CP CIVICPLUS

Recreation Management

EBOOK

The Ultimate Guide to Community Engagement in Parks and Recreation

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Introduction

Park and recreation spaces are more than just places to play; they're vital community hubs that foster well-being, social connection, and a sense of belonging.

To truly serve their purpose, these spaces need to reflect the diverse needs of every resident. This is a difficult task — but when approached in a strategic manner, the results can be transformative. By increasing resident engagement, you can build stronger social cohesion, make your communities safer, and even improve your bottom line.

This eBook will serve as your comprehensive guide to creating more inclusive, accessible public spaces — while building genuine and lasting relationships with your community.

Why Community Engagement Matters

Your park and recreation department plays a critical role in residents' lives, but the spaces and programming you create must reflect the community you serve. This means that developing a strategy for community engagement is critical. Not only does it help leaders ensure that every park and recreational space is fully accessible to residents, increasing participation, but by opening up a dialogue, you can also nurture stronger relationships that encourage positive civic engagement.

Perhaps that's why two-thirds of cities in the the Trust for Public Land's ParkScore index are investing in community engagement either by compensating residents for their input or by hiring full-time community engagement staff members. In addition, the study found that when parks are accessible and well-maintained — a sign of strong resident engagement — there were 26% more social connections between low-and high-income individuals than in other places, and people were 60% more likely to volunteer. This type of accessible green space is also linked with lower crime rates and better resident mental health.

It also lends itself to stronger support for local government.

People who live near parks are 29% more satisfied with their parks and rec department, making them more inclined to support funding for their projects. They're also more likely to support their police department and mayor.
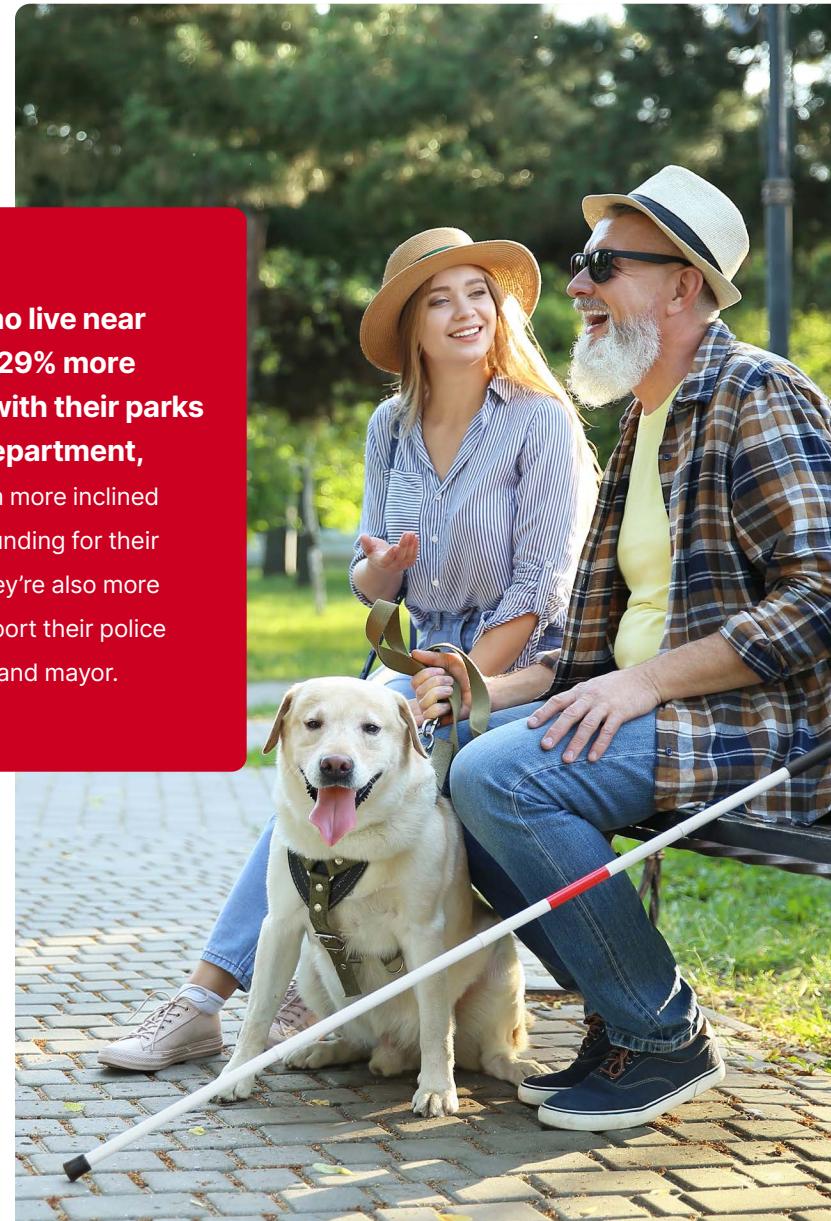
How to Build a Foundation for Engagement

Park and recreation spaces are undeniably popular. A 2024 study found that more than 276 million people in the U.S. visited a local park or recreation facility at least once in the past year, and 91% of respondents agree that parks and rec is an important service provided by their local government. However, 90 million people in the U.S. do not have walkable access to a park or recreation space, 39% said they don't have the time to visit, and 27% said they're not easily accessible.

