

CREATING SMART PARKS

By Doug Wyseman

Parks and recreation departments provide fabulous services to their communities. Unfortunately, most of these services and benefits are seen as "nice to have" rather than essential. So, when tough times lead to budget cuts, many parks departments were the first to feel the blade.

If not managed correctly, reduced staffing, maintenance, or supervisory budgets can not only deprive communities of the great benefits associated with parks, but easily lead to dramatic increases in serious injuries to our children. Recreational immunity is great, but when it leads to organizations abdicating basic responsibilities to provide reasonably safe recreational lands, we need to reassess priorities!





Too many children are injured in parks. While departments in general do a good job in maintaining parks and recreation facilities, the fact remains that every year some children start their day filled with excitement for their upcoming outing with family and friends never realizing that that day will be their last.

In the past five years, I have investigated four fatal accidents in North American parks. All involved children and were the result of accidents that could have been prevented by the local parks and recreation department. We've come a long way in improving equipment, maintenance and training, but we need to do more.

While tough economic times demand that we pay attention to the bottom line, we can't afford to forget the importance of having safe parks. Shrinking budgets don't have to result in growing risks. I've had the pleasure of helping a number of parks departments successfully meet the challenges of doing better while spending less and have learned how some simple steps can make a world of difference. The Creating Smart Parks program is designed to not only help you deal with having less money to spend, but also to allow your department to be improve overall performance.

This program doesn't contain scientific formulas or spreadsheets to success...it does provide many common sense solutions to problems associated with parks and recreation. Recommendations are based on the experience of seeing what can work and what can fail. Embracing the desire to improve is the first step to creating *Smart Parks*.

WHY THE CONCERN?

Imagine your town without parks. Parks are important. Sometimes we get wrapped up in dealing with enough issues

of the day that we forget that simple fact. That is especially true in tough economic times. If the breadwinner loses their job and wants to take the family somewhere for some relaxation, it probably isn't going to be Disney World. Parks provide an abundance of opportunities for people to get outside, enjoy nature, get healthy and have fun. We shouldn't forget that fact.

While we won't try to argue that parks are an essential service, they are an important part of the community. People love their beaches, dog parks, trails, playgrounds and skate parks and use them daily.

Recent efforts to improve park safety have helped, but there have still been thousands of injuries suffered in North American parks. The majority of these injuries (and deaths) have nothing to do with park maintenance, or risk management initiatives...but some do. If organizations don't make some smart decisions going forward, the shrinking budgets will only create growing risks.

HOW MUCH RISK IS OK?

If you are going to manage recreational risk it is important to understand just what defines a 'risk.' Simply put, *risk is the chance of something going wrong.*

For many people, it is risk that makes them want to be involved in an activity. Skiing, skateboarding, hiking and playing any game, from football to poker all include elements of risk. Risk isn't the enemy; rather it is often the main stimulus for being involved in their recreational pursuit. Eliminating all risks in parks and recreation is not the goal. Children need to be able to climb and swing. Adults should be allowed to play games or to slide down a hill. Along with the thrill a child receives soaring through mid-air on a swing comes the risk of the swing breaking and

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SMART PARKS ESSENTIALS

1. Review written policies to ensure that they provide accurate reflection of service
2. Complete review of one-year and five-year experience
3. Increase inspections through use of other resources
4. Review maintenance/supervisory operations documents
5. Transfer appropriate tasks and responsibilities to user groups
6. Maximize effectiveness of signs
7. Don't have rules that you don't intend to enforce
8. Keep score

the child being injured. Should children stop using swings? Of course not. However, the risk of the swing breaking should be eliminated. In essence, this is what risk management for parks and recreation is all about; ensuring that the thrill and challenge that come from play are allowed to continue, while hazards to participants are minimized.

WHAT'S YOUR BEST EFFORT?

When accidents occur in your park, such accidents are supposed to take place in spite of your best efforts. School districts and municipalities alike need to determine the level of service that they can provide to maintain parks and play spaces. One of the most frequent question I'm asked is, "How often should we inspect our park." My honest answer is that I don't know. How could I?

I don't know how many staff you have; how many parks; miles of trails; or how many playgrounds. For anyone to say you must inspect once a week might be ridiculous... perhaps impossible. The same situation holds true for the courts. A judge doesn't want to say how often that you should inspect your park, that's what elected officials are for. They are elected to determine how the resources of the municipality should be utilized. A judge doesn't know what a reasonable policy for your municipality would include. Maybe this year money was needed for improved water quality, or to plow snow, or fight fires. A judge couldn't say you should have ignored all other factors and made sure that you inspected your park every week; that is why elected officials set policy. To ensure that you are providing reasonably safe parklands in your community, organizations should develop written policies outlining the level of service that they provide. Such reasonable policies ensure that you are meeting your responsibilities in your parks and play spaces.

SMART PARKS LAW OF MANAGING RISKS

Look

- Physically look at your area of concern...whether it's playgrounds, trails, toboggan hills, beaches, or playing fields...as many fresh eyes as possible
- Incident reports, claims, complaints...where are they coming from? (*We once worked with a large city that had 20 outdoor pools. They were very pleased that after a summer, they had only 9 reports of slip and falls on the pool deck. By looking closer we determined that 8 of the 9 falls took place at the northeast corner of the same pool!*)

- Signs need to be looked at, as well. Are they visible? Easy to understand? Many signs fail as tools of communication because they contain too much information, much of it needless. Saying "Welcome to Springfield...use at your own risk" does not reduce your liability. Telling a trail user "Cliff ahead" will reduce the likelihood of accident and show that you took appropriate steps to make users aware of a danger.

Ask

- Users are in your parks daily...you aren't. Ask for their help in making sure things are safe. Signs are a good way to accomplish this.
- Users also should be consulted when developing new facilities and lands. If you're developing a trail, who wants to use it? Hikers? Bikers? Equestrian? Can they all safely use the trail at the same time?
- Insurers should be asked to provide benchmarks. "*We are a city of 50,000 and 36 percent of the claims are against the parks department. Is that good or bad?*" Armed with the information that you are worse than average (if you're at 36 percent), you might want to use that information when asking for money in your budget for staffing, new equipment, or other such items that can improve your situation. If you are doing well, you'll want to make sure staff gets a pat on the back and that elected officials are aware that you are better than the norm. Where else can you get such information?
- Legal department should be asked what happened when we were sued. Learn from successes and failures. If you paid, why? If you won, it reinforces risk management efforts.
- Your peers in other municipalities. Thinking of a skate park? Ask someone who has one what they would do differently next time. Learn from their experience.

Watch

- Keep an eye on your experience and any trends.

In spite of tough economic times, we should all be able to enjoy many great days at parks and recreational lands. Liability fears needn't close down the old town swimming hole. A little common sense and simple risk management steps can make things reasonably safe.

Doug Wyseman has worked in the public sector as risk manager for a large Canadian municipality and in the private sector for insurers of public entities. Doug has served on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association and was instrumental in the development of the Playground Safety Institute.

