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Created in 1965, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) is an interstate, intercounty and intercity agency which provides continuing, comprehensive and coordinated planning for the orderly growth and development of the Delaware Valley region. The region includes Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties as well as the City of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania and Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Mercer counties in New Jersey. The Commission is an advisory agency which divides its planning and service functions between the Office of the Executive Director, the Office of Public Affairs, and three line Divisions: Transportation Planning, Regional Planning, and Administration. DVRPC's mission for the 1990s is to emphasize technical assistance and services and to conduct high priority studies for member state and local governments, while determining and meeting the needs of the private sector.



The DVRPC logo is adapted from the official seal of the Commission and is designed as a stylized image of the Delaware Valley. The outer ring symbolizes the region as a whole while the diagonal bar signifies the Delaware River flowing through it. The two adjoining crescents represent the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the State of New Jersey. The logo combines these elements to depict the areas served by DVRPC.

DELAWARE VALLEY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

Publication Abstract

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ABSTRACT

As part of a continuing project to foster inter-municipal cooperation, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission is preparing a series of short "How-to" guides for elected and appointed municipal officials. The purpose of these guides is to outline how local government officials can launch specific cooperative ventures with their neighbors in adjoining municipalities in order to improve services and/or reduce costs. This is the first guide in the series and describes how to create regional recreation commissions in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

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REGIONAL RECREATION COMMISSIONS: A HOW-TO-GUIDE FOR MUNICIPALITIES

PREPARED BY THE DELAWARE VALLEY REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

JULY 1997

There are 353 cities, townships and boroughs in the nine-county Delaware Valley region, a number which reflects the value that many people put on local control. At times, however, the desire for local control may conflict with other important goals such as improving local services or reducing taxes. Many elected and appointed officials now recognize that one way out of this dilemma is for neighboring townships and boroughs to work together. While joint ventures are not the answer to every local government problem, under the right circumstances individual municipalities can offer their citizens improved services for the same or fewer local tax dollars.

As part of a continuing project to foster inter-municipal cooperation, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission is preparing a series of short "How-to" guides for elected and appointed municipal officials. The purpose of these guides is to outline how local government officials can launch specific cooperative ventures with their neighbors in adjoining municipalities in order to improve services and/or reduce costs. This is the first guide in the series and describes how to create regional recreation commissions in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Future guides will address New Jersey-specific issues or will have a bi-state focus.

What is a Regional Recreation Commission?

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), there are currently more than 220 municipal recreation and parks departments staffed with full-time employees across the Commonwealth. About 38 of those organizations can be classified as *regional* or *areawide* recreation commissions in that they involve more than one municipality or school district working together under some type of formal agreement. There are 38 municipal and six regional recreation commissions currently operating in Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery counties in Southeastern Pennsylvania (see map).

Regional recreation commissions typically use school facilities and municipal parks -- at little or no cost -- to provide recreation services to local residents. Recreational programming is usually built around sports leagues, swimming, special events, fitness classes and adult education, with the exact mix determined by local preferences and the availability of suitable facilities. Some commissions develop age-specific programming for the very young (e.g., pre-school, summer play ground or child care programs) or senior citizens while others take advantage of unique natural resources, campgrounds and other local amenities.

CASE STUDY: BLUE MOUNTAIN RECREATION COMMISSION

Created in 1968, the Blue Mountain Recreation Commission (BMRC) is a well established and successful school district-municipal partnership. The Commission is made up of five boroughs, four townships and one school district that collectively represent 18,000 people in communities ranging in size from 250 to 3,700. The region is experiencing substantial growth pressures and its strong schools and recreational programs combine to make the area an even more attractive place to live and work.

Solid school district support is a key factor behind the BMRC's success. Over 75% of recreational activities take place on school district property, BMRC's offices are located within the school district building and its employees are on the school district payroll. Approximately half of the Commission's \$400,000 annual budget comes from user fees with the other half based on municipal and school district earned income tax receipts. The earned income tax is a "robust" funding source as it captures both income and population growth and also reflects taxpayer ability to pay better than sources linked to the property tax base. In terms of governing structure, each municipality and the school district have two seats on the board, one of which must be filled by an elected representative. Each municipality has a single vote on all issues before the board.