Everyone deserves access to public spaces, regardless of who they are or where they live.

Creating an engagement plan — an outline of outreach and participation strategies — can help you better understand how to address issues like this within your community. You can build trust, ensure your funding is distributed equitably, and give residents a sense of agency.

Here are <u>a few steps</u> to get started:

1

STEP 1

Explore any internal barriers to community engagement, such as a lack of staffing, funding, or internal support. Cultivate champions within your department who will support you. Build a team of dedicated staff and volunteers who are passionate about community engagement and clearly see its value.

2

STEP 2

Define your goals. Establish clear and measurable objectives for your community engagement efforts.

3

STEP 3

Learn more about your residents. Conduct thorough assessments to understand your demographics, needs, priorities, and existing resources. Establish trust by acknowledging past missteps, being transparent about your goals, and following through on your promises.

4

STEP 4

Take a multi-pronged approach to community engagement. We will explore those strategies in the next chapter.

5

STEP 5

Evaluate your success. Develop a system for analyzing community input and translating it into actionable insights. Use your findings to continuously refine your engagement strategies and ensure they are meeting community needs.
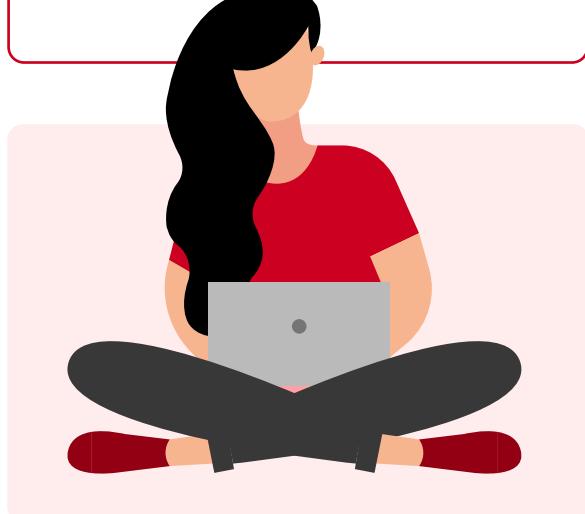
Effective Engagement Strategies

Every community is different, so you'll need to tailor your engagement strategy to accomplish your goals and best serve your residents.

Explore a range of engagement methods, from focus groups to community events to online platforms, to engage diverse populations including youth, seniors, people with disabilities, and non-English speakers. Above all else, remember that engagement should be active, collaborative, and focused on the community at large, not individuals.

A few engagement tactics are:

Embrace Digital Tools: Leverage technology to facilitate communication, gather feedback, and promote transparency. Be sure to complement these surveys with more interactive activities too.

Be a Part of the Community: Meet residents where they are. Have a presence at school fairs and local festivals, and support neighborhood businesses.

Eliminate Barriers to Entry: Schedule events that won't conflict with typical work or school hours, and be mindful of religious obligations too. Consider providing food, childcare, or transportation, and if possible, compensate people for attending (even if it's a small token of appreciation).

Celebrate Your Residents' Cultures: Acknowledge the rich traditions that exist within your community by organizing events around holidays or events that matter to residents. Involve leaders within these communities and play to their strengths. For example, you might hire a local artist to do art projects with children.

Stay Consistent: When you're working with the community on projects, plan meetings and events at regular, recurring times. This can help increase ownership and involvement.
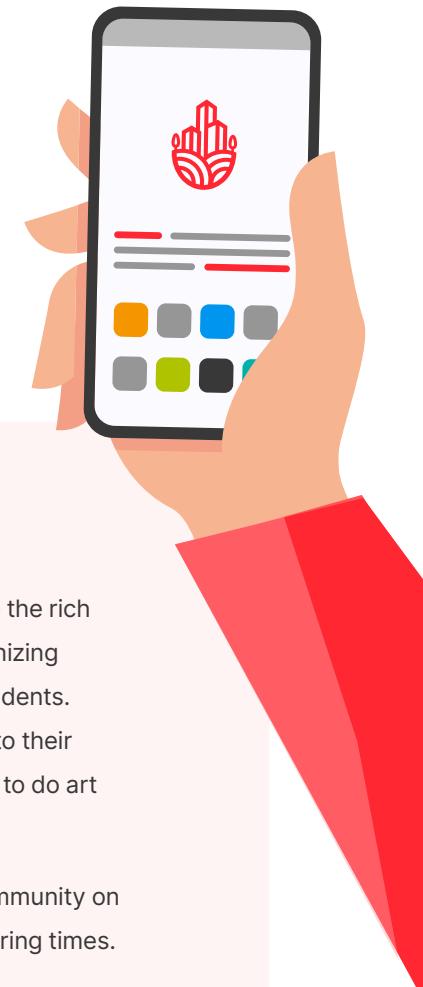
CivicPlus: Your Partner in Community Engagement

