

CHAPTER ONE - STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Individuals comprised of key leaders and representatives from community not-for-profit organizations, local government, athletic organizations, local businesses, organized and self-directed recreation users, frequent program participants, and Department employees participated in twenty-five (25) stakeholder interviews conducted during the week of January 29, 2008 through February 2, 2008.

In each of the key leadership interviews, participants were asked to provide feedback on the same topics related to Parks and Recreation perceptions, key issues that need to be addressed, facility and program needs, community values, funding opportunities, and their vision and priorities for parks and recreation in Maricopa County.

The summary of findings was developed from responses to the following 16 questions and subsequent discussions. These questions were also utilized for the focus group interviews.

1. Have you used any of the Maricopa County parks and recreation facilities, parks and programs? If so what parks, recreation facilities or programs have you used?
2. What are your general perceptions of the County parks and recreation system?
3. Have you used other recreation agencies including public, private or not-for-profit in the County? How do they compare with the County's facilities and or programs?
4. What are the strengths of the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department that we need to build on for this plan?
5. What are the weaknesses of the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department that we need to address through this plan?
6. What are the key issues facing Maricopa County as a whole?
7. How would you describe the values of the residents in Maricopa County as it applies to parks and recreation?
8. How balanced do you think the parks and recreation system is in terms of park types, facilities and programs?
9. What are the mandates for Maricopa County related to Parks and Recreation?
10. What are the recreation program needs do you hear about that are needed in the County?
11. What are the parks and recreation facility needs for the County as it applies to both indoor and outdoor facilities?
12. Are there any operational or maintenance issues that need to be addressed in the plan?
13. What percentage of the total operational costs should users fees be for individual and or team participation in programs or use of facilities?

14. Are there opportunities for partnering or other funding sources in Maricopa County for the development or delivery of recreation facilities or programs?
15. What role do you see parks and recreation playing in the long term sustainability for Maricopa County?
16. If you could change one thing in parks and recreation in Maricopa County in the next 10 years what would it be?

1.1.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following summarizes the responses of stakeholder opinions as captured in these one-on-one interview sessions.

1.1.1.1 STRENGTHS

The overall theme regarding the Maricopa County park system is that it is a solid system and manages its resources well. Individuals within the key leadership arena indicated that some of the system's strengths center on the location of parks throughout the County, the upkeep and maintenance of the park system, and the assortment of programs that are offered. It was noted that a strong, established management team is in place and that the staff are helpful and do a good job despite their small number. Many feel the trail system is good and the ranger-guided hikes and website add to the strength of the Department. In addition, many found the diversity and magnitude of the park system and the uniqueness of parks for an urbanized area to be strengths. Additional comments included:

- The park system is a jewel for the region
- Great interpretive programs
- Clean bathrooms

1.1.1.2 WEAKNESSES

Areas in need of improvement in the park system included: funding, staffing, and bureaucracy. Interviewees indicated that both operating and capital budgets are underfunded and maintenance and operations are affected by the lack of financial resources. Examples of needed maintenance tasks include making sure maps are available at the parks and improving signage throughout the system. It was also noted that there is a lack of preventative and lifecycle maintenance programs. References to staffing issues included low morale, high turnover, and the lack of adequate staffing levels. Some indicated that the Department is in a reactive mode and that it takes too long to get projects completed because of the bureaucracy. Some feel the internal processes are outdated and there is a general lack of sophistication in the use of technology. For example, there is no point of sale system for fees and permits. Additional areas needing improvement include:

- Minimalist approach taken by the agency
- Lack of awareness by the community about the system
- Frustration at some parks about insufficient access
- Some parks are overused
- One interview mentioned the need for better security

1.1.1.3 OPPORTUNITIES

A number of different comments relating to Departmental opportunities surfaced, supporting the opinion that the Department is running in a status quo mode. Three recurring opportunities were identified: the use of alternative revenues (e.g., sponsors, naming rights, and Friends Groups), marketing, and partnering with other organizations (particularly city governments). A regional bond program (with other entities) and a Departmental bond program should be considered for future land acquisition. Key leadership interviewees recommended making the development of intergovernmental agreements easier and formalizing an overall program for partnership processes.

Numerous marketing opportunities were identified during the interviews, including the need for the Department to build its brand and image. It was suggested that the Department partner with cities in advertising its programs and work with the tourism industry and Visitor's Bureau to generate awareness and additional business. Partnering with city governments in the area of trail development and trail connections was also suggested.

Other opportunities identified include the development of ecotourism programs, establishment of new regional parks to keep up with the growing population, providing bike rentals, improving the web site with better park maps, developing a point of sale for all parks, and updating the fee structure.