In a 1991 survey of 27 regional recreation commissions, DCNR documented the range of organizations that have developed over the years. The Elk Creek Recreation and Leisure Board in Erie County is among the smallest areawide commissions, serving a population of 8,500 persons on a \$35,000 annual operating budget. The Lancaster Recreation Board is one of the largest, serving 70,000 people on a \$1.2 million operating budget. Founded in 1909, Lancaster is also the oldest entity. The Spring-Ford Regional Recreation Commission, the product of an agreement between four municipalities and one school district in Montgomery and Chester counties, is the newest commission having been chartered in November, 1996.

Some regional commissions may involve only two jurisdictions, usually a large township and a single school district or a township and a borough. In contrast, the Blue Mountain Recreation Commission in Schuylkill County brings together five boroughs, four townships and one school district that collectively total 18,000 people. The Downingtown Area Recreation Consortium in Chester County has grown to include ten municipalities in two school districts with 66,000 residents.

WHY COOPERATE?

There are three key arguments in favor of cooperation: saving money, improving programming and gaining political clout.

Saving Money

Cost savings can take several forms. First, cooperation allows municipalities to spread the *fixed costs* of providing recreation services over a larger population base. A fixed cost is an expenditure that does not vary directly with the size of the operation. For example, director salary and benefits, central administrative costs, and computer hardware are all examples of fixed costs. Areawide commissions can spread these expenses over a larger tax-paying and user fee-paying service area, which effectively reduces the burden on any individual municipality.

Other savings come from taking advantage of favorable *economies of scale*. For example, bulk purchases are usually priced more competitively than small lot orders. Areawide commissions have the ability to negotiate lower prices on everything from soccer balls to copier paper. Reducing

duplication is another area of potential savings. For example, it is considerably cheaper to develop, print and mail a single brochure to households in three municipalities than to prepare three separate brochures, each delivered to one-third of the mailing list. By eliminating redundant design and set-up charges, regional recreation commissions can benefit from favorable economies of scale.

The actual dollar amount of savings from cooperation depends on several factors, not the least of which is how much individual municipalities were spending and what level of services they were providing prior to going regional. It is clear that given two adjacent townships -- each with its own recreation commission run by a director earning \$35,000+ a year -- both townships can save money by consolidating operations and splitting staff and administrative costs down the middle. It is also clear that if neither municipality had a department to start out with, it would be cheaper for them to design a joint operation than to create two parallel departments with two staffs.

However, if only one of the two municipalities has a recreation commission to begin with (hence has a "recreation" category in its municipal budget), the cost implications are more complex. In this case, the municipality that is already providing recreation services would likely reap some cost savings through collaboration. However, the municipality that previously did not provide any recreation services would incur net new costs. An acceptable funding formula would need to be established between the two municipalities that fairly distributed those costs.

For municipalities that have decided to offer recreation services to their constituents, it is generally more cost-effective to collaborate than to go it alone. By forming a regional recreation commission, individual municipalities can spread fixed costs among a larger population, take advantage of favorable economies of scale and reduce duplication of effort.

Improving Services

While cost savings will vary with local circumstances, the variety and overall quality of services delivered nearly always improves under a regional approach. When two or more municipalities combine offerings, residents can choose among a wider range of options than were offered by a single municipality. Similarly, when

