

EBOOK

The Parks and Recreation Guide to Sustainability Best Practices

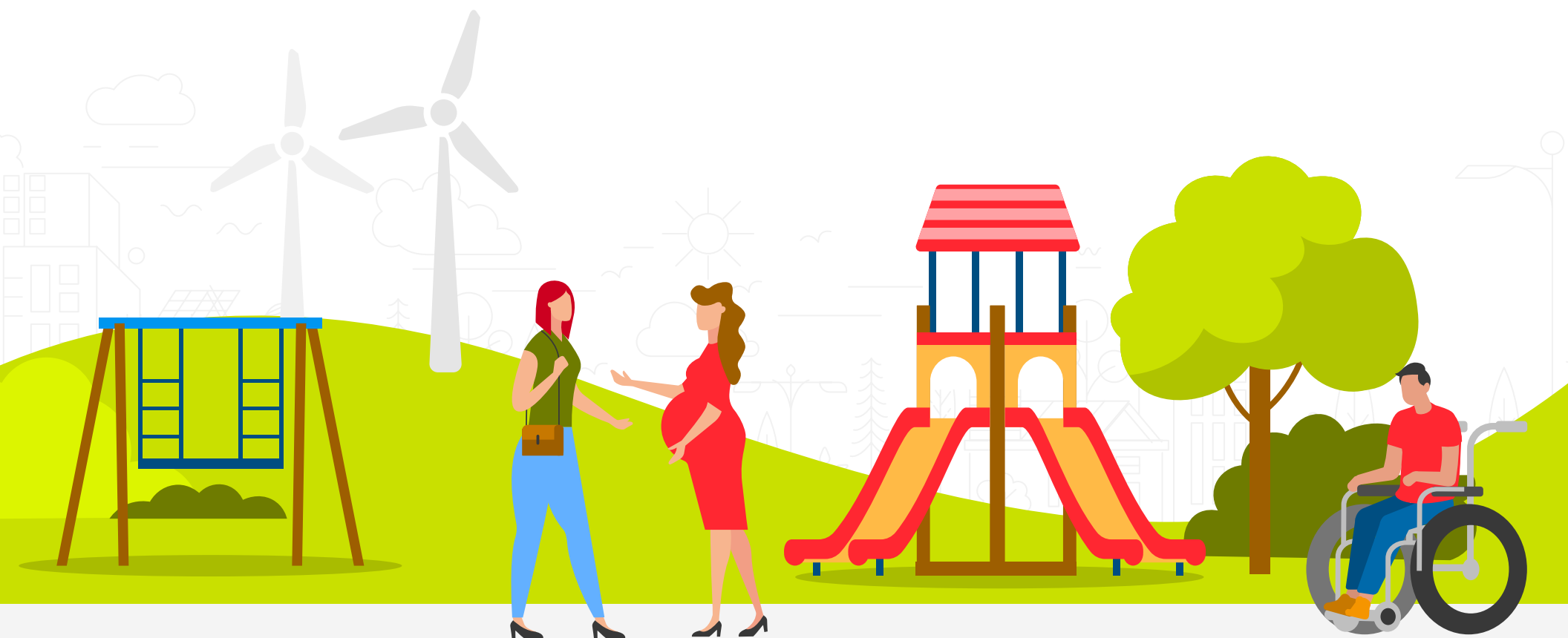




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Introduction

Sustainability. It's more than a buzzword; it's a fundamental principle for the future of parks and recreation. **This ebook, *The Parks and Recreation Guide to Sustainability Best Practices*, will:**

- Guide you through the essential steps to create environmentally responsible and financially sound park and recreation systems.
- Explore how sustainability goes beyond “being green” to encompass long-term financial health, operational efficiency, and enhanced community engagement.
- Provide practical strategies and real-world examples to help you make a positive impact on both your environment and your bottom line.

Let's dig in.





Understanding the Two Pillars of Sustainability

Environmental and financial sustainability are interconnected. Often, the most environmentally responsible choices are also the most financially prudent.

Therefore, the two pillars of sustainability are:



Environmental Stewardship

Protecting and preserving natural resources, minimizing environmental impact, and promoting ecological health.

This includes conserving water and energy, reducing waste, protecting habitats, and promoting biodiversity.



Financial Prudence

Making smart financial decisions that reduce costs, increase efficiency, generate revenue, and ensure the long-term financial viability of park and recreation departments.

This includes cost-effective operations, resource optimization, and exploring diverse funding streams.

