Chapter 8: Strategies and Recommendations for Management and Financing

The Northern Federation exemplifies the benefits of partnerships through its nearly 40-year history of successful planning and land conservation efforts. Volunteerism and collaboration are the lynchpins of community parks and recreation in the Region. The nine municipalities are relatively small communities that have commensurately small staffs and budgets. Each municipality is too small to provide an independent public parks and recreation system. But together, and along with other public and private sector partners, the Region is large enough to be able to offer a parks and recreation system to serve people of all ages, year-round, with a wide range of opportunities, facilities, and services.

This chapter synthesizes challenges and opportunities identified in the inventory and assessment reports (Appendices) and presents recommendations under three Blueprint Strategies:

- Strategy 10: Organize a regional commission to coordinate the development and delivery of parks, recreation, trails, and open space services.
- Strategy 11: Increase operating and capital support for parks, recreation, trails, and open space.
- Strategy 12: Leverage the knowledge, skills, and resources of partner organizations that share the Region’s core values.

CHALLENGES

This Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan focuses heavily on recommendations that require a high degree of activity, organization, and management. Through good fortune, the generous spirit of volunteers, and the support of key stakeholders, parks are in place, events and activities are happening, and planning continues in many varied parks and recreation efforts from trails to park master plans and school-parks. However, the Region has reached the size and critical level of effort in which the fragmented efforts of many providers cannot expand and improve independently. Partnerships and multi-municipal collaboration are necessary for everything from efficiency and cost savings to being competitive for grant funding to providing more and better public service. Instituting a formal organized approach to partnerships led by the multi-municipal coalition, the Federation, appears to be a sound direction. To implement this plan, some paid staff is necessary to carry out daily functions of partnership-building and plan implementation, freeing volunteers to carry out major projects and initiatives.
Chapter 8

OPPORTUNITIES

The Northern Federation, nine municipalities, three school districts, major conservancies and land trusts, dozens of community organizations, and a host of interested citizens came together in a public conversation about how to work together in providing parks, recreation, greenways, trails, and preserving open space. While there are well over 100 organizations with partnerships under way or with potential for parks, recreation, and open space progress through joint efforts in Northern Chester County, it is essential to focus on several crucial partnerships that, if successful, will make all other partnerships possible. These crucial partners include:

1. the Federation’s municipal partners organizing for the planning, development and operation of parks, recreation, and open space;
2. the Owen J. Roberts, Downingtown Area, and Phoenixville Area School Districts to advance the school-park concept;
3. the sports leagues, Downingtown Area Recreation Commission and Phoenixville Recreation Department for development and maintenance of the major recreation facilities most in need — athletic fields;
4. the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation and Phoenixville Community Foundation for active, healthy living;
5. Hopewell Big Woods, Schuylkill River Greenway Association, and Chester County for conservation;
6. the Schuylkill Highlands Conservation Landscape Initiatives Program for tourism and economic development; and

While there are a host of other important organizations that are involved in partnership efforts, the work involved with the major partners mandates a strong and specific focus.

Recommendation 10.1 Establish a Northern Chester County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Commission.

Five options for parks, recreation, and open space were developed for consideration as a management structure for a regional parks, recreation, and open space system. These are shown in Table 5 of Appendix 7, Organization, Management, and Financing, on page A7-15. Based upon the ideas and concerns of the participants involved in the planning process, this plan recommends formal
Strategies and Recommendations for Management and Financing

regionalization—a Northern Chester County Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Commission—for recreation planning, programs, and services. Alternatively, naming the Commission as the Federation Park, Recreation, and Open Space Commission would draw upon the organizations successful and respected reputation.

The Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Commission would operate as a volunteer organization. Its purpose would be to plan, direct, and evaluate the formation of a regional parks, recreation, and open space system in Northern Chester County. Its main focus would be on the implementation of the Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan. Park ownership and maintenance would continue as an individual municipal function.

