

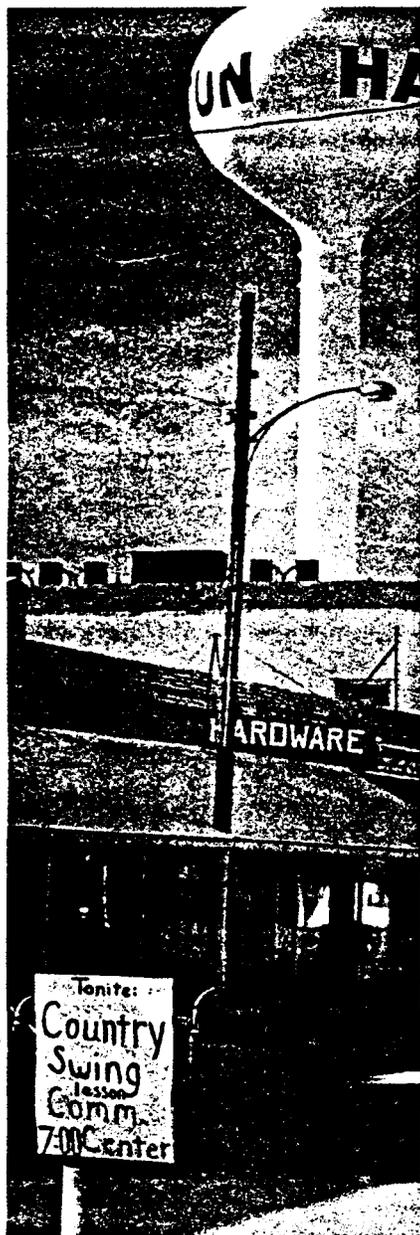
# LOCAL GOVERNMENT PARK AND RECREATION DEPARTMENTS

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**I**n order to plan for adequate recreation opportunities for America's changing rural population, recreation professionals must anticipate future recreation trends, problems, and demands. The first step in this process is to understand the status of existing public recreation services in rural areas. Are small communities providing the same recreation opportunities as large ones? Are the traditional park and recreation delivery systems used in most large city and county governments mimicked by smaller governments? Do recreation agencies in rural communities face the same issues, problems, and opportunities as agencies in urban ones? These and

other questions were the focus of a recent nationwide study, the Municipal And County Park And Recreation Study (MACPARS), conducted by a consortium of organizations including the University of Georgia, the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, the American Park and Recreation Society, the National Recreation and Park Association, the National Park Service (Southeastern Region), and the National Society for Park Resources.

In February, 1986, a ten-page, closed- and open-ended questionnaire was mailed to directors of over 8,000 local park and recreation agencies nationwide. Questions concerned budgets, salaries, programs, and perceived needs, is-



Photograph by Martin Nativig

*Parks and recreation opportunities are important to rural people, and their local departments have responded accordingly to the need.*



Photograph by Martin Nativig

*Small recreation agencies are providing opportunities for access to recreation land and parks, team sports, and fitness activities.*

**TABLE 1. Average Percentage of 1985 Recreation Budget from Selected Revenue Sources**

Source	COMMUNITY SIZE (Population)		
	Small (under 25,000)	Medium (25-100,000)	Large (over 100,000)
Local Property Tax	50	47	58
User Fees	19	20	13
Land and Water Conservation Fund	3	2	1
Revenue Sharing	5	6	3
Other Local Taxes	10	11	6

sues, and trends in parks and recreation. The budget data reflect the 1985 fiscal year. Only full-time departments were included, although many rural communities are served by part-time departments or by recreation committees of interested citizens.

The definitions of urban and rural have changed several times over the years (Rathge and Beegle, 1985), but most criteria are based on population or population density. For this article, a population below 25,000 within the service area, or a density below 350 people per square mile, is considered rural.

### The rural context

#### Population

In the 210 rural counties sampled, the average population density was about 61 people per square mile. Of the people living in these counties, 89 percent were white, 7 percent were black, and fewer than 3 percent were Hispanic. About 42 percent were either under 18 or over 64 years of age. Across the total population, the median age was 30 years.

About three-quarters of the households in these rural counties were families. Almost two-thirds of the households were two-parent families; just over 8 percent were one-parent families in which the single parent was, most likely, the mother. Single-person households represented 21 percent of the total of households. The average size of all households was 2.8 people; of families, 3.8 people.

The median household income for all the sampled rural counties at the last census was about \$14,505; the lowest county median was just over \$9,000, the highest was \$26,000. One-third of the households were classified as low-income (\$10,000 to \$20,000 per year), and 14 percent were considered below the poverty level. Seventeen percent of the residents were receiving social security assistance; just over one-half of these people were retired. Five percent of the work force was unemployed.

#### Business

As one might expect in rural counties, a substantial portion of the economy was farm-oriented. An average of 40 percent of the

land area in the sampled counties was farmland. Just over 6 percent of the county population lived on farms averaging about 1,100 acres in size, with a per-acre value, including buildings, of \$885.

Only 9 percent of the residents were employed in manufacturing, and only 8 percent in trade. Business revenues in two areas associated with parks and recreation (hotels, motels, trailer parks, and amusement and recreation services) totaled about \$5.5 million per year.

