Parks and Recreation Centers Bring Communities Together

City parks and recreation centers offer countless benefits to residents fortunate enough to have them in their neighborhoods. They serve as an affordable place for people to exercise, enjoy nature, and spend time with their family and friends.

Elizabeth Dugan, a Public Administration instructor at South University Online, says that parks and recreation centers unite communities.

“They allow residents a common setting to congregate for recreation and exercise,” Dugan says. “My family used to use the playground equipment but now that my children are older, we fly kites, play tennis, and have picnics in our local parks.”

Dugan says that people living in towns with parks and recreation centers feel a stronger sense of community than those living in areas without these facilities.

“The areas are open to all who live in the area and children can play, parents can talk, and families can be active together,” Dugan says. “People can encounter others with common interests. Additionally, information can be discussed and distributed about common concerns.”

Cindy Curtis, Virginia Beach deputy city manager, who formerly served as the city’s director of Parks & Recreation, says that parks and recreation centers are important to communities because they provide residents with a better quality of life, increase property values, attract tourists, improve air and water, and bring the community together.

“They are the core part of the fabric of the community,” Curtis says.

Christine Thrower, director of the City of West Palm Beach Parks & Recreation Department, believes that having a parks and recreation department makes a city more attractive to potential residents.

“It is our job to constantly remind everyone, especially our legislators, that so much of who we are starts in parks.

“All research indicates that people don’t move to a community because of the water quality or how often trash is picked up,” Thrower says. “While safety is important, it is usually not the main reason someone moves to a city.”

Something For Everyone at Parks and Recreation Centers

Curtis and Thrower agree that their parks and recreation centers have something to offer all members of the community.

“We offer something for everyone, programs for all age groups and interests,” Curtis says.

This includes both group classes and opportunities for individuals to enjoy the resources provided by the community, Curtis says. Some of these programs include classes for infants to participate in with their mothers, sports leagues for all age groups, and a variety of activities for senior citizens.

Curtis says that Virginia Beach parks and recreation centers also provide a number of self-directed activities such as working out, climbing a rock wall, and playing basketball. The city also offers golf courses, parks for bike riding and fishing, and even a park with a beach.

Thrower says her department works hard to ensure that residents are aware of all that the West Palm Beach parks and recreation centers have to offer.

“We produce a brochure of classes and activities in our parks and community centers and communicate this with our families through email, Facebook, Twitter, newspaper stories, and public access television,” Thrower says.
Running a Parks and Recreation Department

As the director of the City of West Palm Beach Parks & Recreation Department, Thrower is tasked with countless responsibilities.

She oversees six community centers, one swimming pool, 54 parks, the maintenance of all city-wide grounds, and more than 400 community events each year.

Before she arrives at work each day, she is already busy checking emails and coordinating with her maintenance team about any outstanding issues from the previous day.

Thrower keeps track of everything going on at the different West Palm Beach’s parks and recreation centers by having weekly meetings with her senior staff and through frequent email contact.

“We track progress on projects, events and activities, plan for the upcoming season’s activities — be they after school programs or summer camp,” Thrower says. “I surround myself with people smarter than I am in their given fields so the rest is easy.”

Curtis agrees that when she served as director, meeting regularly with her staff members was necessary in order to stay updated with the issues happening in all areas of the parks and recreation department.

Curtis says she made sure to visit Virginia Beach parks on the weekends, and the recreation centers on weekdays, to make sure things were running smoothly. On her visits to the recreation centers, she would talk with staff about any issues getting in their way, and residents about their level of satisfaction with program offerings and pricing.

Curtis also asked for feedback from community members through surveys to gauge their level of satisfaction with the programs offered at the Virginia Beach parks and recreation centers.

Recent Economic Times Challenge Parks Departments

Curtis says that recent economic times have made it more challenging for parks and recreation departments to receive proper funding.

“Across the country, parks and recreation departments are facing challenges due to improper funding,” Curtis says.

Thrower says that since parks and recreation departments are a quality-of-life issue, not a public safety one, they are constantly on the chopping block for funds.

“It is our job to constantly remind everyone, especially our legislators, that so much of who we are starts in parks,” Thrower says. “Our first introduction to nature, economic development, social interaction, environmental preservation, culture, history — everything about who we are as a country was rooted early in the national parks program really kick started by FDR because he understood the importance of preserving our environment for recreation.”

Thrower says that parks and recreation departments are a necessity that shouldn’t be taken lightly.

“Today we are everything from drowning prevention to after-school care for children, to the only social interaction a senior citizen might experience,” Thrower says.