The following chapters will unpack the synergistic relationship between these two pillars, presenting actionable tips designed to help you continue to enrich nature and your community for years to come.



Energy Efficiency: Powering a Sustainable Future

According to the [United States Environmental Protection Agency](#), the average building wastes about a third of the energy it uses. By investing in energy efficiency, local governments can achieve substantial energy cost savings throughout their parks and facilities while raising public awareness by demonstrating environmental leadership.

To enhance the energy efficiency of your parks and facilities, consider:

- Switching to light-emitting diode (LED) lighting and implementing smart lighting controls and motion sensors.
- Upgrading to energy-efficient heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems and implementing building automation systems to optimize energy use.
- Exploring solar panel installations and other renewable energy options like [micro wind turbines](#) or [microhydropower systems](#).
- Conducting regular energy audits to identify areas for improvement.

Efficiency is a cost-effective way to reduce energy use and pollution. Increased energy efficiency can minimize greenhouse gas emissions, lower overall electricity demand from generation and transmission infrastructure, and decrease energy costs — a weighty line item in your local government’s annual operating budget.





What Water Conservation Success Looks Like

Through a combination of parkgoers conserving water and the [Honolulu, Hawaii Department of Parks and Recreation \(DPR\)](#) implementing repairs, instituting water-saving policies, and installing water-efficient fixtures, the DPR's **freshwater usage decreased 15.4% year over year**. The lower water usage also resulted in a **cost reduction of \$678,693.71**, reflecting a 16.5% decrease in the water bill.



Water Conservation: Every Drop Counts

A single leaky faucet that drips at the rate of one drip per second can waste **more than 3,000 gallons of water per year**. However, the majority of water consumed by park and recreation departments is used to keep outdoor spaces green. By approaching water conservation from both of these angles, local governments can save money on water utility costs while helping improve water quality, maintain aquatic ecosystems, mitigate the effects of drought, and protect drinking water resources for their communities.

For more efficient water use, focus on:

Restrooms and Concessions: Install low-flow faucets and fixtures, regularly check for leaks, and promptly repair seals, washers, and gaskets.

Irrigation: Use efficient sprinkler systems, hydrozones (i.e., a garden area of plants with similar watering needs), and drip irrigation with weather-based scheduling.

Rainwater Harvesting and Greywater Reuse: Collect rainwater for irrigation or other non-potable uses. Deploy decentralized water management units that allow for the collection, treatment, discharge, and reuse of wastewater flows.

Water-Efficient Landscaping: Adopt [water-wise landscaping practices](#) by planting drought-tolerant and native species.



Waste Reduction and Recycling: Closing the Loop

The U.S. National Park Service (NPS) manages [nearly 80 million pounds of waste](#) across more than 400 park sites annually. The NPS aims to divert 75% of municipal solid waste from landfills by 2030.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) prepared an [NPS Plastics and Sustainability Scorecard](#) to evaluate the environmental sustainability plans of 25 parks in the NPS. The Scorecard outlines the parks' baseline practices and concludes that several parks have exemplary plans that can serve as models for others. Many of those plans include:

Recycling Programs: Establishing comprehensive recycling programs in parks and facilities with clearly labeled bins in public spaces.

Composting: Composting organic waste from parks and gardens to enrich the soil.

Waste Audits: Conducting waste audits to identify areas for waste reduction.

Single-Use Plastics Reduction: Decreasing or eliminating the use of single-use plastics and promoting reusable alternatives.

In addition to environmental benefits, effective waste management offers significant financial benefits. For example, [recycling is less expensive than landfilling](#) because it avoids disposal costs and extends the life of existing landfills.





Going Batty

Bats play an essential role in keeping pesky bug populations in check.

According to the [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#), the insect-eating prowess of bats **saves American farmers more than \$3.7 billion** in pest control each year, reducing pesticide use and protecting the health of fields, gardens, and water sources.



Protecting Natural Habitats and Biodiversity

Fostering a legacy of care — where parks and recreational areas flourish, inviting everyone to enjoy their beauty, vitality, and accessibility for decades — should be the cornerstone of your natural habitat and biodiversity protection efforts. By adopting the following practices, you can achieve this goal and realize lower landscaping, maintenance, and repair costs:

Native Plantings: Use native trees and vegetation, establish pollinator gardens, and stabilize riverbanks with native plants to prevent erosion.

Habitat Restoration: Restore degraded habitats, transform abandoned lots into green spaces, and create community gardens.

