



BOARD TALK

Massachusetts Recreation and Park Association

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Some of you might be asking why there is an article on economic development this month instead of something directly related to recreation and parks. It is because recreation and parks play a key role in the building of community and its economic development! American author Gertrude Stein called it “there” - and because her hometown of Oakland, California didn’t have “there” - she moved to Paris!

Think of some cities that you’ve visited in the past, and what they are like, today. Lowell, MA sits on the Merrimack River, at the juncture of Routes 495, 93 and 3, with commuter rail service to Boston. Once a thriving textile center, those businesses began relocating to the South leaving empty mill buildings along the river. Manchester, NH found itself in the same situation. Both communities decided to concentrate on what it had, highlighting the historic nature of the city, as well as the natural beauty.

The Lowell National Historical Park preserves and interprets the American Industrial Revolution, with historic cotton mills, 5.6 miles of canals with operating gatehouses, and examples of workers’ homes. Residences are now thriving in the downtown area, an annual folk festival brings people from all over, as does the Lowell Auditorium.

So, what does it take to do this in your community - you can’t do it alone, but you can be a promoter!

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In Your Community

It all begins with a vision, with the ultimate goal being one that builds identity and pride in your community. Here are some principles to create that atmosphere:

- Create a town “heart” - *promote a location that has controlled development as well as an inviting pedestrian environment*
- Develop open spaces for the community - *create a gathering place within the town “heart” and promote activities - simple activities work just as well as the more complex!*
- Connect the pieces - *find ways to encourage people to visit various locations in your community - help develop ways for pedestrians to move between these areas, as well as vehicles.*
- Promote walkability - *you probably already have a program for encouraging people to walk for their health, but it also benefits the health of your community.*
- Establish mixed uses - *having a place to live, work, shop and recreate within walking distance is important to achieve!*
- Reflect a unique character - *find something that is unique to your community ... Newton is the “Garden City” ... and let everyone know!*



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SUSTAINABILITY AND STEWARDSHIP

The constant pressures to provide more services vs. the pressures to reduce what it costs to have those services continues. Some of the organizations in our association are in the midst of a major struggle. Some municipal departments are facing budget cuts as their community struggles to deal with increased energy and education costs. Our commercial members get less opportunities because of the lack of funds to purchase services or new supplies.

You have been elected or appointed to be a responsible and careful steward. Difficult choices need to be made in how resources are allocated. Merriman-Webster defines stewardship as *the conducting, supervising, or managing of something; especially the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care.*

Sustainability is the meeting of needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Being able to balance natural, human, and financial resources while also improving livability is a board member and staff must achieve together.

So, what can a board member do to help relieve some of this financial pressure?

- Insure that the department manager has the opportunity to share struggles and successes with you;

- Insure that you have fully evaluated any proposals before accepting them - you'll be passing these on to the staff for implementation, so don't propose what is too difficult to achieve;
- Insure that any donations are affordable - it's wonderful to receive materials that had no up-front costs, but what are the long-term costs?
- Ask your department manager about efforts to reduce energy costs.

Massachusetts has a Commonwealth Capital Policy that encourages municipalities to work in partnership with the state to achieve "smart growth." Each municipality is encouraged to apply for a score by filling in a lengthy application. It's important that your organization participate in the completion of the application, as many of the questions relate to work done by recreation and parks departments...*approved Open Space and Recreation Plan, stewardship plan for municipal forest, actions to facilitate biking and walking.* If your organization decides to apply for a state grant, many of those opportunities count the municipalities score as 30% of the evaluation.

To learn more about the Commonwealth's sustainable principles, go to www.mass.gov/commcap. If you click onto the Capital Score application information, you can find the score for your community.

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PROMOTING HEALTHY LAND USE

Many of those working in the recreation and parks field often find themselves protecting open space against development. To some people, a parcel of land without a building is available for a school or other type of facility, or a parcel with trees and trails is requested to be transformed to parking or different type of athletic facility.

Members of recreation and park boards need to begin by educating themselves on the value of all different types of open space and recreation amenities. It is then important to cultivate support from other municipal boards, including the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Health, and the Planning and/or Zoning Board. It is within their jurisdictions that policies and regulations will be instituted to help your community achieve its goals for preservation.