1) Determine the composition of the commission. It is suggested that the commission members include each municipality, each school district and the Federation of Northern Chester County Communities. This would make a 13-member board. Each member organization would appoint a representative and a designated alternate, and hold one vote. Municipal representatives would preferably comprise a parks and recreation board member, open space board member, or an elected official. It is important to ensure that a broad range of interests is represented on the Commission including conservation, recreation and sports.

2) Have the respective entities appoint the members to staggered terms of office.

3) Determine an organizational framework to establish the roles, responsibilities, and methods for decision-making. Consider how decisions will be made in serving the Region as a whole while supporting the needs of the sub-regions for active recreation facility planning, development and operation. If outside assistance is needed, consider applying for a Recreation and Parks Technical Assistance Program (RecTAP) grant of $3,500 with no match required, or a Peer Grant of $10,000 with a $1,000 match required, to assist in this matter.

4) Develop a one-year action plan defining the projects, roles, schedule, and resources based upon the goal of implementing the Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan.

5) Determine a budget for the commission based on the one-year action plan and the formula that sets for the contributions by the partners.

6) Evaluate progress at the end of one year and determine whether the commission is ready to formalize their relationship, e.g., with an Intergovernmental Agreement, and proceed in planning year two. Evaluation should address plan implementation and commission roles and functions and include input from the commission as well as the partnership organizations.
   • Evaluate the current opportunities and emerging needs in parks, recreation, and open space.
   • Analyze the previous year’s accomplishments and indicate reasons for progress or lack of it.
   • Determine if staffing is needed. Assess the potential for a Circuit Rider.
   • Develop a plan of action for the next fiscal year.
Chapter 8

Recommendation 10.2: Consider addressing sports facilities through sub-regions.
In terms of the regional planning, development and maintenance of sports facilities, the Region is especially complex. The complexity is due to the fact that residents of the nine municipalities are served by 15 athletic leagues with 26 divisions covering seven sports. Only two leagues have their own facilities; the rest schedule use of public and private fields. Some leagues feed the athletic programs of the three school districts and reflect participant preference to play with others they know. In addition, residents of East Pikeland and West Pikeland have access to professionally-led community recreation programs through the Phoenixville Recreation Department and Downingtown Area Recreation Consortium respectively, while residents of the remaining municipalities have had more limited programs offerings largely provided by volunteer and private organizations.

Background
A review of league service areas, player participation by municipality, and school district service areas found two sub-regions in the Northern Chester County area: East Nantmeal, East Coventry, South Coventry, North Coventry, East Vincent, and Warwick in the northwestern area and East Pikeland, West Pikeland and West Vincent in the southeastern area. While West Vincent is in the Owen J. Roberts School District, its residents primarily play in recreational leagues that operate outside of this school district. Of the 4,050 registered players in the sports leagues serving in the Region, players are nearly evenly split between the two sub-regions. Table 8-1, Possible Sub-Regions for Sports Facility Planning, Development and Use, presents the two possible sub-regions according to municipalities, participation, school districts, leagues and recreation providers.

Table 8-1 Possible Sub-Regions for Sports Facility Planning, Development and Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Region</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Municipalities</th>
<th>Leagues (Predominant)</th>
<th>Recreation Program Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern</td>
<td>2,030</td>
<td>East Nantmeal, East Coventry, South Coventry, North Coventry, East Vincent, Warwick</td>
<td>Coventry Little League, Coventry Soccer, Coventry Youth Lacrosse, Coventry Girls Basketball, Norchester Red Knights, NYAA, SFYAL, Wildcats Football</td>
<td>Volunteer parks and recreation boards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeastern</td>
<td>2,020</td>
<td>East Pikeland, West Pikeland, West Vincent</td>
<td>DARC, GEYA, KYAL, LYA, NYAA, Phoenixville Baseball,</td>
<td>Phoenixville Recreation Dept., DARC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Toole Recreation Planning

It is important to note important nuances reflected in Table 8.1. The leagues shown for each sub-region are the predominant leagues for the Region, however there is some crossover of players. Interviews and focus groups found that citizens are oriented to their leagues, school districts and community recreation program providers. People like to recreate with their neighbors, schoolmates and friends. Sustaining these social patterns while expanding sports facilities and program for all ages will increase recreational activity and foster active, healthy lifestyles.
Strategies and Recommendations for Management and Financing

Sports facilities would be located as close to home as possible thereby making facility use more convenient resulting in more use, more feasible bicycle and pedestrian distances, and thus less driving and environmental impact. Facilities would be configured to serve people where they want to play thereby enhancing a sense of community.