Habitat Preservation: Identify and mitigate threats to natural areas while minimizing human disturbance, particularly in nesting and denning sites.

Invasive Species Management: Control and remove invasive plants and insects and install barriers to limit the spread of invasive animal species.

Pesticide Reduction: Reduce pesticide and herbicide use, implement vegetative buffer zones to prevent pollution runoff, and enhance wildlife habitats with bird and bat houses — species that help control the insect population.



Sustainable Operations and Maintenance

Did you know that a leaf blower emits 300 times more pollutants than a pickup truck? Or that an hour of gas-powered lawn mower use is equivalent to 100 miles worth of auto pollution? Sustainable operations and maintenance practices can reduce harmful emissions released into the air — as well as the quantity of fossil fuels consumed.

Saving the planet while saving money on fuel costs is a win-win for your community and budget. Explore:

Greener Equipment and Transportation: Invest in fuel-efficient machinery and vehicles, follow anti-idling practices, and transition to electric or hybrid fleets.

Preventative Maintenance: Regularly maintain equipment and vehicles to optimize efficiency and extend their lifespan.

Sustainable Procurement: Purchase products with recycled materials or eco-friendly certifications. Source locally to reduce emissions and transportation costs.

Beyond Fossil Fuels: Green Cleaning

Using supplies that meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards helps ensure that any necessary chemicals found within the cleaning solutions do not contribute to a degradation of air quality, water quality, aquatic life, or the environment. At the same time, adopting daytime cleaning schedules for park buildings and recreational facilities reduces nighttime energy use from lighting and HVAC systems.





Community Engagement and Education

Research shows that people who spend time in nature are more likely to act responsibly toward it. Therefore, promoting healthy outdoor activities in your parks and recreational areas goes hand-in-hand with increasing public support for sustainability actions.

However, it's also important to provide community members with transparent opportunities to engage directly with your department's sustainability efforts. Think about:

Signage and Communication: Use clear signage to educate park users about your sustainability initiatives.

Educational Programs: Offer workshops on composting, water conservation, and wildlife protection.

Volunteer Opportunities: Involve volunteers in maintaining community gardens and preserving trail systems.

Community Partnerships: Partner with local businesses and eco-conscious brands to sponsor solar lighting, water bottle refilling stations, and native plant installations.



Financial Sustainability: Measuring and Reporting Progress

A [National Recreation and Park Association \(NRPA\) member survey](#) highlights a serious barrier to sustainability investment: the failure to assess financial impact. Even though virtually all the park and recreation agencies that responded to the NRPA member survey have implemented sustainability activities, most agencies do not have a documented sustainability plan — let alone a plan backed by performative measurement. Demonstrating the economic, environmental, and community health benefits of sustainability efforts strengthens the case for continued funding and support.

To strengthen the case for your sustainability initiatives, embrace:

Data Collection and Analysis: Use data to effectively measure progress on strategic initiatives, and identify areas for improvement.

Cost Savings: Track savings from sustainability efforts and consider long-term costs in purchasing decisions.

Reporting: Share sustainability performance with stakeholders and the community.

Grant Funding: Seek out and apply for sustainability-focused grants.

Public-Private Partnerships: Collaborate with local businesses and organizations to support sustainability initiatives.

Revenue Generation: Explore sustainable revenue streams, such as eco-tours or selling recycled products.

Key Performance Indicators

Among the NRPA member survey respondents whose agencies do gauge the impact of their sustainability practices, top measures include:

- Community engagement growth and added miles of trails
- Water usage per facility or park
- Electric meter usage tracking
- Energy audits and comparative reviews
- Number of residents reached through education programs



Conclusion

Sustainability is not just a responsibility; it's an opportunity. By trying one or more of the initiatives outlined in this guide, park and recreation departments can create thriving spaces that benefit their communities for generations to come. It's about creating a legacy of stewardship to ensure our parks and recreational areas remain vibrant, healthy, and accessible for everyone.



About the Author

Thousands of high-performing civic leaders rely on CivicPlus as their trusted partner for Impact-Led Government. With CivicPlus, leaders can finally overcome the perpetual tradeoff between the demand for better services and the realities of operational resources, leveraging the unique Civic Impact Platform to deliver both unmatched end-to-end automated efficiency and truly unified, delightful resident experiences.

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About the CivicPlus Mass Notification System

The [CivicPlus Recreation Management system](#) helps local governments enhance their sustainability strategies, build resident trust, and increase engagement. Learn more about the CivicPlus Recreation Management system by [taking a self-guided tour](#).