It's safe to say that in this industry, parks are the most visible manifestation of what is offered to each community. However, it's also likely that park land is taken for granted—not only by residents, but also by the organizations that are responsible for developing and maintaining it. That's not to imply that communities and agencies don't value parks. Rather, in these still-challenging economic times, it comes down to doing more with limited resources—and something has to give.

In 2009, with budget challenges and frequent changes in leadership in its recent past, the Naperville Park District in Illinois recognized a disconnection between its park-maintenance standards versus the status of individual parks. “We saw that we were at a bit of a crossroads with our parks maintenance,” explains Kevin Finnegan, director of parks. “An aggressive, multi-year capital building plan brought forth many new park amenities across the district, but we lacked the additional budget dollars to bring each of our locations up to our established maintenance guidelines.”

GUIDELINES FOR BEST PRACTICES

In an effort to align park standards with maintenance practices, the district had to begin somewhere. So, Finnegan went to the district's maintenance guidelines. “We classify our different types of parks using six different modes,” he explains. “Not only does this structure assist staff in prioritizing ongoing maintenance schedules and delivering a consistent product, but it also emphasizes best practices and good stewardship.”
Mode I: This “hallmark” mode includes not only those areas frequently viewed by the public, but also those areas that receive the greatest amount of use. An example is the Naperville Riverwalk.

Mode II: Typically reserved for sports complexes, this mode dictates a high level of maintenance to enhance turf quality due to excessive wear and tear. Also, many of these locations have significant shrub beds and ornamental horticulture that require additional maintenance.

Mode III: Reserved for neighborhood parks that host park district programs and have field space, these areas require more frequent maintenance due to more regular use.

Mode IV: These areas receive a moderate level of maintenance, but significantly less than for those locations classified by Modes I and II. Maintenance is managed for neighborhood recreational use.

Mode V: Comprised mainly of greenways and preservation areas, this mode dictates a moderately low level of maintenance, which is appropriate for native-plant species.

Mode VI: This is the lowest level of maintenance. Typically, newly acquired park land falls within this classification until it is developed for use.

Having standards is one thing; being able to use the standards as viable guidelines is another. Finnegan knew that there was some catching up to do, so he worked with park staff to develop a four-step process to establish more consistent maintenance practices, including:

1. Benchmarking
2. Implementing no-cost improvements
3. Allocating new resources
4. Tracking improvements.

**BENCHMARKING**

This information-gathering process is the most time-consuming, but it’s also the most revealing part of the plan—and very necessary. Staff members inspect each park and track various areas and items that are not being maintained in accordance with the district’s maintenance guidelines. Each standard not being met is assigned a value. Eventually, the data will prove essential in helping the department make its case to the park board for acquiring additional resources through the capital-planning process.

“When we performed the first round of park inspections in spring 2009, only 20 percent of our parks were meeting 100 percent of our maintenance standards,” Finnegan says. It turned out that it was the most common and routine tasks, like turf care, shrub-bed maintenance and horticulture tasks, that weren’t being performed.

Another essential component of the benchmarking phase involves parks staff. “It’s the staff who is doing the work, so it’s very important to train them to perform their maintenance tasks in a consistent manner,” explains Finnegan. “And, once you provide the training and guidance, buy-in needs to be achieved across the organization to ensure that the new process and expectations become part of the culture of the way things get done.”

Once the department had a handle on the maintenance standards, the next step was to set a target by which it could track meaningful progress.

**IMPLEMENTING NO-COST IMPROVEMENTS**

“That first year, staff collectively determined the goal for improving the overall maintenance standards by counting on only the resources they already had available. The plan was to do the
work, achieve the goal, and show the park board what we were able to do," explains Finnegan. "Then, we had to explain what resources were needed to fill the gap and get the district back on track." From spring through fall 2009, the parks department focused on increasing the maintenance standards of turf across the district. By the end of the year, the department had increased its turf maintenance standards from 68 to 73 percent.

**ALLOCATING NEW RESOURCES**

With a successful first season of adhering to stringent turf-maintenance standards, the parks department made its case for additional resources. Since the largest benefit was visible in turf standards, Finnegan decided to continue to focus on that area. When it came time to budget for 2010, an additional $26,500 was allocated. Goals for increasing park-maintenance standards were established at 80 percent and 90 percent for 2010 and 2011, respectively.

And, there's already some good news. The parks department's assessment at the conclusion of 2010 showed real progress, with 79 of the district's 138 parks meeting 100 percent of the overall park standards.

**TRACKING IMPROVEMENTS**

An important piece of any continuous-improvement project involves monitoring outcomes in order to make necessary adjustments, or knowing that things are on the right track. In addition to turf improvements, the parks department also looked at its practices related to weed control, fertilizing and shrub-bed maintenance. "The plan is to continue to keep an eye on each of these areas and know what went well and what didn't," says Finnegan. "Regardless, we'll use those lessons as we're planning and budgeting each year in an ongoing effort to close the budget gap."

Of course, there's no magic formula that will improve a parks department's operation overnight. Nothing can replace well-coordinated, hard work done by staff members who know their stuff. Yet, there are some tools that can help. Some of the park district's trucks are equipped with a GPS to efficiently route the crews. Also, working mowing time into the schedule, and shortening travel times by having centrally located maintenance facilities, helps increase efficiencies across the department. But, there's one more piece of the puzzle to consider that can help ensure the success of a park operation—community feedback. The district conducts its Community Interest & Opinion survey approximately every three years. Results from the 2009 survey overwhelming indicated that the park district should not acquire anything new, but instead continue to take care of its assets. "There's nothing like resident input to help focus us and improve our processes," explains Finnegan. "This feedback confirmed that everyday park maintenance is a high priority for our residents."

And, at the end of the day, serving the customer is what it's all about. **PRB**

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