



Engaging Citizens in State Recreation Planning: Best Practices from Oregon

Oregon's SCORP provides a replicable framework for ascertaining the desires of minority park consumers and engaging minorities in the planning process.

by Steven N. Waller

Citizen participation in public planning processes is one of the hallmarks of American democracy. Transparency, intentionality, and inclusiveness are essential to effective planning in the 21st century, whether planning efforts relate to energy, transportation, health, education, law enforcement, economic development, or recreation, park, and environmental initiatives. Comprehensive planning efforts are necessary in the battle for scarce fiscal resources and given mandates for efficiency, effectiveness, and positive outcomes.

State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

Every five years, states are required by federal statute to prepare a State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) to identify potential issues and needs. The plan includes indoor and outdoor recreational opportunities for the next five-year period. The purpose of the plan is to provide guidance for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) program. SCORP also supplies information and recommendations in making policy and planning decisions to federal, state, and local units of government, as well as the private sector. The plan also offers guidance for other state-administered grant programs and recommendations to the state park system operations, administration, planning, development, and recreation programs.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 was enacted to help preserve, develop, and assure access to outdoor recreation resources. The law aimed to facilitate participation in recreation and strengthen the

health and vitality of U.S. citizens. It sought to accomplish these goals by providing funds for federal acquisition and development of lands and other areas and by providing funds for and authorizing federal assistance to states in recreation planning, acquisition of lands and waters, and development of recreation facilities. Monies in the fund are available for outdoor recreation purposes only if appropriated by Congress, and the level of annual appropriations has varied widely since the origin of the fund.

LWCF appropriations support grants to states for recreational planning; acquisition of recreational lands, waters, or related interests; and development of outdoor recreational facilities. To be eligible for a grant, a state must prepare and update a statewide recreation plan. This plan typically addresses the needs and opportunities for recreation and includes a program for reaching recreational goals. States award their grant money through a competitive process based on their recreation plans and their own priorities and selection criteria. They can use the money for state projects or for pass-through grants to localities. States send their top-ranked projects to the National Park Service (NPS) for formal approval and obligation of grant money.

Each state is required to develop SCORP to be eligible for matching grants from the LWCF grant program. This plan is significant to citizens because it guides the development of programs and facilities statewide and affects millions of people in each state. As part of the process, local interest groups and citizens are invited to participate in any public hearings—the plan review—which includes the opportunity to comment on the plan's findings and offer suggestions on the future of the state's conservation and recreation efforts.

Meaningful engagement of citizens is a precursor for successful local and state agency planning processes. Agencies must be fully transparent and deliberate with targeted efforts to engage underrepresented stakeholders in planning processes. A pluralism of voices that represents both traditional and nontraditional consumers and crosses racial, ethnic, and ability lines must be sought to validate sound recreation planning practice.

Citizen Participation in Planning Efforts

Citizen engagement is part of a family of democratic reform ideas—a facet of our political culture

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that includes public participation, public involvement, deliberative democracy, and collaborative governance. These terms make distinctions about the purpose, scope, and techniques of participation, but they all recognize and build on a belief that citizens have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Citizen-participation policies and programs thus reflect a basic commitment to this principle and invite citizens to engage in planning, policy development, and decision-making activities.

Citizen-participation activities revolve around six general aims:

- ◆ inform and educate the public on key planning and policy issues
- ◆ improve government decisions by channeling better information upward from citizens to decision makers
- ◆ create opportunities for citizens to shape and, in some cases, determine planning outcomes
- ◆ legitimize government decisions by ensuring that the voices of those affected by government planning efforts have been heard, considered, and addressed
- ◆ involve citizens in monitoring the outcomes of planning efforts for evaluation
- ◆ improve the quality of public life by restoring trust and engagement of citizens in public life.

Each of these aims plays an important role in legitimizing the planning processes undertaken by state recreation planning authorities. In essence, public participation is a mandate that must be adhered to by state agencies involved in generating statewide planning efforts, especially where federal funding is involved.

Citizen Input as a Tool for Social Justice

By including the populations affected by planning efforts and subsequent policy and recruiting marginalized people to have input, citizen engagement is a tool for social justice. In theory, citizen engagement protects public interest and decreases biases in the recreation planning process. As consumers, taxpayers, and voters, citizens are the best arbiters of public interest because they experience services.