The analysis of sports field needs determined that the following facilities are needed:

- 19 diamond fields for youth
- 13 rectangular fields for youth
- 4 diamond fields for adults
- 4 rectangular fields for adults

Based upon the nearly equal level of participation in the two sub-regions, the facilities needed in each sub-region would also be about equal. The northwestern region would need 12 diamond fields and nine rectangular fields. The southeastern region would need 11 diamond fields and eight rectangular fields.

An advantage of this configuration is that it will enable all municipalities to compete for grant funding by collaborating in a joint application. By partnering within the sub-regions, the municipal partners and school districts can ensure that their resources are maximized, facilities are not duplicated unnecessarily, and operating costs are streamlined.

Recommendations

1. Consider forming two sub-regions for active recreation facility planning purposes. Sub-regions are common in large parks and recreation systems for efficient and effective service.
   - Northwest Sub-Region: East Nantmeal, East Coventry, South Coventry, North Coventry, East Vincent, and Warwick
   - Southeast Sub-Region: East Pikeland, West Pikeland and West Vincent

2. Plan the needed additional 40 sports fields according the sub-regional needs.

3. Planning for the development and operation of sports facilities needs to include representatives of municipal government, sports program providers (leagues and recreation providers), and school districts working together in a positive and collaborative fashion. Together, these partners can accomplish what no one entity could do on its own.

4. Consider locating one sports complex in each sub-region.

5. Advance the concept of School-Parks throughout Northern Chester County in the three school districts of Owen J. Roberts, Phoenixville and Downingtown.

6. West Pikeland should continue to be a partner in DARC for sports and other recreation programs, and the Federation of Northern Chester County for other services and facility improvements supported by this plan, including networking and partnership development.
Chapter 8

7. East Pikeland should continue to be a partner in the Federation of Northern Chester County for parks, recreation, open space, greenways, trails and other related functions. East Pikeland could also consider opening discussions with the Phoenixville Area Recreation Department regarding the provision of recreation services to East Pikeland. The residents are already participating in these programs. The Department has re-organized and staffed recreation operations since East Pikeland withdrew from this partnership five years ago. This could include the exploration of the services to be provided, funding, and most importantly, regular reporting of participation by township residents and other benefits to East Pikeland as a result of the partnership.

**Recommendation 10.3: Consider staff to support coordination and/or expansion of services.**

As the members carry out their work, the commission could decide when to hire staff. That could be sooner or later depending on how the work goes along with plan implementation and the capacity of the volunteers to support progress. When that time comes, this plan recommends that a Circuit Rider be considered. A Circuit Rider is the name of a PADCNR grant-funded position for regional parks and recreation management. This position would be a Recreation Coordinator for Northern Chester County. Over the four-year course of the Circuit Rider grant, PADCNR would fund half of the salary of the Recreation Coordinator—100 percent in year one, 75 percent in year two, 50 percent in year three, and 25 percent in year four—to be matched with local funds. This gives the Region four years to establish the system as well as begin implementing the plan.

The Recreation Coordinator would serve the Region by planning, marketing, directing, coordinating, and evaluating parks and recreation programs. The Recreation Coordinator would also help advance other partnership recommendations. It may be possible to secure the matching funds from a partnering organization in the Region.

**Recommendation 10.4: Establish a central clearinghouse for technical information about parks, recreation, and open space.**

Since parks, recreation, and open space initiatives in Northern Chester County are largely implemented by volunteer Parks and Recreation boards, there is a higher need for convenient access to technical resources, funding sources, case studies, service standards, best practices, and so on. Armed with useful information, volunteers can then work toward the advancement of parks and recreation goals. Mandatory Dedication of Parkland was just one example of the type of information that park and recreation board members were interested in. Several informative websites, plans, reports, and studies have been listed in *Appendix 13, Tools and Resources*, but these are just the tip of the iceberg. Additional research and information sharing would greatly benefit volunteers and ultimately the Region’s residents.