1.1.1.4 KEY ISSUES

A number of key issues emerged that were previously mentioned during other sections of the interview. These include funding limitations and the inability to reinvest in infrastructure, a lack of capital funds, encroachment issues, and a limited awareness by the public of what the park system has to offer. Additional issues indicated were a lack of park access, issues of entitlement, and the continued growth in the population and the department's ability to accommodate more users.

1.1.1.5 PROGRAMS

Many interview participants felt that the programming within the county is good, however, a number of programs were suggested for the county to pursue or expand upon: interpretive and environmental programs, equestrian programs, family-oriented programs, and adventure programs such as rock climbing and back country camping. Additional comments include:

- More education programs related to environmental stewardship and conservation
- Shooting programs
- Summer camps
- Special events and programs build advocacy
- Trails 101
- Make sure programs aren't duplicating what cities are offering

1.1.1.6 FACILITIES

Interviews with key leadership resulted in a number of comments related to parks and recreation facilities in Maricopa County. Smaller scale facility projects such as better

signage, more trails and a trail program to designate level of difficulty, more interactive facilities/programs for children, and expanding concessionaire opportunities were mentioned. Larger scale projects such as the establishment of visitor centers at all parks, adding laundry facilities, more restrooms and showers, and vending at all campgrounds. Expanding facilities to include paint ball, more equestrian facilities, competition sized shooting range, large room for presentations and meetings, and an outdoor stage were also mentioned.

- Trailhead at State Land Trust at White Tank
- County needs to be a part of the City planning process

1.1.1.7 FEES

Few comments were made regarding fees associated with the Department. It was noted that additional strategies that rely less on the General Fund should be explored. Earlier comments indicated updating the fee structure is one opportunity the department should examine.

1.1.1.8 VALUES

Key leadership in the county value the preservation of open space, the natural beauty of the parks, the ability to get away from the noise of the city, and the family time spent together at county parks.

- Open place to go for all...cheap, accessible, and easy to get to
- Outdoor recreation is highly desired
- Health conscious residents

CHAPTER ONE - FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Focus group interviews sought to capture public opinion regarding parks and open space, recreation activities, environmental stewardship, and partnerships as it pertains to Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department. Twenty (20) focus groups were conducted during the week of January 29, 2008 through February 2, 2008 and involved a wide range of user groups representing a balanced array of interests. The summary of findings was developed from responses to the 16 questions listed in the Stakeholders and Key Leadership interviews and subsequent discussions.

1.1.1 GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE COUNTY PARK AND RECREATION SYSTEM

Focus group attendees indicated an overall positive perception about the Maricopa County Park and Recreation System. It was noted that the system's unique programming, cooperativeness, maintenance, variety, beauty, and quality staff all contribute to a positive view. Many feel that the system does a good job for park visitors and the staff, though limited in resources, does a good job of managing those resources. A number of constructive opinions were voiced during the interviews as well. Some feel that the Park and Recreation Commission does not have a lot of interest in what goes on at the parks, the system is hindered by poor morale, and the system is struggling significantly. Additional observations mentioned include parking issues, the perception that there is "nothing to do at the parks except hiking", and parks are not permanently protected as land is being traded for other uses.

1.1.2 USE OF COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES, PARKS, AND PROGRAMS

Focus group attendees indicated using a majority of the parks available to them, including White Tank, Utery Mountain, McDowell Mountain Park, Lake Pleasant, Estrella Mountain Park, Buckeye Hills, Spur Cross, and Cave Creek. Specific facilities identified include the visitor center and scout area/group party area of McDowell Mountain Park. Participants indicated trail use, hiking, interpretive programs, horseback riding, fishing, and mountain biking as parks and recreation programs and services utilized.

1.1.3 USE OF OTHER RECREATION SERVICE PROVIDERS

A small number of additional public, private, and not-for-profit recreation agencies, such as surrounding cities and National Park and Forest Service agencies, were identified as facilities visited in addition to those run by Maricopa County. When asked to compare the County's facilities and programs to those of other recreation agencies, some participants felt that the county system is equal to and compares favorably in size and expansiveness with other systems. It was noted that the county parks are cleaner than other parks and have less expensive entrance fees. Others feel the county system is lagging in comparison to other systems in the areas of park maintenance, staffing, funding, and availability of newer facilities and campgrounds.

1.1.4 STRENGTHS OF THE COUNTY'S PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

Many strengths of the department were identified as possible items to be built upon in the master plan including the department's working relationship with federal agencies, quality staff, unique and diverse products, quality resources, a strong group of park rangers and hosts, and the department's trail system.