Optimally, effective citizen engagement is progressive with involvement increasing at each level. The general public should have the opportunity

to participate in decision making. The public is often segmented into interest groups, geographic communities, and individuals warranting strategic and intentional engagement.

Challenges

Rethinking public engagement in recreation planning is a critical challenge for state park, recreation, and natural resources agencies in the 21st century. In an era of declining trust in public institutions and urgent issues that require collaborative solutions, state park planners, policymakers, and managers must critically rethink the way government engages minority communities.

In particular, they must recognize the emerging role of government as “convener” and think of ways agencies can contribute to the growth of an infrastructure for engagement. This means expanding agency participation techniques to include information-processing methods, deliberative techniques that support the general interest public in sharing their experiences and perspectives, building knowledge, thinking critically about the issues and tradeoffs, and then crafting workable solutions.

This type of change, in the manner in which agencies implement citizen participation strategies, warrants intentionality. Several institutional challenges remain to an effective transition to a more engaging and participatory planning process:

- ◆ low levels of administrator trust in the quality of the public contribution to the policymaking process
- ◆ uncoordinated, often inconsistent, policy guidelines that provide insufficient direction on the effective use of deliberative engagement techniques and, in some cases, actually impose constraints on the options available to administrators
- ◆ insufficient intentional engagement of citizen knowledge-building and sharing to promote and improve practice in and across agencies.

Current research by practitioners and academics points to the myriad problems that occur when minority groups are not included in state recreation planning processes. Disparities in facilities, declining state park

usage by minorities, misguided marketing efforts, and the missed opportunity to cultivate emerging markets that represent new revenue streams for state park agencies are just a few.

For example, Myron F. Floyd, Jason N. Bocarro, and Timia D. Thompson chronicled the importance of minority involvement in park, recreation, and natural resource-based planning efforts in their 2008 *Journal of Leisure Research* article. In their meta-analysis of related literature, inclusion of minorities in the planning process was a major theme over the last 15 years.

They argued that exclusion of minorities in the park and recreation planning processes created disparities in access and opportunities. Where participation by minorities in local and state recreation planning process is low or non-existent, African Ameri-

cans or Latinos tend to have fewer public resources than white communities for leisure time, physical activity, such as parks and walking or biking trails. They also noted that African Americans and Latinos have less access to park lands than white non-Hispanic residents and benefit less from park funding initiatives.

Toward averting disparities, state agencies must become more aware of the changing interests of minority park users and more relevant ways to get them involved in the various facets of SCORP planning efforts. Use of traditional mechanisms to garner public input is a great place to begin, but in the examination of best practices, the “rules of engagement” warrant more than traditional means.

Oregon’s Inclusive Recreation Planning

Upon reviewing what strategies states are employing to actively engage minorities in the SCORP planning process, there is very little information available about specific strategies. There is more than sufficient evidence that states are recognizing major demographic shifts that will drive planning, grant-making, and service delivery strategies. SCORP documents are plentiful with strategic actions to implement plans, but what remains elusive is how to engage minorities in the various facets of SCORP planning.

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD) appears to lead the way in minority

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engagement in SCORP planning. Oregon's plan provides a replicable framework for ascertaining the desires of minority park consumers and engaging minorities in the planning process. The planning effort included a series of research projects designed to provide outdoor recreation managers and planners across Oregon with usable knowledge to proactively address key statewide demographic and social changes effecting recreation provision in the state. Oregon officials closely monitored the demographic trends in the state and noticed a growing number of Hispanics and Asians.

Research Surveys

One of the keys to Oregon's success in SCORP planning is the use of research to drive its inclusive planning practices. In a multiphase research effort designed to inform and drive planning efforts, OPRD used a statewide survey followed by a series of focus groups to stimulate participation among minority groups and to garner the necessary data that was needed to develop a viable state plan.

Survey recipients were obtained from a commercially provided list of Hispanic and Asian households in Oregon. Surveys were mailed to a 3,595 recipients. Adjusting for undeliverables, the response rates were 17 percent for Hispanics and 21 percent for Asians. In total, 522 completed surveys were received. However, 164 respondents did not classify themselves as Hispanics or Asians. These respondents were included in the "by group" analysis, but not in the other analyses.