1. Evaluate the capacity of organizations in the Northern Chester County region to support an information clearinghouse.

2. Determine the parameters that the clearinghouse will encompass.
Strategies and Recommendations for Management and Financing

3. Undertake the function and scope of the clearinghouse that can be supported with either regional resources or through a partnership with another organization such as the Pottstown Health and Wellness Foundation. It is better to have a smaller clearinghouse with a targeted scope that works well rather than an extensive clearinghouse that is irrelevant due to insufficient capacity.

**Recommendation 10.5: Actively develop and manage partnerships.**

Recognize that partnerships are key components of creating a regional parks, recreation, and open space system and that these partnerships must be managed. The Northern Chester County Parks, Recreation and Open Space Commission cannot undertake everything they would like to do. By focusing a few key partnerships (see Strategy 12) while addressing others to a lesser extent, the commission should be able to get the maximum benefit from partnerships.

1. Develop a strategic plan for partnership development and management.
2. Identify three to five core partnerships that will involve 80 percent of the total time devoted to partnership development.
3. Identify all of the other partners that will get 20 percent of the focus of partnerships.
4. Create a “Friends of the Parks and Trails” organization with an objective of having a Friends organization for every park and trail in Northern Chester County. The Friends groups would serve as advocates, ambassadors, watchdogs, fundraisers, and overall supporters.

Consider making partnership development a primary responsibility of a future Recreation Coordinator.

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**Strategy 11: Increase operating and capital support for parks, recreation, trails, and open space.**

*Whether implemented individually, cooperatively, or through joint efforts, a finance strategy is needed to support capital (land and facility) and operational (program and publicity) recommendations. Consider that staff may be needed, if a more intensive level of service is to be attained. A capital and operating finance strategy should assemble a mix of sources—public, private, and individual—to support parks, recreation, trails and open space.*

**Recommendation 11.1 Adopt a financial support policy that sustains parks and recreation over time.**

The policy should address the following components:

- Government Role, explaining that local government can provide (and thus fund) some but not all parks and recreation opportunities independently. Services will require a mix of public and private resources, both human and financial.
Chapter 8

- Revenue Sources, stating that revenues to support parks and recreation need to come from both public and private revenue. This includes taxes, earned income, contractual receipts (leases, rentals) and financial assistance (grants, gifts, donations, bequests).
- Fees and Charges, indicating that parks, recreation facilities, and events that benefit the general public will continue to be free of charge; facilities that require a higher level of maintenance for specific uses such as sports and programs that benefit the participants individually would be supported through a mix of user fees and volunteer support.
- Capital Donations, outlining criteria and procedures to ensure that any significant donation can be supported over time, whether that is through municipal support, private support, or a mix of public and private support. Significant donations could include land, trails, recreation facilities such as ball fields, playgrounds, pavilions, park benches, etc.

Recommendation 11.2 Increase municipal investment in the daily operation of parks and recreation to enhance the quality of life.
Work toward aligning the municipal operating budgets for parks and recreation with the $28.78 per capita annual average of Pennsylvania municipalities. Expand budgets over time as additional facilities and services are provided.

Recommendation 11.3 Keep park maintenance expenditures a function of each individual municipality.
As small rural communities with limited staff, workload and cost tracking of park maintenance tasks are not always performed. Since three out of every four dollars of the lifetime cost of a park is in maintenance, tracking maintenance is important. The conundrum is that it is relatively easier to get funds to buy land and build facilities than it is to get funding for operations and management. Often new parks are added and recreation facilities built, but no additional staff or budgets are added to support their maintenance (see Recommendation 11.4). As a rule of thumb, the municipalities could work toward tracking maintenance costs and an average per acre maintenance cost for active areas of $1,500 - $3,000 per acre, and $250 to $500 per acre for passive parks. While continuing to maintain parks individually, the townships as a region can develop an approach to park maintenance by exploring this municipal function as a network in which staff share information, training, joint purchasing, and perhaps maintenance software that could be used by the Northern Chester County municipalities.