1.1.5 WEAKNESSES OF THE COUNTY'S PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

While many strengths of the department were identified in the previous question, a number of weaknesses were also highlighted by the focus groups as concerns that should be addressed in the plan. Regarding staffing and funding, there is concern that there is not enough of either which limits the services offered to visitors. Many feel salary levels are low, contributing to high turnover, and that budgeting for the department is not at an adequate level. Other areas needing improvement include the lack of a preventative maintenance plan, antiquated systems, a lack of volunteers and helpful signage, and the department's ability to accommodate a large number of users. Areas needing improvement of specific parks were also mentioned such as Lake Pleasant Park's pricing structure for water craft access, White Tank Park's trail system, and security at Buckeye Hills Park.

1.1.6 KEY ISSUES FACING MARICOPA COUNTY

One of the key issues Maricopa County is facing that surfaced most frequently is the growth of the county and how this growth is affecting transportation, air quality, demand, and encroachment issues as commercial and residential development around parks increases. Also related to the population growth of the county is the county's ability to educate the public about the parks and recreation system, maintaining open space, and minimizing the effects of aging on park infrastructure. Other key issues identified by the focus group participants include reductions in budgets, keeping utility corridors off of park land, and coordinating with the County Flood Control District.

1.1.7 MARICOPA COUNTY RESIDENT VALUES TOWARD PARKS AND RECREATION

Maricopa County residents value the county parks and the opportunities they provide as a place for families to come together in a safe environment. Residents are appreciative of the contrasting park types and facilities and their offerings. Also highly valued is personal health, active lifestyles, the beauty of the open and natural spaces available, and the preservation of the land.

1.1.8 BALANCE OF THE PARKS AND RECREATION SYSTEM

Overall, focus group participants feel that the park and recreation system in Maricopa County is well balanced and is able to maintain a variety of programs and services to meet the demands of the county residents. A few comments regarding an imbalance in the system reflected a desire to build more active parks and increase the number of group campgrounds.

1.1.9 RECREATION PROGRAM NEEDS

Focus group respondents indicated that additional or more programming in the areas of rock climbing, rappelling, education and nature safety, wildlife, interpretive, equestrian, and conservation is needed. The community needs also focused on the delivery of more special events such as biathlons, corporate team building opportunities, and biking competitions. It was also noted that the county should take the lead in becoming an outdoor recreation leader and, in general, should offer more family-related programs and activities.

1.1.10 PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITY NEEDS

Participants of the focus groups indicated that additional indoor recreation facility needs include larger rooms for indoor presentations and places for people to go during the hot months of the summer time. An example provided includes enhancing the experience at visitor centers by replacing mobile homes with permanent visitor center buildings, creating more interactive displays for children, and more classroom space for educational and interpretive programming.

Many more outdoor recreation facility needs were highlighted at the focus group meetings than indoor needs. Examples of outdoor facility needs include the creation of a paint ball facility, amphitheater/ outdoor stage area, solar restrooms and composting toilets, laundry, shower and vending facilities at campgrounds, and more small group and youth group camping areas.

1.1.11 OPERATIONAL AND MAINTENANCE ISSUES

It was indicated that a number of parks have some maintenance issues related to a lack of trash receptacles, safe creek crossings, upkeep of website and informational brochures, and trail maintenance. It was noted that, overall, the county is not able to provide preventative maintenance at the correct level. Operationally, participants indicated that staffing levels (including hiring an event planner and additional public relations staff), cost recovery principles, and funding issues should be addressed in the plan. Enforcing a standardized purchasing and point of sale system and a consistent pricing policy were also highlighted.

1.1.12 PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL OPERATIONAL COSTS COVERED BY USERS

The focus group conversations resulted in a mixed review regarding user fees and covering the costs of program and facility use. Some indicated a belief that user fees should cover 100% of program and facility use costs while others disagreed. And while some participants feel a \$5.00 entry fee is high, others feel it is reasonable. No comments were made regarding an increase in current fees and the possibility that the public would find an increase reasonable.

1.1.13 OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERING

Focus group participants offered up a long list of potential partners for the county to work with in the delivery and development of facilities and programs. Examples include partnering with other related education-based organizations that need resources, other local agencies, Student Conservation Association, Arizona State University, and the US Game and Fish Department. Other funding source possibilities offered up during the focus group interviews for the delivery and/or development of facilities and services include the use of

sponsorships, tourism dollars, creating a preservation tax, impact fees, Indian gaming grants, and revenues generated through the sale of county license plates.

