

Community Park Investments Make a Difference: The Case of Allentown's Cedar Creek Parkway

Study Background:

Park and recreation services can enhance property values, attract business investments, protect fragile ecosystems and watersheds, increase physical activity and health, reduce youth crime, and enhance community cohesion (Crompton, 1999). Local and state investments in park renovation and rehabilitation projects play a critical role in insuring that parks meet these important community needs. However, park managers, policy makers, and elected officials need sound evidence to understand whether the money spent on park renovations are worth the investment. That is, are such projects valued by constituents and do they enhance park visitor experiences while delivering benefits for the community-at-large? Unfortunately, few scientific studies have documented the impact of park capital renovations on these types of outcomes (Active Living Research, 2010).

The Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society, working in cooperation with the City of Allentown Parks and Recreation Department, recently completed a study that examined the impact of a major park renovation at Cedar Creek Parkway. Renovations at Cedar Creek were funded through local dollars (\$2.3 million) and Key 93 grant money (\$375,000). The study examined whether these park renovations resulted in enhanced park visitor behaviors, quality perceptions, satisfaction, and perceived benefits.

Key Findings:

- A large majority of Cedar Creek visitors (84%) were aware that the park was renovated and could identify numerous improvements to the trails, the environment, park support features, as well as the new playground.
- When Cedar Creek visitors were asked how the renovations influenced their park use, a majority agreed that they visited more frequently, stayed longer, and did a wider variety of activities due to these changes.
- A majority of Cedar Creek visitors (71%) felt that they enjoy their park visits more now due to the renovations.
- The number of Cedar Creek visitors who reported walking, bicycling, exercise, and playground use increased after the renovations.
- Physical activity levels also increased significantly. For example, participation in moderate physical activity at Cedar Creek increased from 58% in 2008 (pre-renovation period) to 68% in 2011 (post-renovation period).
- Children who visited Cedar Creek were much more likely than children at the control park (Trexler Park) to be physically active at moderate or vigorous levels during their park visit.
- Reducing anxiety/stress, preserving open space, improving physical activity, and connecting citizens to the outdoors were perceived as the primary benefits provided by the parks. Furthermore, Cedar Creek visitors were more likely to perceive that the park provided children with a safe place to play and reduced youth crime after the renovations.
- Overall satisfaction increased significantly after the renovations. The perceived quality of specific Cedar Creek features also increased significantly and is now on par with or exceeds quality ratings at Trexler Park. Cedar Creek features such as the condition of trails/paths, the cleanliness of restrooms, the availability of picnic areas and drinking water, the quality of the creek and lake, and overall park cleanliness/maintenance increased significantly after the park renovation, while few quality items increased significantly at Trexler Park.

Visitor Comments and Focus Group Discussions – In Their Own Words:

When asked to describe the impact of Cedar Creek renovations, visitors reported a wide range of behavioral changes such as: more activity variety, increased ease of use, more winter use, increased health, and improved access for visitors with disabilities.

For example one visitor said that “the park renovation increased the number of people, so I feel safer... especially as a lone runner.” Others talked about park improvements that enhanced park use for persons with disabilities. For example, one person said that she could “bring mother in wheelchair, she gets out more and does the LifeTrail®, and meets people.” Another visitor referenced the playground and said, “It is a great thing, a place for children to play... children with disabilities and without can interact.”

Cedar Creek visitors also cited a number of experiential changes due to the renovations such as: increased beauty/aesthetics, cleanliness, enjoyment, safety and sense of community pride. Visitors also felt that the renovations increased a sense of community togetherness and cohesion among visitors of different backgrounds.

For example, one visitor felt that “the playground probably has the biggest impact in bringing the community together,” while another said that the new playground “increased safety and togetherness, watching the kids get along with each other and having someone to contact when there’s a problem.” Visitors also felt that park renovations “created a sense of pride in the Allentown community,” and created “a positive image for Allentown.”

Focus group discussion with key park users (e.g., parents, older adults, emerging adults) also uncovered a number of positive renovation outcomes; both for park users and the greater Allentown community. For example...

“I think the park has really become a unifying force in the community. I see lots of people talk to each other in the parks that, if they were passing each other on the street, they wouldn’t... but in a park setting, it’s somehow, we’re all one and it’s really nice to see because Allentown needs unifying forces... and it’s really nice that we can mix in a peaceful, friendly, and safe environment and get to know each other a little better.”

“From my perspective (my daughter is young)... but as she’s getting a little older, she needs to see other children and needs some socialization. Maybe we would have gone to the park before, but there wouldn’t have been a place where all those kids were congregating, where she could just be around other kids. It’s such a great playground and it’s so heavily used pretty much all the time. There’s always some kids there, even on light days when we’ve been there, which is not necessarily the case of all playgrounds.”

“But now since the playground is there, more people from the city are coming in... So you see different cultures in the playground playing side by side, having fun, and enjoying the playground that you didn’t see before.”

“It is bringing a sense of community to Allentown where before, many of us would be in our homes, in our backyards, or being separate from each other. Now we’re all going out to this park, and we’re holding conversations with our neighbors while our children are playing with each other; that’s getting us as adults to be playing with other adults even more, which I think is a very good thing.”

Conclusion:

This study represents a first step in providing the evidence pertaining to park infrastructure improvements. Findings suggest that park renovations can have a positive influence on visitors and the greater community. This type of evidence can be used to defend the merits of park projects within the Commonwealth and the funding that supports those projects. Further studies could examine the impact of park programming and policies on local communities. Furthermore, efforts to improve park and recreation services should consider incorporating a formal evaluation mechanism to assess their potential and limitations.