Recommendation 11.4 Consider a Maintenance Impact Statement to evaluate future operating costs when planning capital improvements.
To ensure that the municipalities or the Region can support a planned capital improvement, it is essential to consider maintenance, operations, and funding during the planning process.

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Strategies and Recommendations for Management and Financing

MAINTENANCE IMPACT STATEMENT

Purpose
1. To assess the capital and operating impact of a significant proposed project or a major program and its effects on other parks and recreation facilities and services.
2. To support an informed decision about feasibility and viability of the proposed project.

Method
1. Determine Capital cost of the proposed project.
2. Determine Operating costs of the proposed project. Include:
   - Number of staff hours required, and cost of staff hours
   - Volunteer support (any indirect costs)
   - Cost of materials and supplies
   - Miscellaneous costs
3. Determine impact on other facilities and programs with the implementation of the proposed project.
   - Will the project/service require funds needed for other facilities/programs?
   - Will the project/service require staff time needed for other services/programs?
   - How will the project impact the quality of service in Northern Chester County?
   - Will the project require resources from the community and are they available?
4. Determine revenue sources.
   - Municipal funds – within current budget
   - Municipal funds – additional appropriation
   - Non-tax funds to be generated from the project/program
   - Grants, Donations

Decision-Making
Based upon the above information, does the region (or a municipality) have the resources to develop and sustain this project?

Recommendation 11.5 Consider capital improvement programs for each municipality.
Every municipality should consider having a five- to seven-year capital improvement program for parks, recreation, and trails. The first year of the program would go into the current fiscal year’s budget. Having a five- to seven-year plan enables municipalities to undertake projects in an organized manner rather than as a reaction to a crisis, urgent need, or public pressure. Allocating a designated amount of funding annually and regularly facilitates planning. For example, East Vincent Township allocates about $50,000 annually for capital improvements. Other funding sources can include the Chester County Open Space Program, fees-in-lieu of dedication of parkland, bond issues, loans, grants, and partnerships.
Chapter 8

Recommendation 11.6 Consider pooling a dedicated amount of funding for regional parks and recreation efforts.
This would be considered as part of the per capita investment level. This funding could be used to support projects and programs that are beyond the capacity of volunteers to undertake. Part-time staff or contractors for a specific project could undertake specific tasks and actions to implement the recommendations of this plan.

A regional funding formula that strives to equalize the responsibilities and the benefits of parks and recreation is crucial. This is especially important in Northern Chester County where some municipalities provide multiple parks and recreation facilities and others provide few to date. Regional parks and recreation system contributions begin at a few dollars per capita. Determining this formula requires discussion and negotiation to reach a fee is fair and equitable.

One way to test this at limited cost to the municipalities is to secure a Circuit Rider Grant through the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to hire a parks and recreation professional to work on the implementation of this plan. See description under Recommendation 10.2.

Consider undertaking a major regional parks and recreation improvement program as a way to demonstrate that this plan is being implemented. The annual contribution per municipality would need to be determined. This could be for ball fields, a sports complex, trails, and other facilities. These projects and the joint investment would be particularly competitive for grant funding.

Strategy 12: Leverage the knowledge, skills, and resources of partner organizations that share the region’s core values.

While citizen volunteers are leading parks, recreation, and open space at the municipal level, other organizations are working toward similar goals. Local government, school districts, and private organizations can accomplish more together than they can independently.

Recommendation 12.1 Advance the Concept of School-Parks with the Owen J. Roberts School District.
The school-park partnership can grow from the sharing of information, programs, services, and maintenance to the development and operations of facilities that serve recreational and educational purposes through joint use agreements. The region’s participation in discussions of future school district improvements, i.e., its strategic plan, can provide maximum benefit to residents of all ages for both educational and recreational use. Therefore, families with or without children will benefit from educational experiences. Collaboration on school sites may make cost savings possible in the construction and operation of educational/recreational facilities. Municipalities and school districts may be able to pool resources to develop facilities neither could afford independently. See specific
Strategies and Recommendations for Management and Financing

guidance on advancing the school-park concept and description of joint use under Recommendation 2.1.

