisfied with the current local conditions of available housing and controlled growth.

What park and recreation professionals can do with this information

As recreation providers, what can *we* do with this research material? Well, the data from this survey can guide, shape, and change future actions in local communities by *the way it is presented*. The answer to what can be done with this material is very complicated and will require effort from all park professionals to encourage support for the park and recreation profession — advocacy!

For example, park and recreation professionals could use the results of this survey to consider how best to develop and present their organizations' efforts to tie in more closely with the views held by policy makers and business leaders. Policy makers and business leaders are key groups

in any community. These individuals have the difficult task of balancing the financial needs of one community service against another. Business leaders can provide critical support for community endeavors such as a celebration or festival, team sport tournament or parks' renovation, for example. The business communities influence on policy leaders allocating scarce community resources to protect quality of life elements such as park facilities and recreation programs is well known.

Parks and recreation need to compete for the same public dollars as safety, education, and public works. In other words, according to CPRS's *Talking Park and Recreation Issues to Policymakers*² "Your involvement is needed at the local, state, and federal levels to *communicate* the value (of recreation) and how you are addressing societal issues..." Therefore, park and recreation professionals should consider:

- Speaking directly to decision-makers and business leaders about what your agency is doing to solve a community problem. Provide clear examples and tell them that park facilities contribute to a strong local economy by increasing property values and by providing jobs – many to youth looking for job experience (e.g., lifeguard, maintenance, and recreation assistants) as well contribute to peripheral businesses such as restaurants, hotels and the retail industry.
- Demonstrating to media sources your agency's' effective and well-run programs, and highlight community partnerships with your local Chamber of Commerce or businesses. Ask to provide guest speakers and presentations at Chamber meetings or offer to host a business meeting at one of your park facilities. When speaking to the media, remember to connect your agency to the local economy and to education, health, and public safety.
- Explaining to policy leaders how your agency can help solve a policy issue and educate them about the value and important benefits park facilities and recreation services provide. Provide easily understood examples on collaborative efforts between businesses and your agency. Speak of your ability to provide solid solutions to a number of community problems involving education, public safety, and the economy.

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¹ *California Leaders' Opinions of Parks and Recreation 2002*, Second Edition, California Department of Parks and Recreation, Planning Division, www.parks.ca.gov,

² California Park and Recreation Society's *Talking Park and Recreation Issues to Policymakers* 2000, www.cprs.org.