1.1.14 ROLE OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF THE COUNTY

Focus group participants indicated that they feel the role of the Parks and Recreation Department is to add value to the community through the preservation and protection of natural resources and provide open space for individuals to escape to when needed. It was also indicated that the county should play a role in getting things started in outlying areas for the creation of programs and facilities.

1.1.15 CHANGE ONE THING OVER THE NEXT 10 YEARS

Participants indicated if they could change one thing in parks and recreation in Maricopa County in the next 10 years they would like to see the system adequately staffed at all levels, become high-tech and more advanced, acquire more land, and build visitor centers at all parks. Improving access to all parks, improvements in marketing, and reducing bureaucratic red tape also made the list. Additional items such as the creation of a county preservation tax and the establishment of a career track for employees with improved responsibilities and accountability were also mentioned as items that would like to be changed in the next 10 years.

1.1.16 MANDATES OF THE COUNTY

The mandates indicated for Maricopa County related to parks and recreation include the need to provide and preserve open space, provide unique facilities and services and programs to residents and visitors, and maintain a balanced use of active and passive space at parks. Focus group participants feel the county should also fund the park system properly and increase user group involvement.

CHAPTER ONE - PUBLIC INPUT SUMMARY

The PROS Team conducted ten (10) public forums between March 27, 2008 and April 12, 2008, with two (2) meetings held per Supervisory District to ensure geographic distribution throughout the County to gather insight from citizens at large. County staff in conjunction with PROS Team members utilized neutral locations and worked to gain maximum media exposure to inform citizens of the purpose and importance of the meetings and clearly note time and locations. County staff assisted in the outreach and coordination of these meetings including preparing and distributing press releases and related media contacts, coordinating the invitations to stakeholders and their respective constituencies, facilitating meeting room logistics and assisting in attendee sign-in and greetings.

PROS team members facilitated the public forums to gain an understanding of resident's opinions and perceptions surrounding parks and recreation. An agenda was provided to the participants to maintain the focus and purpose of the meeting and ensures coverage of all issues. Professional facilitation managed and directed the sessions toward open and constructive input. The ten (10) locations of the public forums included (100+ residents from the general public attended):

DISTRICT 1 (CHAIRMAN FULTON BROCK)

- April 7, 2008 in Tempe, AZ – Fiesta Inn Resort, Prescott Room
- March 27, 2008 in Queen Creek/Gilbert, AZ – Queen Creek City Council Chambers

DISTRICT 2 (DON STAPLEY)

- March 29, 2008 in Fountain Hills, AZ – Fountain Hills Branch Library
- April 11, 2008 in Carefree, AZ – Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center

DISTRICT 3 (ANDY KUNASEK)

- March 28, 2008 in Phoenix, AZ (Central) – Burton Barr Central Library
- April 12, 2008 in Phoenix, AZ (North) – Goelet A.C. Beuf Community Center

DISTRICT 4 (MAX WILSON)

- March 31, 2008 in Wickenburg, AZ – Town of Wickenburg Community Center
- April 4, 2008 in Peoria, 2008 – Peoria Public Library

DISTRICT 5 (MARY ROSE WILCOX)

- April 3, 2008 in Gila Bend, AZ – Gila Bend Unified School, Logan Auditorium
- April 5, 2008 in Laveen, AZ (South Phoenix) – Cesar Chavez Branch Library

The public forums sought to capture public opinion regarding parks and open space, key issues, community needs, recreation activities, partnerships, and priorities as it pertains to Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department.

The summary of findings was developed from responses to the following five (5) questions or areas of focus, and the subsequent discussions:

1. What are your general perceptions of the parks, facilities, and programs in Maricopa County?

2. What are the key issues facing the County as a whole, as well as parks and recreation today?
3. What parks and facilities are needed?
4. What recreation programs are needed?
5. What should be the short and long-term priorities for Maricopa County Parks and Recreation?

1.1.1 PERCEPTIONS OF PARKS, FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS

The attendees of the public forums communicated a number of different items relating to the general perceptions of the parks, facilities, and programs available in Maricopa County. Many forum participants indicated that the amenities available to them are good at serving a multitude of needs and that the parks should be left as natural as possible. Many feel better signage is needed to indicate the presence of blind spots and yielding points on trails. Better trailhead signage and maps were also indicated as a need. An additional general perception highlighted at the public forums was that the county parks do not have the same level of amenities as municipal parks. In addition, Wickenburg residents indicated a desire for a county park that is closer to their community.