Southeastern Pennsylvania Recreation Commissions

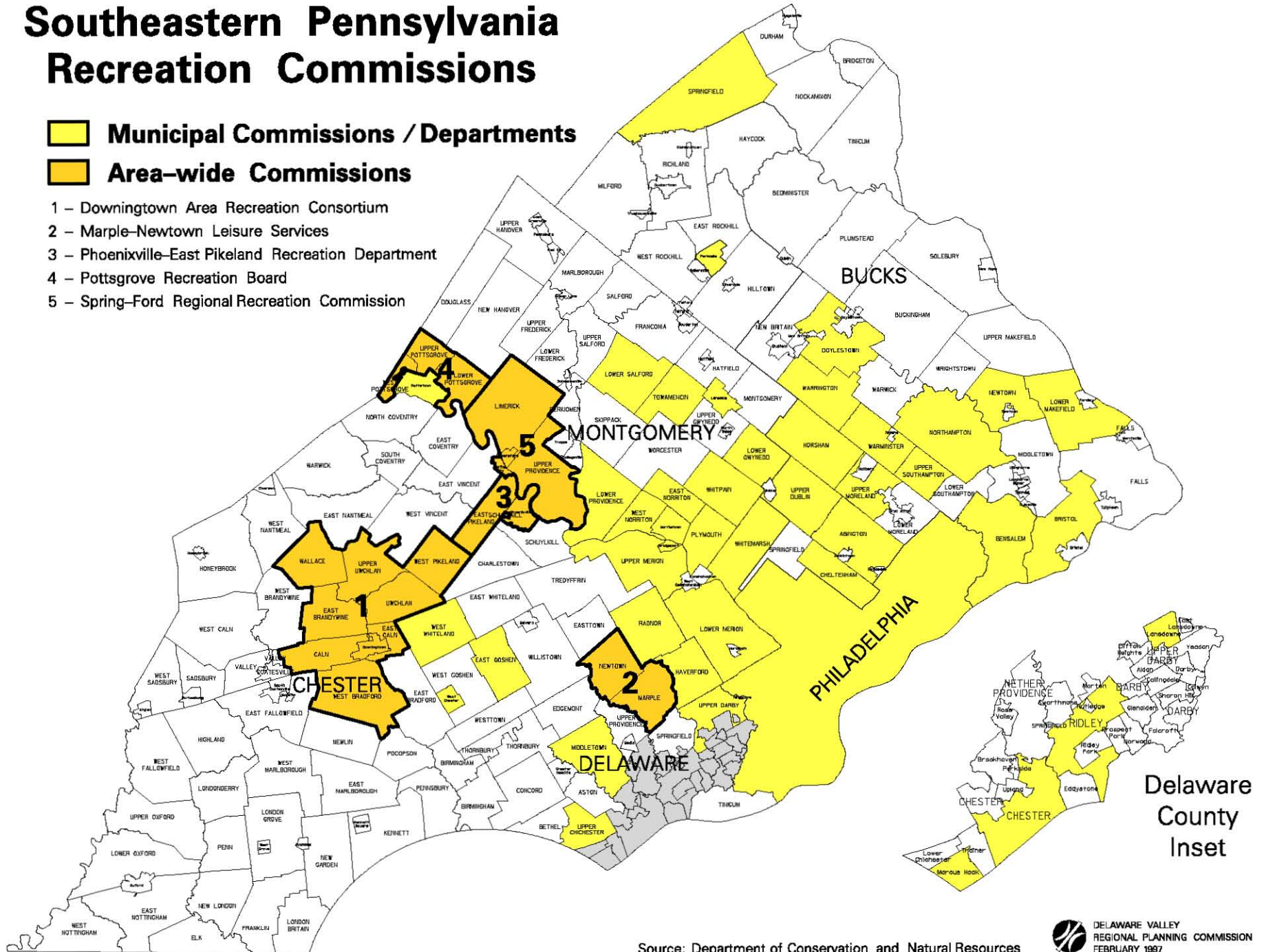


Municipal Commissions / Departments



Area-wide Commissions

- 1 – Downingtown Area Recreation Consortium
- 2 – Marple-Newtown Leisure Services
- 3 – Phoenixville-East Pikeland Recreation Department
- 4 – Pottsgrove Recreation Board
- 5 – Spring-Ford Regional Recreation Commission



Source: Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

DELAWARE VALLEY
REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION
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CASE STUDY: SPRING-FORD REGIONAL RECREATION COMMISSION

This newly-created Commission was established in November, 1996, and is made up of Limerick Township, Upper Providence Township, Royersford Borough (all in Montgomery County), Spring City Borough (in Chester County) and the Spring-Ford School District. Participating municipalities represent different sizes, income levels and growth prospects which, at times, threatened their ability to reach a joint agreement.

The Commission grew out of an effort by the Spring-Ford Council of Governments (COG) to move ahead on a specific regional project. After the COG agreed to focus on recreation services, municipal leaders spent about 18 months working on the framework for creating a regional commission. This process was facilitated by a DCNR Peer-to-Peer Grant which made it possible to bring in an outside expert for consultation.

Sue Abele, well-respected director of the Lancaster Recreation Commission, served as the DCNR-appointed peer consultant and was, by all reports, critical to the process of launching the new commission. Although the agreement almost broke down several times owing to disagreements over the funding formulas and board representation, the joint commission's charter was signed in November, 1996. Its major source of funding will not be tax dollars. In addition to seeking grant support, the Commission's director will apply for alternative revenues including business sponsorships, fund-raising events, special events, donations and program fees.

municipalities team up with a school district to form a regional commission, adults and young children gain access to recreation facilities that were previously available only to students -- and then only during the school day.