**Recommendation 12.2 Foster active, healthy lifestyles with the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation.**

Public recreation is public health. Recreation is an important tool in fixing the national health crisis stemming from obesity, which results from a lack of physical activity and poor nutrition. The U.S. Surgeon General has stated that communities can offer an important public health services by providing facilities such as trails and parks close to home, along with programs and activities for citizens to participate in physical activity for fun and fitness. The Pottstown Health and Wellness Foundation and Northern Chester County are ideal partners in pursuing their common interest in fostering active, healthy lifestyles in the Region.

1. Continue to explore the potential of a regional circuit rider for Northern Chester County and a mega-region circuit rider for active, healthy living.
2. Continue to work together in projects and programs to engage citizens in physical activity through recreation.
3. Continue to pursue funding from the Foundation to help support recreation and wellness in Northern Chester County. Focus on facility improvements using Foundation funding to match other grants.

**Recommendation 12.3 Consider strategic marketing and development of special destinations and experiences with conservation and tourism partners.**

As described under Recommendation 9.6, traditional tourism is not appropriate for this region. However, the Region could benefit economically from greater local and niche awareness and use of recreational, natural, and cultural places of interest and activities. Efforts are underway by conservation partners to promote recreation and tourism as appropriate economic development. The region will need to continue to participate in these discussions and developments to promote sensitive development, management, and use of the landscape.

1. Continue to work with the Schuylkill Highlands Conservation Landscapes Initiative on appropriate economic development.
   - Focus on heritage outdoor recreation tourism.
   - Identify projects that can be undertaken in a specific time frame along with the roles and responsibilities of each organization.
   - Apply for funding from the grant program offered by the Schuylkill Highlands. Consider funding for signage in the Region as a high priority.

2. Work with the Convention and Visitors Centers to increase appropriate tourism.
   - Work with the Brandywine Conference and Visitors Bureau on folding Northern Chester County into its promotional activities at a higher level.
• Work with the Valley Forge Convention and Visitors Bureau to direct visitors from Valley Forge National Historic Park to related sites and programs in Northern Chester County.

**Recommendation 12.4: Continue to work with sports leagues in the planning, development, operation, and maintenance of athletic fields.**

Additional ball fields and game courts are needed to provide sufficient facilities for youth sports and adult sports that are now not addressed at all. Community sports groups can be valuable allies in undertaking the goal of providing additional facilities as well as taking care of facilities that are already in place.

1. Consider establishing a Northern Chester County Regional Sports Association. This would be an umbrella group for community sports leagues. However, each league would continue to manage its own operation. The umbrella organization would focus on issues and opportunities that are regional in nature.

2. Hold an annual sports summit for the purpose of identifying and addressing issues and opportunities.

3. Involve the sports organizations in the planning of future athletic facilities.

4. Consider partnerships in sports fields in which there could be funding from both public and private sources.

5. Work with the leagues in figuring out ways of maintaining sports facilities in a fair, equitable, and high quality manner.

**Recommendation 12.5: Support and expand partnerships in conservation, trails, and open space preservation.**

Many major organizations have invested their time, money and expertise in Northern Chester County in order to preserve its historic resources, scenic beauty, and outdoor recreation opportunities. These partnerships will become more important than ever as fiscal challenges continue.

1. Continue to work with the Schuylkill River Greenway Association on river access, trail development, advertising, and programs.

2. Continue to partner with the Chester County Planning Commission and the Parks and Recreation department on open space, trails, and recreation.


The conservation and trail organizations are instrumental partners in preserving natural and scenic resources as well as in providing trails to create community connections. Consider creating a sub-committee(s) of the commission for conservation and trail groups. At least annually, interview these organizations to determine and help support their goals and projects.