1.1.2 KEY ISSUES

The community indicated a wide range of key issues that Maricopa County and the Parks and Recreation Department are currently facing. Some of the key issues provided focused on the need for the development and protection of open space, greenbelts, and wildlife corridors. Residents indicated a need for additional dog parks, including off-leash and smaller dog parks. Better connections and partnerships with other governmental entities, such as Yavapai County and the Bureau of Land Management, were highlighted as current issues as well. A lack of connectivity to other parks and trails and a lack of security in parks were primary issues also raised by the community.

1.1.3 PARK AND FACILITY NEEDS

The community indicated that additional dog parks were needed in the county, along with a multi-use aviation park and an ATV course. Many expressed a need for a managed trail system containing single use trails as well as trails shared by hikers, bikers, and horses. Additional shaded areas, solar-powered buildings, dedicated wildlife habitats, and improved parking for trailers were also indicated as priority needs.

1.1.4 NEEDED PROGRAMS

Public forum attendees pointed out that recreation programs, such as wilderness survival courses, GPS classes, wildlife programming, and informational classes and marketing for the regional trail system and ecological diversity awareness are needed. Cross-education programs and scheduled events for users are needed to promote understanding and appreciation and may be conducted through schools and partnering organizations. An addition, citizens indicated there should be a marketing program to create an identity for the County's Parks and Recreation Department.

1.1.5 OPERATIONAL AND MAINTENANCE ISSUES

The community indicated that certain operational aspects should be addressed, such as the ability to purchase annual passes at municipality buildings and town halls, and the ability to conduct e-commerce transactions online. Maintenance issues focused primarily around trail maintenance, including the use of volunteers, installment of call boxes at trailheads, and the trimming and pruning of plants and trees around the trails. Additional comments included:

- Litter control, facility upkeep, and cleanliness
- Arizona Trails Association; adopt a trail program
- Narrow trails are more natural; should be left this way as appropriate

1.1.6 SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM NEEDS

Regarding the short term needs of the county parks and recreation department, the community would like to see the creation of an open space preservation plan and additional trails built at McDowell and San Tan Mountain Regional Parks. Residents feel the county should work more closely with outside groups such as developers to create buffer zones, fire departments on improved emergency and rescue plans, and non-profit organizations to partner with on grants. Other short term needs mentioned included providing multiple education programs, parking improvements, on-line purchases of annual passes, and improved marketing and communication to the community. Long term needs focused on the expansion of the park system with the establishment of a dog park and the acquisition of additional land for open space. The community also feels that the county should adopt standards for open space planning and development, help in reforming state land regulations, and provide new homeowner educational programs for realtors and homebuilders.

CHAPTER ONE - PUBLIC INPUT SUMMARY

1.1.1 FINAL PUBLIC MEETINGS SUMMARY

The final five (5) locations of the public forums included (98+ residents from the general public attended):

DISTRICT 1

- February 24, 2009 in Gilbert, AZ – Maricopa County Southeast Regional Library

DISTRICT 2

- February 18, 2009 in Cave Creek, AZ – Desert Foothills Library

DISTRICT 3

- February 19, 2009 in Phoenix, AZ – Paradise Valley Community College

DISTRICT 4

- February 17, 2009 in Surprise, AZ – Surprise Community Center

DISTRICT 5

- February 25, 2009 in Goodyear, AZ – Estrella Mountain Regional Park Nature Center

1.1.2 PUBLIC COMMENTS

Citizen comments in response to the presentation for the Maricopa County System Strategic Master Plan report are detailed below.

- Analyze trail development from a comprehensive approach – hiking, biking, equestrian, and multi-use.
- Approach the development plan in a way that allows the public to share in the progress; meaningful progress, not just all policy creation/changes.
- Consider partnering for trail building, and then the county should work through issues together with surrounding cities to plan, mandate/implement guidelines for improvements, upkeep, and edge treatment policies on bordering cities.
- Consumers want a choice these days – perhaps if the county could offer a multi-use punch card or a seasonal/winter visitor pass as some variations on the standard annual or individual passes, it would increase user fees by encouraging more frequent visits and making it more cost effective.
- We would like to see some future park plans for the Wickenburg area. Also, there is a need for more parks in West Valley and Vulture Peak.
- The goal of the park system in regards to marketing and increasing public awareness should be clear - winter events and more information and education on trail etiquette is necessary. The internet (i.e. Google and other search engines) should be utilized to the County's advantage to disseminate information to users, including trail and park maps, amenities and activities.
- Find a balance of providing a variety of services/resources to different users (especially equestrian), would effectively promote specific parks, areas and services and ultimately increase overall visitation, revenues and citizen satisfaction with the County parks system.