Finally, while there might be insufficient interest in a single municipality to support a specialized class or program, a larger, regional service area might provide the critical mass needed to make the program viable. For example, day trips to out-of-town attractions may require a minimum enrollment to defray the cost of renting a van or bus. Moreover, with a larger population, it might be possible to offer beginner and advanced classes in place of a single mixed class. It is hard to conceive of an example where the breadth, depth or quality of available recreation programming shrinks in response to an alliance between two or more municipalities and school districts.

Gaining Political Clout

Perhaps the most under-appreciated reason for municipalities to form an alliance is to improve their bargaining position with their respective school districts. In most parts of the region, school districts own and operate recreation facilities that are critical to the success of any municipal or regional recreation program. Under the go-it-alone approach, each municipality must try to independently negotiate access to school district facilities.

Municipalities enter the negotiations from a stronger, more unified bargaining position when they operate as a coalition. From the school district's perspective, partnering municipalities represent taxpayers who constitute a significant, if not complete, share of the district's funding base. School districts have a greater incentive to cooperate with regional recreation commissions precisely because of the demonstrated level of regional support.

Political clout is also an asset in the growing competition for state dollars. Funding formulas used by the Pennsylvania DCNR in its Circuit Rider Grants and Peer-to-Peer Technical Assistance programs explicitly reward joint proposals. Political leverage combined with funding criteria mean that other things equal, multi-municipal ventures are likely to be more favorably received.

While it is hard to quantify the value of this sort of political edge, it is even harder to do without it. The director of one western Pennsylvania recreation commission recently commented that his commission's board of directors is considering recruiting several additional municipalities and a second school district in order to bolster its standing and political position within the region. While a regional recreation commission with two school districts would be unusual, the fact that it is under consideration illustrates that municipalities can gain power and influence by banding together.

FIGURE 1
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF COOPERATION

Selected Advantages of Cooperation : broader participant base, increased credibility with school districts, stable financial support, less duplication of programs and services, free use of school buildings and municipal parks & facilities, better chance for receiving state grants, more exposure, heightened community awareness, better ability to serve smaller communities, and reduced supply costs through volume pricing.

Selected Disadvantages of Cooperation: the need to constantly educate new elected officials, coordinating meeting schedules, difficulty satisfying special needs of each municipality, too many bosses, politics, jealousy and demands of competing municipalities (each wants the best facilities & programs), poor communication between municipalities & school districts, too many meetings, and promoting programs across a larger area.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, 1991

Size Matters

Not all municipalities stand to gain equally from cooperation. For small townships and boroughs (i.e., local population below 5,000), money may be the driving force behind the decision to enter into a regional commission. Some communities may not have the financial ability to set up their own recreation commission nor the facilities to support programming for their own residents.

Larger and more affluent municipalities with 20,000 or more residents, on the other hand, often have the financial capacity to support an individual recreation commission. For communities with the financial means, the prospect of a commission dedicated to meeting the needs of a single municipality can offer more control and less need to coordinate and compromise with neighboring townships and boroughs. Control comes at a price, however. Townships and boroughs that go it alone forego the opportunity to reduce costs, expand the number and type of program offerings and improve their bargaining position. Other advantages and disadvantages of forming a regional recreation commission are summarized in Figure 1.

THE PROCESS

There is no single formula for creating a regional recreation commission. Governing, programming and funding mechanisms are flexible and can adapt to local circumstances. While the particulars vary from one situation to the next, four sets of players figure in the creation process: municipal officials, school district officials, civic leaders and DCNR. In many cases, DCNR's grant and incentive programs help local advocates of regional commissions reach agreement.

The Principal Players

Municipal officials include both locally elected representatives and appointed township and borough managers. These local leaders represent the interests of community residents who would both benefit from and pay for any newly-created recreation services and facilities. Moreover, municipal officials are important players because they control the use of existing local parks and facilities that may be critical for regional programming. Municipalities often make facilities available free of charge. The 1991 DCNR survey found that 92 percent of regional commissions had free use of municipal parks.

School Districts are critical partners because many districts cross municipal boundaries, creating an important precedent for regional service delivery. With legislated taxing powers and elected governing boards, school districts are a visible and familiar form of regional government. Municipalities wary of collaboration may feel more comfortable working within their school districts than exploring brand new alliances.