Each community will set different goals for its needs. Do you hope to have a walkable community that decreases the reliance on the automobile, and encourages a healthier lifestyle? Do you hope to insure that there are tree-lined parcels in neighborhoods with heavy traffic, with the trees helping to decrease the amount of carbon dioxide in the air? Are you trying to promote safe use of your facilities, through the addition of lighting, the use of traffic calming measures, or regular maintenance of facilities? Policies and regulations can insure your goals are being met!

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The Commonwealth of Massachusetts can provide information to help you achieve your goals - and also has regulations and policies in place, as well as grant opportunities available.

- The MA Department of Public Health, the MA Executive Office of Transportation, the Regional Planning Agencies, and the MA Association of Health Boards received responses from 239 communities (out of 351) on a survey done in 2002. It highlights how communities are doing on health related issues, and provides recommendations for improving facilities and zoning recommendations related to open space.
- The Open Space and Recreation Plan can be a vital resource for protecting land. Be involved in its creation, and promote the issues important to recreation and parks.
- Review the various grant opportunities provided through the state. This link will bring you to a newsletter from the MA Riverways Programs that highlights funding possibilities.

<http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/river/newsletters/newsnotes27.htm>
- Know the designation of the land, as in many cases the state will not permit changing an open space parcel or park to a different use, without an exchange of an equivalent parcel of land!

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GOOD TO GREAT

In 2001, after five years of research, Jim Collins wrote the book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. He is able to provide examples of how individuals and companies can build on strengths to create a highly successful business. (www.jimcollins.com)

But, it soon became clear that many readers were not from traditional business models, and though they could learn from his concepts, there were some concepts that needed further research. In 2005, a monograph to accompany his original book was published, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*. The first lines of the monograph states, "We must reject the idea - well-intentioned, but dead wrong - that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become 'more like a business.' Most businesses - like most of anything else in life - fall somewhere between mediocre and good. Few are great." The concepts of greatness are similar, but in the social sector the definitions cannot be from a business model. Very simply, financial success is a way to measure performance, but that standard cannot be used for most of your boards working in recreation and parks within the municipal or non-profit arenas. It is more appropriate to measure performance based on the stated mission of your organization.

Measure Output - Not Input!

If your organization is responsible for maintenance of parks, what is more important for success - mowing an athletic field every other Tuesday (input) or mowing an athletic field based on conditions (output)? What is important is the condition of the field for safety - the mission of this task. Mowing every other week during a slow-growth month is likely not appropriate, and staff services might be better suited if directed to a different task. Mr. Collins states, "In business, money is both an input (a resource for achieving greatness) and an output (a measure of greatness). In the social sectors, money is only and input, and not a measure of greatness."

Leadership

In a business model, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) has clearly defined executive power. In the social sector, there is far more ambiguity. In the municipal sector, your organization most likely has many tiers of leadership: your board, the Mayor/City Council or Selectmen/Town Meeting model with a Town Manager or Town Administrator. In a non-profit, there is likely a local board, perhaps regional council, and a national board.

Next Month: Building a Great Organization in the Social Sector!

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GOOD TO GREAT—Part Two

Last month, this column featured the book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't* written by Jim Collins. He is able to provide examples of how individuals and companies can build on strengths to create a highly successful business—and has written a companion piece for those working in a government or non-profit structure. (www.jimcollins.com)

“We must reject the idea - well-intentioned, but dead wrong - that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become ‘more like a business.’ Most businesses - like most of anything else in life - fall somewhere between mediocre and good. Few are great.”

Collins describes a “Hedgehog Concept” that helps lead towards the best long-term results. In the business sector, there are 3 intersecting areas: (1) what you are deeply passionate about, (2) what you can be the best in the world at, and (3) what best drives your economic engine.

The major difference in the social sector Hedgehog is the third intersecting circle—the economic engine. In the social sector, the third circle is the resource engine. Money is one component of the resource engine, and for many of us, it involves tax-support, fee-support, grants, and donations. But, those are not the

only resources that lead us towards success. *Time* is the second component and refers to attracting people to your organization willing to contribute their efforts for free, or at rates below what their talents would yield in business. The third component is *Brand*, referring to how well your organization can cultivate a deep well of emotional goodwill and mindshare of potential supporters. These concepts work whether you are a governmental organization, an organization dependent on charitable support, a hybrid organization dependent on revenues and charitable support, or a non-profit that relies on a revenue stream from the services provided—Red Cross aquatics programs is an example.