The remaining 358 respondents were included in all analyses. Census data on gender and educational attainment were used to weight responses and reduce the potential for non-response bias. The sample almost exactly matched the statewide geographic distribution across the Portland metro area versus elsewhere in the state, so responses were not weighted by location.

A brief phone survey of nonrespondents was used to assess potential nonresponse bias; there was no indication of systematic bias. Subsequent to data collection, Oregon SCORP planners compiled a summary report entitled "A Growing Minority Population and Outdoor Recreation in Oregon," which concluded:

"People of color are transforming Oregon much faster than expected, arriving in larger numbers and settling in areas throughout the state.

"In general, minorities are less likely than whites to participate in outdoor recreation in the U.S. Minorities forego the health, social, and other benefits of outdoor recreation, while natural areas, and the agencies that manage them, lose a potentially important group of supporters. Lower participation rates amongst minorities will become even more important in the future with the growth of the minority population. This project identified the factors limiting minority participation in Oregon and opportunities to increase this participation."

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Focus Groups

The second phase of research consisted of four focus groups that were designed to understand ethnic minorities' interests and needs related to outdoor recreation. The

focus group deliberations concentrated on the current and previous recreation experiences, benefits sought, constraints, media, and information needed about state parks by ethnic minority groups.

Focus group meetings were strategically conducted around the state, with two meetings taking place in Portland and two in other areas of the state. The greater Portland area was targeted because there is a greater concentration of African Americans present in the general population, thus their participation was more likely. As a result of intentionality and inclusion, OPRD gleaned useful information to better the state park system users, including minorities.

Interpretation of the data obtained from the focus groups drew several important conclusions that proved useful to OPRD planners (Burns, Graefe, and Covelli, 2006). First, social context is an important aspect of recreation among minorities. When recreating with family and friends, using spacious, clean amenities to accommodate families is important. Second, safety is a major concern affecting outdoor recreation participation and includes two elements: personal safety and safety for children. Many minority individuals consider parks dangerous, with the degree of danger varying for different types of parks and outdoor areas. While members of all cultures are concerned for the safety of their children, Asian parents are especially protective of their children.

Finally, ethnic minorities have little awareness of the recreation opportunities available to them on public lands. Few understand the differences between

the many federal, state, and local areas and managing agencies. Better information is needed to facilitate greater participation by these groups. Efforts such as multilingual materials and outreach through community groups are necessary to deliver the needed information to the minority populations.

Point-of-Contact Surveys

Oregon park officials opted for a third strategy for better understanding and engaging minority park users in the planning process. Select managers of key parks conducted “point-of-contact” surveys involving under-represented day-users. In this method, users are issued short surveys at key entry and exit points. Observations of park managers indicated that some parks around the state were being heavily used by Hispanic and Russian-speaking users. The state used bilingual interviewers to conduct the surveys.

This strategy—coupled with the mailed survey and focus groups—allowed Oregon state park planners to meaningfully engage minority populations and collect data needed to craft service packages that meet the needs of its customer base. Statewide recommendations to include minority groups pointed to the following actions:

- ◆ encourage organizational culture change within public recreation agencies and organizations to effectively address the diversity issue
- ◆ create a pilot project to identify how to increase under-represented population access to outdoor sports fields
- ◆ develop recommendations for addressing language barriers to encourage underrepresented population use of outdoor recreation facilities and programs
- ◆ create a customer service training module related to serving the outdoor recreation needs of an increasingly diverse population.

The key to Oregon’s success in recreation planning is that inclusion is forethought and the use of a multi-method approach to engaging key minority user groups. Approaching the planning process with full intentionality for inclusion led to meaningful engagement.

Strategic Ways to Engage Minorities

General Framework

Perhaps the place to begin to resolve the dilemma of public participation in the state recreation planning process is with the implementation of internal reforms that agencies can begin to implement on their own. In *The Public Manager* article “Today’s Leadership Challenge—Engaging Citizens,” Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer and Lars Hasselblab Torres provide a general framework for state park planners and managers.

Adopt Consistent State Guidelines for Public Involvement

To ensure the propagation of a culture and practice of participation in government, an oversight entity such as a state advisory board may supply clear guidelines for deliberative forms of citizen engagement while ensuring that existing policies do not unnecessarily constrain agency practice.