More importantly, school districts own and operate recreational facilities that are essential for regional programming. Peak demand for school facilities occurs during and after the school day. Many facilities are underutilized evenings, weekends and in the summer which is when most community recreation demand is concentrated.

The Lancaster Recreation Commission recently polled 33 Pennsylvania recreation commissions about their relationship with their partner school districts. They found that 94 percent of recreation commissions have free use of school buildings and

97 percent have free use of school athletic fields. Slightly over half of recreation commissions have an agreement with their school districts granting them first priority use of facilities after school uses. In addition to providing facilities, 45 percent of school districts also make monetary contributions to regional recreation commission operating budgets.

Civic leaders is an all-inclusive term that covers everyone from friends of the parks to neighborhood block captains to local business sponsors of Little League teams. With a shared desire to create new recreational opportunities, these individuals can bridge the political and geographic boundaries that often stand in the way of cooperation between neighboring townships and boroughs. More specifically, interested citizens serve as committee and board members, unpaid volunteers, political allies, and private sector project partners. No regional recreation commission can expect to thrive much less survive without the support of local civic leaders.

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources is the state agency charged with administering grant and technical assistance programs for local recreation and conservation programs across the Commonwealth. A cabinet-level agency, DCNR was established by Governor Tom Ridge and the General Assembly in 1995 to create a stronger voice for state parks and forests, rivers, greenways, trails, community parks and heritage areas. DCNR encourages local communities to think and act regionally and has several programs designed to help municipalities launch regional recreation commissions.

DCNR Grants and Incentives

DCNR directly encourages the creation of regional recreation commissions through its Circuit Rider Grants and Peer-to-Peer Technical Assistance programs. Both of these initiatives are administered by DCNR's Bureau of Recreation and Conservation and are funded through the Keystone Fund established through the provisions of Act 50 of 1993, the Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund Act. Keystone funding is a combination of lump sum proceeds from bond issues (DCNR will receive the third of three allocations in 1997) and a share of the real estate transfer tax. The transfer tax provides a continuing funding stream of about \$8 million per year to support these and other Keystone programs.

Funding formulas for both programs contain criteria that reward inter-municipal cooperation. DCNR guidelines explain that the "Level of Involvement/Cooperation" category awards points to applicants based on the "extent and role of cooperation between local governments and organizations and the partnerships that have been or will be created to complete this plan." This evaluation criteria reinforces DCNR's overall goal to create regional recreation commissions.

Peer-to-Peer Technical Assistance. Peer-to-Peer Technical Assistance is a special type of consulting service coordinated by DCNR's Bureau of Recreation and Conservation. The Bureau arranges for professionals with the appropriate experience and background to help grantee municipalities solve existing problems or improve services in a specific area. These tend to be short-term projects conducted by experienced park and recreation professionals who work closely with community leaders. The final product of this process is a written report including locally-specific recommendations prepared by the consultant and approved by both DCNR and the municipal grantee.

Eligibility guidelines for the Peer-to-Peer program are intentionally flexible in order to accommodate a wide range of problems and opportunities. This program has been used on a number of occasions to help municipalities explore the feasibility of developing a regional recreation and park department. The input of an "informed outsider," i.e., a consultant who is not affiliated with any of the potential partners, can be of great value to the process. Recent Peer-to-Peer grants awarded to municipalities in the Spring Ford Area and Lampeter-Strausburg regions both resulted in the creation of a regional recreation commission led by a paid executive director. A maximum grant of \$7,500 is available for Peer-to-Peer projects. The community must provide at least a 10 percent local cash match and total project cost cannot exceed \$8,250. Grant funds can only be used to pay the DCNR-approved consultant's time, travel expenses, subsistence costs, clerical support and printing.

Circuit Rider Grants. The Circuit Rider program is a three-year, declining grant that allows two or more municipalities to share a full-time recreation and/or parks director. State grant funding for the circuit rider's salary decreases from

100 percent in year one to 75 percent in year two and to 50 percent in year three. No funding is provided in subsequent years. Participating municipalities must create an intergovernmental agency as outlined in Act 180 of 1972 (the Intergovernmental Cooperation Law) and must provide the required local match. DCNR encourages municipalities to apply for a Peer-to-Peer grant to facilitate this process.