To be successful, you need to continually develop through:

- Attracting believers - *time and money*
- Build strength - *bring the right people on to work with you*
- Demonstrate results - *compare your mission and show how you've met the goals*
- Build brand - *maintain a solid reputation and show your passion*

Have a GREAT summer - doing what you do best!

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COMMUNITY PRESERVATION ACT - Updates

If you are a Community Preservation Act community, or are considering a vote to become one, it's important to keep up with all the recent information on what is very confusing legislation. There are currently 130 CPA communities with votes pending in more this Fall.

Community Preservation Coalition

One of the most valuable resources available to communities and individuals is the non-profit Community Preservation Coalition. Executive Director Stuart Saginor and Assistant Director Kathy Roth are able to provide helpful information on all aspects of CPA, from the initial research stage, through implementation, and guidance on specific projects. Along with their board, they are instrumental in lobbying at the state level for improvements to the legislation, reducing some of the complexity. Both Stuart and Kathy will answer questions by phone or e-mail, and when possible will come out and speak to small groups, and send out periodic newsletters. Check out their helpful website at www.communitypreservation.org

Procurement

A commonly asked question on CPA projects: *Do you need to follow state procurement laws and prevailing wage law?* The answer is most often YES, but will vary depending on the type of project, the recipient of the funds and the law that the project falls under. It is best to check with your local finance and legal officials before spending funds.

Project Assistance

There are individuals and organizations that the Coalition can direct you to if you need guidance on specific projects.

One new support system has recently been put in place. *Preservation Massachusetts* and *National Trust for Historic Preservation* have collaborated on a Massachusetts Circuit Rider Program. The circuit riders are historic preservation experts equipped with knowledge of the programs, services, and resources of both Preservation Massachusetts and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in addition to other public and private programs and resources.

Legislation Updates

The Joint Committee on Community Development and Small Business recently advanced SB 137, a bill which would ensure that the state CPA trust fund match remains strong, create additional flexibility for communities to adopt the Act, and clarify and expand the allowable uses of CPA funds for recreation projects.

The legislation was filed in the current legislative session by Senator Cynthia Stone Creem. After amendment and recommendation of the Joint Committee in May, the bill has now been placed before the House Committee on Ways and Means as HB 4820.

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THE VALUE OF PARKS

The value of parks has become a much more common topic in recent years. Many of us have lived through the era of our work being termed “non-essential” particularly in terms of public funding. But, the dialogue has been shifting, and the need for safe and beautiful recreation sites within each community is growing - along with the requests to do more! *It Starts in Parks!!!*

Certainly, one goal to achieve is to provide quality improvements to your outdoor spaces. Inexpensive “fixes” don’t last and end up costing more money in the long-run. Sometimes in the decision between quality vs. quantity, the chosen route will need to be quality - doing less than you want, but doing it right!

Use documentation and performance measurements to help show a financial need - but also show how funds will be saved in the long-term. If you have many complaints about not keeping up with mowing tasks, take the time to record daily mowing tasks, how long each mowing project took to complete, what type of mower and other equipment was needed, supplies needed, and transportation time and costs. Also note any incidents that caused delays, including weather, special events, or activities that coincide with work hours. A new specialized mower may be more cost effective in the long-run than using inappropriate equipment or equipment that is constantly under repair. In Needham, through performance measurement projects, we are in the process of purchasing a new trash vehicle that will be used daily with two staff stopping at more than 150 receptacles and starting a new school recycling program.

Though this is a large investment, it is taking the place of three pick-up trucks and 5-6 staff handling the work through separate divisions. The backlog of projects can now be “attacked” with the extra hands available - and they will be kept busy to avoid any discussion of “do you need those additional staff members?” The increased recycling effort will save funds spent on trash disposal. Once the data was collected during the study phase, it actually was not difficult to convince the financial experts that it was worth it to spend money to save money!