Adapt Administrative Process

Ensure that the procedures, budgets, and cycles for planning create sufficient opportunities to include citizen engagement, achieve an appropriate balance of expert and public input, and link to a transparent and accountable decision-making structure.

Develop Assessment Frameworks

To improve the practice of engaging the public in planning processes, governmentwide standards of good practice must be in place and oversight agencies must have the capacity to measure and evaluate the outcomes of various techniques across context and purpose.

Encourage Exchange Across Agencies

To facilitate the exchange of learning, managers should create or seek out networks for the exchange of best practice information. For example, the Recreation 2.0 website provides access to an expansive network of state and federal officials that are engaged in recreation and natural resource planning.

Supplemental Approaches

Beyond the previously noted agency guidelines there are several supplemental strategies that can be

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used effectively in the SCORP development process. These strategies include tailored outreach, deliberative techniques and the use of emerging technology.

Tailored Outreach

In addition to internal changes needed to garner greater levels of participation by minorities, there are multiple external strategies, including tailored outreach efforts that can be employed.

Tailored outreach simply means selecting and adjusting public involvement techniques in order to effectively connect with the people impacted by a plan, whoever and wherever they are.

Tailored outreach recognizes that traditional techniques are not always the most effective. Creating effective outreach requires knowing the constituency and taking steps to ensure that the public involvement process is accessible to everyone in the community. Inherent in knowing the constituency is the recognition of—and sensitivity to—the limitations experienced by some individuals.

Typical meeting announcements in newspapers and on the radio, for example, may not reach underserved populations. Agencies need to understand how these populations get information. This could be via bulletins from religious centers, on grocery store or laundromat bulletin boards, or at community meeting places. Perhaps the simplest of strategies needed to increase participation by minority groups are overlooked.

For example, the U.S. Department of Transportation, in its planning efforts, uses the following strategies to garner participation among minority groups:

- ◆ conduct meetings in nontraditional locations, outside of government buildings
- ◆ use population-specific methods for visually and verbally communicating
- ◆ match outreach approaches to the characteristics of the community being contacted
- ◆ through early consultation, empower people by gaining their assistance in identifying engagement strategies that may be most effective

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- ◆ use community organizations and their leaders to broker information and communicate with potential participants
- ◆ enlist religious organizations that have a broad ethnic, social and spiritual base to stimulate participation
- ◆ consider the times at which members of a community are available to participate in the transportation decision-making process
 - ◆ create small groups to better engage certain demographics
 - ◆ place announcements in minority or ethnic news media to heighten interest in a process.

In addition, social networking mechanisms, such as Facebook and Twitter, can be of great value in reaching younger segments of minority populations that are technologically savvy.

Deliberative Techniques

Deliberation is commonly defined as “discussion that involves the careful and serious weighing of reasons for and against some proposition or to an interior process by which an individual weighs reasons for and against courses of action.”

Deliberative features have been incorporated into a broad grouping of methods that include citizens’ juries, planning cells, deliberative polling, consensus conferences, and citizens’ panels. Individual methods may differ with respect to specific features such as participant selection (statistically representative versus purposeful sampling); the number of participants (100 versus 10); and the type of input obtained or the number of meetings. Common to all, however, is the deliberative component whereby participants are provided with information about the issue being considered and encouraged to discuss and challenge the information, considering each others’ views before making a final decision or recommendation for action (Abelson et al 2003).

Citizens’ juries, panels, and consensus conferences are regularly used to amalgamate technical information and values into planning and resource allocation decisions in the environmental, energy, education and

local government fields. In these settings, their primary purpose has been to provide a forum for nonexpert citizens, acting as “value consultants,” to combine technical facts with public values into a set of conclusions and recommendations.

Citizens’ juries and planning cells have been conducted in the United States since the early 1970s.

Basic features of the jury method include the selection of 12 to 24 participants to meet over several days as part of a single jury.

The planning cell has had more formal institutional support from government and agency sponsors. In planning cells, deliberation takes place among approximately randomly selected citizens who may meet several times. Results are presented to the sponsor, the media, and other interested groups. An accountability requirement is built into the process, which requires the sponsor to agree to consider the decisions produced by the planning cell.