DCNR managers characterize the Circuit Rider Program as “not competitive” in that the state tries to fund as many meritorious grants as possible. While the program is especially well suited to smaller municipalities that cannot afford a full-time recreation professional on their own, larger communities have also successfully utilized grants. For example, the Altoona Area School District and the City of Altoona have used this grant to hire their first professionally trained manager.

Peer-to-Peer Technical Assistance can be used in tandem with a DCNR Circuit Rider Grant. Municipalities can apply for a Peer-to-Peer grant to help establish a joint recreation department, and then follow up with a Circuit Rider grant to subsidize the resulting department head’s salary. In practice, it may take more than one attempt to launch a regional commission. Two sets of frequently contentious issues -- funding formulas and governing structures -- must be resolved before a multi-municipal organization can take form.

Negotiating a Funding Formula

By definition, the “right” funding formula is that which is both acceptable to all contributing member governments and generates sufficient revenue to meet basic programming objectives. Negotiations about funding arrangements usually revolve around one or more of these issues:

- the division between internally-generated (fee and program revenues) and outside dollars (from public sector, private business and other sources);
- the level of school district cash contributions (if any); and
- the search for a formula that participants perceive as fair and equitable to all member governments.

FIGURE 2
CANDIDATE FUNDING SOURCES

Internally-generated funding

User fees
Membership dues
Bingo
Special events
Rental fees
Merchandise sales
Contractual work
Concession stands
Vending machines
Direct mail fundraising

Public dollar funding

Per capita tax (head tax)
Lump sum assessment to member governments
Local earned income tax
Percentage of assessed valuation of property
Real estate transfer tax
Bill municipalities based on actual participation

Other funding sources

United Way
Charitable Foundations
Non-profit 501(c)(3)
Public sector grants (DCNR)

Source: Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, “Area-Wide Recreation Survey,” 1991.

While finding the funding mix that clears all of these hurdles is a difficult task, the good news is that there is no shortage of potential funding sources. Figure 2 provides a list of internal and external funding sources that are currently used by regional recreation commissions in Pennsylvania.

While the number and variety of funding combinations can be daunting, the availability of options creates more room for negotiations. More often than not, the first funding scheme proposed will not be acceptable to all parties. Advocates of regional recreation commissions should anticipate that it will take several rounds of negotiations to reach an agreement, even if everyone is bargaining in good faith from the outset. Directors of existing recreation commissions concur that the most important thing proponents of new organizations can do is to remain flexible, creative and persistent in their approach. Other tips and strategies that have surfaced from recent experience include:

- *Watch for hidden agendas.* Negotiations may bog down if townships and boroughs bring non-recreation issues to the table.
- *Substitute non-cash for cash contributions.* It may be easier for some school districts and municipalities to make in-kind contributions in lieu of cash commitments. This can include free office space, printing services, access to phones, computers and technical support -- or any other good or service that can be provided by the municipality or school district that has value to the commission. While in-kind services can be just as valuable as cash, all commitments should be put in writing to ensure that they will be honored year after year.
- *Recognize elected officials are accountable to taxpayers.* Incumbents need reassurance that they aren't making expensive, open-ended commitments. Capping the rate of growth of the agency budget can help elected officials reach agreements that they can comfortably take back to their constituents.

Adopting a Governing Structure

The governing board of directors is usually charged with making policy, balancing the budget and strategic planning while day-to-day operations are managed by an executive director. Creating a workable decision-making structure is essential in part because member governments will only be willing to fund a regional organization if they feel that they have reasonable control over how the money will be spent.

Board members are, in most cases, local elected officials or appointed representatives with a strong interest in recreation issues. While "strong boards" may become problematic if they are allowed to become too wrapped up in day-to-day agency operations, most veteran recreation commission directors favor boards made up of interested and capable local leaders over apathetic appointees. Successful directors learn to be adept at enlisting the help of individual board members to solve problems in specific neighborhoods and communities and view their boards as their primary link to partnering municipalities and school districts. By keeping board members informed and involved they strengthen their ties to member governments.

Conflict on any governing body -- much less a regional organization -- is inevitable. Member governments frequently have legitimate differences, and it often falls to the executive director to play the role of mediator. This holds true even when the issues coming between townships, boroughs and school districts are about longstanding differences that have nothing to do with recreation concerns. Recognizing that keeping multiple member governments informed and moving in the same direction requires special competencies, DCNR is putting more emphasis on the need for excellent communications skills for new participants in its Peer-to-Peer and Circuit Rider programs.