Support can be gained if you have each project achieve multiple goals. A project that enhances beauty while at the same time reduces maintenance costs is welcomed by park lovers and fiscal conservatives! It isn’t difficult, today, to get support for “green” initiatives!

- Can you replace park benches with recyclable units that require less frequent maintenance tasks?
- Can you use a porous surfacing on unpaved trails or parking areas that will allow for proper water drainage but provide for more long-term use?
- Can you replace some lawn areas where they aren’t needed with some low-water plantings that don’t require mowing or constant irrigation?
- Can you create volunteer resources to assist with beautification projects that enhance the look of the park, and therefore the public perception for a welcoming place?

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TIME FOR REFLECTION

How often do you hear yourself say, “Our board doesn’t seem to have a proactive direction for our work—we just seem to react to issues as they come forward?” Many of you are probably nodding in agreement, but should understand that you are in the same situation as most boards. When you volunteer your time, it is difficult to carve out additional hours for reflection. But, there are times when it is appropriate to set aside this time, and enable your board to move in a more proactive direction. It can be difficult to self-assess, and during the process there will be tension and disagreement. Some members may choose to leave the board, but most will be re-energized and feel more comfortable serving as proactive board members.

Step One:

If you believe the time is right for your board to assess its performance do you have the support of other board members? Do you have staff who can assist with some background information? Do you want to work on an informal assessment within your group or look for something more formal with an outside consultant? Can your board agree to re-assess at regular intervals—yearly or every 2-3 years?

Step Two:

How does our board work together? Do we discuss various aspects of issues and work together to find solutions—sometimes making a difficult decision to say “no” and other times finding compromises that reflect the concerns of many? Do we tend to argue over issues and find it difficult to come to unanimous agreement? Do we all tend to

address an issue in a similar way and ignore other view points, possibly appearing to favor one constituency group over another? A group that continually argues or one that agrees without much discussion might want to consider having someone from outside the board/staff as a facilitator to their discussions—someone who can help each member see the detriments to their current processes.

Step Three:

Develop a set of questions that are appropriate to the work you are trying to accomplish.

1. Do I understand my role as a board member vs. the role of a staff member?
2. Do all the members of the board agree to what our roles are supposed to be, or do we work under different assumptions?
3. Do I prepare for meetings and issues, and provide support outside of meetings on issues? Do I have any issues with attendance?
4. Do I focus on strategic issues and policy, and leave tactical or day-to-day issues to the staff?
5. Do I share my own personal views with my constituency or with the media, or do I share the agreed upon view of the board?
6. Do we have shared goals for the upcoming year? How do we work to achieve our goals?

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NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

The start of a new calendar year is a good time to reflect on the organization of your board, and insure that the board is operating as effectively as possible. Here are some reminders, excerpted from previous issues of *MRPA's Board Talk*:

Organization

- Have you clearly defined the roles of board members vs. staff members?
- Does your organization have an updated set of by-laws, to help deal with conflict when it arises?
- Does each board member prepare him/herself for the regularly scheduled meetings? Is each member provided sufficient background information for meeting discussions?
- Are discussions/deliberations held at meetings, only? It's a good time to remind members that the *Massachusetts Open Meeting Law* requires deliberations to be held in a public setting, and not in private conversations or on e-mail.
- Are agendas prepared prior to each meeting, and are they followed at the meetings? Are agendas available to other interested people prior to the meeting? Try posting agendas in a public location or on your web site.

- Does the chairperson of the committee keep order to the meetings, using an agreed upon format, such as *Roberts Rules of Order*?
- Do members understand the *Conflict of Interest* law, and how to avoid problems, including the *perception* of conflict of interest?
- Are official records kept of the minutes, and made available to the public, along with other documents?

State Laws

In Massachusetts, it's important that members of all public boards be familiar with the following from Massachusetts General Law, along with other chapters related to the specific work of the organization:

Chapter 268A: *Conflict of Interest Law*

Chapter 39: 23 A-C: *Open Meeting Law*

Chapter 30B: *Uniform Procurement Law*

Go to www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/

If you would like more information on any of the issues discussed in this article, contact the MRPA Executive Director John Whalen, or the editor of this column Patricia Carey, for back copies of MRPA Board Talk.

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