Citizens’ panels are similar to juries in their composition and task but can have more permanency with the same, or a partially replaced group, meeting routinely to consider and make recommendations or decisions about different issues or on different aspects of a single decision-making process.

Consensus conferences, developed in Denmark, are used in a variety of settings and typically involve a group of citizens with varied backgrounds who meet to discuss issues of a scientific or technical nature. The conference has two stages: the first involves small group meetings with experts to discuss the issues and work towards consensus; the second stage assembles experts, media, and the public where the conferences main observations and conclusions are presented.

Deliberative polling attempts to incorporate a deliberative process into the traditional opinion poll. Developed in the early 1990s, the deliberative poll combines the strengths of a large representative, random sample while providing opportunities for discussion and deliberation over a two- to three-day period. The large scale and significant costs associated with running a deliberative poll has resulted in its restricted application to national issues. The outcomes produced from a deliberative poll are individual

opinions (as with traditional polls) that are shaped by group deliberation (Abelson et al).

Each of the deliberative techniques may be highly useful in facilitating minority participation in state recreation planning efforts. They can be successfully used to obtain feedback from large samples or small groups of minority citizens.

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Emerging Technology

Finally, the use of innovative, emerging technologies in the area of public communications management offers a viable solution to the public engagement dilemma. For example, the IBM Neighborhood America

Public Comment Service is a web-based solution offered in a software-as-a-service model. The IBM Neighborhood America Public Comment Service supports the management of public comment collected both online and by traditional means. By using the service, planning officials are able to target select user groups, easily manage large volumes of public comment, moderate questions, and generate meaningful reports that properly categorize, classify, and characterize public responses.

This system has been effectively used by the National Park Service to solicit public input on key projects such as the Flight 93 Memorial, which commemorates the loss of the crew and passengers of Flight 93, thus thwarting the attack in our nation’s capital on September 11, 2001 (www.publiccomment.com).

Final Thoughts

In the 21st century, public participation in the planning process is an imperative. For states and local units of government across the nation, having a well-developed SCORP can mean capturing millions of dollars to make improvements to the local and state park and recreation infrastructure. These improvements can improve services to existing users, create new opportunities for under-represented groups, and catalyze outdoor recreation related tourism.

The critical tasks at hand are to understand leisure-based behaviors of all users—including minorities and under-represented groups—and to find meaningful ways to solicit their input in planning

processes. Intentionality toward meaningful inclusion yields multiple benefits for managers, planners, and consumers.

Recreation opportunities and natural resources are tremendous assets for every state across the nation, and a well-written, fundable SCORP is the key to success. The economic, social, and physical health of states rests with a state recreation plan that represents the diverse interests of its residents and visitors. The question, “How do we get minorities involved in recreation planning?” is a valid one, but is not insurmountable.

Many states in our nation are at a crossroads with regards to diversity and the way recreation and natural resource agencies will respond to changes in the ethnic and racial composition of the state. Statewide and national educational efforts to promote outdoor recreation among minorities—and the promotion of diversity in state recreation and natural resource agencies—are recommended. State planners and recreation resource managers must determine what practices work best in serving racial and ethnic minorities in recreation, natural, and cultural resource settings and attracting multicultural and diverse employees.

In this era of expansive technology that empowers agencies to communicate effectively with individuals and interest groups almost at will. E-government instituted at the advent of the new millennium allows government and citizens to interact in novel ways. Withstanding the numerous methods available to communicate with minority citizens, marginal or nonparticipation in planning processes can be averted.

We will continue to experience the rapid evolution of technology that will further enhance the government’s capacity to interact with citizens in creative and meaningful ways. To ensure that these changes are accompanied by maximum benefits to the public, explicit efforts must be made to support meaningful citizen engagement.

Failure to adequately address the growing public appetite for transparency, accountability, and engagement in decision making risks deepening democratic deficits and driving up the costs of getting public

business done. Bringing citizens into a partnership in comprehensive recreation planning through evolving online and traditional and nontraditional face-to-face techniques has the potential to alter the public’s perception of government, improve the substance of planning, and enhance the prospects for lasting, effective plan and policy implementation.

Intentional, deliberate inclusion in the SCORP process can be the means for moving beyond the speculative conversation about why minorities do not participate in planning efforts.

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