Arriving at an acceptable formula for board representation can be as difficult as negotiating a funding formula. In practice, the two tasks often go hand in hand. In some cases, the allocation of votes on the board is weighted in proportion to bill paying responsibilities. The idea is that townships or boroughs making the biggest financial contributions should have the most say over how funds are spent. However, because dollars are more divisible than board seats, (e.g., a township cannot be awarded 1.65 or any other non-whole number of seats), other factors usually have to be added to the funding equation.

Another possibility for creating a board is a "one-municipality, one-vote" rule. The underlying philosophy is that all member governments are equal partners and deserve equal representation. In practice, this approach tends to be favored by municipalities that are responsible for a relatively smaller share of the budget as it puts them on equal footing with other, larger member governments without having to raise a commensurate share of the budget.

In practice, the number of people on the board can be less important than the rules about voting. Some governing structures require "super majorities" for specific votes such as those involving budget allocations or personnel matters. Super majorities may be defined in terms of margin of victory (e.g., a two-thirds majority versus a simple majority) or geographically (e.g., at least one representative from each member government must vote to approve).

FIGURE 3
A HYPOTHETICAL SUPER MAJORITY VOTING STRUCTURE

The Commission (4 member governments): "Wealthy-Township" - 3 seats, "Moderate-Township" - 2 seats, "Older-Borough" - 2 seats and "Supportive-School District" - 3 seats

The Voting System: A *simple majority* (six out of ten votes) is enough to pass a minor resolution (e.g., whether soccer fields should be lined using paint or chalk). This means that the "Supportive-School District" and "Wealthy-Township" conceivably control enough votes to pass a minor resolution by a 6-4 vote. A *super majority* (defined in the commissions bylaws to mean at least one out of two votes from "Moderate-Township" and the "Older-Borough" and two of three votes from the "Wealthy-Township" and the "Supportive-School District") is required on items involving any expenditure over \$2,000. While an expenditure could still be approved by a 6-4 vote, all four member governments would have to cast affirmative votes.

The Results: This system helps to keep the regional recreation commission on a course that is fundamentally acceptable to its municipal and school district partners. The downside of this arrangement is that each municipal government is, in effect, empowered with *super veto* authority and can single-handedly thwart the will of the majority.

Many other configurations are possible and Figure 3 illustrates one hypothetical example using a regional commission with two townships ("wealthy" and "moderate"), one borough and one ("supportive") school district. This voting scheme requires that all member governments must vote to approve a major expenditure.

The added control and protection provided by super majority voting schemes can help townships, boroughs and school districts with vastly different profiles feel more comfortable working together. The higher degree of consensus required under super majority voting helps guarantee that all of the major funding and/or policy decisions are fundamentally acceptable to each of the participating member governments. The downside is that, depending on how the voting provision is structured, super majority may turn into "super veto" power.

Sometimes regional recreation commissions opt to include non-voting members as a way to build bridges with other organizations and governments outside the official configuration. For example, the newly-formed Southern Regional Recreation Board in southwestern Pennsylvania has extended non-voting membership to a municipality that is within the school district but has not yet signed on as a full-fledged member. The Board reasons that by encouraging the candidate member to informally participate, they are making

it easier for them to assume a formal stake in the process at a later date.

STRATEGIES

There is no single approach to creating a regional recreation commission. While the importance of local history, politics and personalities cannot be underestimated, several general strategies have proven useful in a wide range of conditions.

Cultivating Partners and Allies

For nearly all kinds of cooperative ventures, recreation and otherwise, cultivating the right partners and allies is essential. According to DCNR's 1991 survey of areawide recreation commissions, 63 percent co-sponsor programs with other entities, including municipal recreation departments, colleges, YMCAs or YWCAs, scouting organizations, and the Special Olympics.

Building a network of community volunteers can be just as important as establishing solid institutional ties. Even in professionally staffed commissions, volunteers are needed to do everything from staffing sporting events to selling raffle tickets to hanging up flyers. Most importantly, friends of the recreation commission can be crucial political allies, particularly in times of budget pressure. The ability to turn out 25 supporters to a budget hearing can mean the difference between expansion and extinction.

There is no limit on the kinds of things partnering organizations and volunteers can do for a regional recreation commission. Figure 4 describes several different kinds of alliances that might be cultivated.