Increasing engagement can feel overwhelming, but CivicPlus can help. Our Recreation Management software has helped park and recreation departments just like yours boost operational efficiency and improve resident relations almost immediately.

Improve Communication: Kelly Lind, the facilities manager of the Carbon Valley parks and recreation district in Frederick, Colorado, said that the CivicPlus Recreation Management solution was transformative for her community.

"The new system empowered us to reach out to our community more effectively, whether through individual messages or broad communications, bridging the gap between our services and our residents' needs," she explained.

Save Time and Boost Efficiency: In Apache Junction, Arizona, CivicPlus Recreation Management software has helped the parks and recreation department cut back on their program set-up from days to hours.

"Setting up each facility used to take a week; now it takes a day," noted Riley King, city management analyst. **"Thanks to this time savings, staff members have more time to devote to other priorities — like community engagement."**

Increase Resident Self-Service: In <u>Spartanburg County, South Carolina</u>, Recreation Management has been instrumental in streamlining workflows and empowering residents to self-service many of their own needs.

"We have trained the public to use [the CivicPlus Recreation Management system] to make reservations, register for programs, and pay bills all online. So now, we don't need to spend as much time on internal auditing processes and ensuring we can conduct cash transactions all over the county," said Jon Woodsby, the Spartanburg County assistant parks and recreation director.

"We cut the cord on change funds, and it has made all our transactions more convenient. We worked hard to teach all of our [residents] how to use the system and got everyone comfortable with it. They realize now that it's as simple as shopping online."

Grow Revenue: By allowing the department to hone in on accessibility, Recreation Management has helped increase Apache Junction's program participation, contributing to revenue growth.
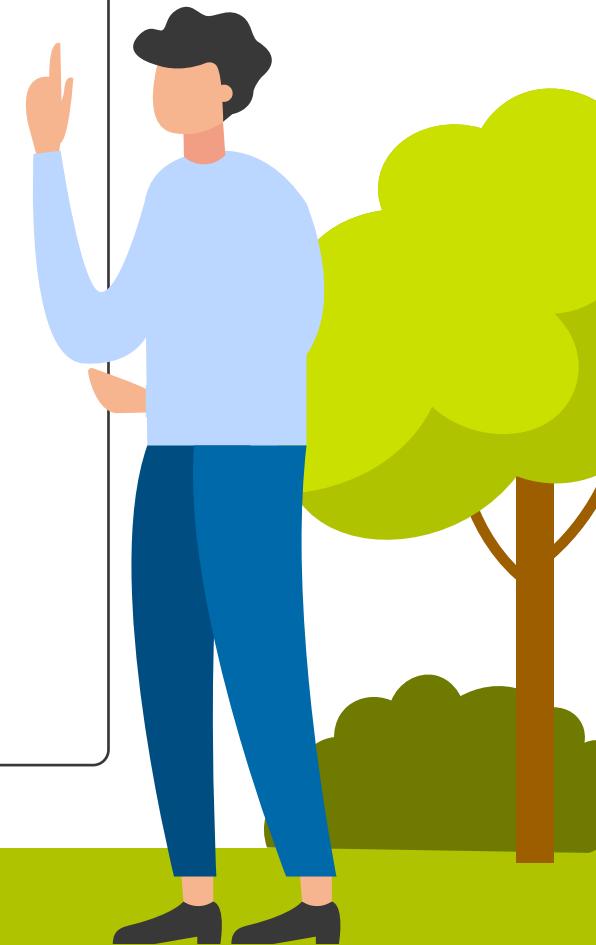
Conclusion

Community engagement is not just a box to be checked; it's an ongoing process that requires commitment, creativity, and a genuine desire to connect with the people you serve. By embracing the strategies outlined in this eBook and leveraging the power of CivicPlus solutions, you can transform your parks and recreation department into a truly community-driven and inclusive space.

Ready to take your community engagement to the next level?
Visit our website to learn more about our solutions and how we can help you build stronger communities.

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 residence experiences.

Backed by over 25 years of experience and leveraging the insights of more than 900 team members, our solutions are chosen by over 10,000 organizations and are used daily by over 340 million people in the U.S. and Canada. For more information, please visit civicplus.com.