Making (and Keeping) School Districts Happy

Many school district officials, under pressure to satisfy a growing number of academic and non-academic mandates, question why they should be in the recreation business. Successful recreation commission directors have learned to answer this question by figuring out how to make life easier for school district administrators. This can take the form of assuming responsibility for administrative chores such as scheduling the use of school fields or physical labor such as maintaining and making improvements to playgrounds and pools.

In addition, recreation commission staff may hold credentials or other certification that can be of value to the school district trying to comply with state mandates and regulations. For example, if a recreation commission employee is properly certified in a particular skill (e.g., CPR-instruction) and works on site at a school, the school district may be exempt from having to send its own employee for formal training and certification.

Coaches can also be important allies for recreation programs. While competition over facilities can pose a problem, coaches are often supportive of recreation commission objectives because youth leagues and clinics can function as feeder programs for high school sports teams. Most importantly, commission staff should establish good relations with school janitors who, as keepers of the keys, can open school buildings during non-school hours. One current director recommended that recreation commission budgets should be sure to include funds to compensate janitors who are frequently asked to work overtime to cover leagues and special events.

Some school district officials view their alliance with recreation services providers as a public relations opportunity. More than just exercise or adult education, programs held on school grounds are a way to get taxpaying residents physically back into the schools. The mere act of entering a school building strengthens the connection between schools and the community at-large. In communities where large numbers of households have no school-age children, public schools are

experimenting with new ways to reach out to their constituents. The Titusville School District, which is affiliated with the Titusville Leisure Services Board, recently created a "school walking" program for senior citizens and other adults. This variation of "mall walking" was created to serve both exercise and community outreach purposes.

Create Your Own Demand

A third strategy for sustaining a regional recreation commission is to identify a galvanizing issue and develop strong programming in response. The Marple-Newtown Leisure Services Commission, for example, has received national attention for its KID'S STOP school-aged child care program. KID'S STOP is a state-licensed child care program operated in partnership with the Marple Newtown School District for children in kindergarten through fifth grade and located in the schools and community center. The Commission offers both a school-year and a summer program and has recently added a pre-kindergarten class. By identifying an area of need in its service area -- namely unmet demand for quality, affordable day care services -- the Marple-Newtown joint commission was able to carve itself a niche and strengthen its standing in the community.

FIGURE 4
PARTNERS & ALLIES

Business groups. Economic development groups view sports and recreation as amenities that can bolster the community as a better place to work and live.

Sports associations. In return for impartial league and field scheduling, sports associations can provide political and monetary support. Soccer moms and dads have clout.

Non-profit groups. Links to non-profit groups with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status for fundraising purposes, can help meet funding match requirements.

College students. Students majoring in physical education, recreation, or sports management may be eligible for course credit for supervised internships at a regional recreation commission.

High school students -- Many schools have adopted "service learning" and "school-to-work" programs that foster student involvement in outside agencies such as recreation commissions. Motivated students can make major contributions.

Board members -- Recreation directors should keep in mind that members of their governing boards can be powerful friends when problems arise.

An alternative to targeting a special population is to focus on a popular service area. DCNR's 1991 survey revealed adult sports leagues and swimming to be the two most popular programs. Commissions are probably better off focusing on the most popular areas of demand before experimenting in more speculative programming areas.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Regional recreation commissions are not the only form of cooperation. In some cases, the desire for local control overrides other considerations such as cost savings or wider program offerings. Informal cooperation between municipal recreation department professionals can help coordinate scheduling and programming. Neighboring municipalities may also agree to share services by custom or practice without drawing up a legally binding agreement or creating a joint commission. Lower Merion Township recreation facilities are available to residents of Narberth Borough by mutual agreement even though no

formal commission has ever been created. In other parts of the Commonwealth, neighboring municipalities are exploring possible job sharing agreements that would split a single full-time recreation director position between two part-time directors, each serving a different municipality.

In short, the benefits of cooperation that are described in the guide are not reserved solely for jurisdictions that create joint recreation commissions. Other forms of cooperation can also result in cost savings, improved services and better bargaining positions. The risk, however, is that these benefits will prove temporary if one or more partnering governments finds a reason to stop cooperating. By creating a regional recreation commission with a joint funding formula, formal governing structure and a paid staff charged with carrying out the organization's mission, municipalities can make a more enduring commitment to providing cost-efficient recreation services to their constituents.

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