#### Government

General revenues in the 210 sampled rural counties totaled \$625 per resident, of which \$282 was derived from other governments (state or federal); \$226 was derived from local taxes and \$13 from nontax, nongovernment sources. Property taxes generated \$218 per capita.

Direct expenditures by local government in the sampled counties averaged \$652 per resident. About \$21 per person was spent for public welfare programs and \$49 per person for health and hospitals. Rural park and recreation departments spent almost \$19 per resident on operating expenses and capital development combined.

#### Organization and services

##### Administration and Finance

Rogers (1982) noted that small communities seem less willing than large ones to share service responsibilities with other area governments. This study supports Roger's finding. The majority (72 to 80%) of the recreation departments serving rural communities indicated that they were municipally operated. The proportion of recreation departments administered by county or other non-municipal governments was generally greater in larger, more urban communities.

Per capita expenditures reported for recreation in urban communities of over 100,000 were \$9.88—less than one-third of the \$36.60 per capita expended by

**TABLE 2. Average Number of Staff of Recreation Departments by Type of Staff and Community Size**

	COMMUNITY SIZE (Population)				
	Under 5,000	5,000- 15,000	15,000- 25,000	25,000- 100,000	Over 100,000
Permanent	2	5	10	21	107
Seasonal	17	35	70	118	206
Volunteers	21	50	232	170	502



*Recreation professionals must anticipate future recreation trends, problems, and demands in order to adequately plan for recreation opportunities for a changing rural population.*

communities of under 5,000. In communities of 25,000 to 100,000, per capita expenditures were around \$23. The portion of the recreation budget generated locally, by combined tax and nontax revenue, was very similar for communities in all three population categories (see Table 1). While large communities received almost 60 percent of their revenues from property taxes, compared to 50 percent for small communities, they tended to rely less on other kinds of local taxes (6%) than did smaller communities (10%).

While small communities were eligible for state and federal funds, they often lacked the expertise necessary to seek these funds and to prepare the requisite applications. Responses to our study, however, indicated that small communities received about the same percentage of their budgets from the combination of Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and revenue sharing monies as did medium-sized communities. They

received double the percentage received by large communities. It is important to keep in mind, however, that eight percent of a rural recreation department's budget represents a much smaller total amount than four percent of a large department's budget. This fact alone can make a considerable difference in the effects these additional funds have on acquiring or developing a park or hiring staff.

When asked what they thought the future status of LWCF should be, 89 percent of the large departments, but only 71 percent of those in communities of under 5,000 people, indicated that it should be continued. This response may have to do with the perceived or actual availability of open space in rural settings, as compared to the greater congestion of large metropolitan areas.

Hitzhusen (1977) suggests that user fees are or can be an important source of nontax revenue for rural governments. Our data show that

19 percent of the budgets of small agencies and 13 percent of those of large ones were generated by user fees (see Table 1).

#### *Personnel and Volunteers*

Most recreation departments rely on paid staff and volunteers. Table 2 describes the staff of park and recreation agencies that responded. On the average, the ratios both of employees to population and of volunteers to population were slightly higher for small departments than for large ones.

For all but medium-sized communities (25 to 100,000), civic groups were most often mentioned as the source of volunteer assistance. In the smallest communities (those with under 5,000 people) volunteer police and fire departments were a significant source. Environmental groups, on the other hand, tended to volunteer more in large population centers. Support from environmental groups, like the need for the LWCF program, may be inversely related



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*The recreational needs of rural people, many who are either under 18 or over 64 years old, should not be ignored.*

to the perceived availability of open space.

#### *Senior Citizens and Special Population Programs*

The migration of young individuals to the cities and the increasing numbers of people choosing to retire in rural communities pose a challenge to rural park and recreation departments. Programs open to seniors were common, regardless of community size.

Fewer small agencies than large ones, however, offered programs for special populations, and fewer small departments started new special population programs last year. Regardless of community size, physically disabled and mentally retarded individuals were much more likely to find recreation opportunities offered by public agencies than were other special populations.

#### *General Programming*

Social service and fitness activities were among the most popular general recreation programs introduced during 1985 in departments of all sizes. One interesting difference was in aerobics. The smaller the agency, the better the chance that it had recently offered a new program in aerobics. It may be that the larger departments already had been offering aerobics.

#### *Recreation Needs and Issues*

All respondents were asked to

indicate the most important issue or need out of a list of 15. The results were surprisingly consistent. In the departments serving the smallest communities, the greatest needs were for increased land, facilities, funds, and volunteers. Otherwise, needs were for acquiring, maintaining, and developing land.

#### **Summary and discussion**

A great deal of attention has been dedicated to urban places and their populations. While the trend indicating that three-fourths of the United States population will reside in urban places justifies this attention, we cannot ignore the remaining 65,000,000 rural residents. Our study has shown that many of these rural people are either under 18 or over 64 years old. They are most likely to be members of traditional families than are urban individuals, and are less dependent on manufacturing, trade, and government for their livelihood.

Parks and recreation opportunities are important to rural people, and their local departments have responded accordingly by spending more per capita than do the larger, urban park and recreation departments. Most rural departments are municipally operated and have few personnel, working and living in closer proximity to the constituents they serve. Our data indicated that rural departments spend on the average about \$19 per person from the local government budget. While it appears that the proportionate contributions to rural recreation budgets were consistent across community sizes, the marginal cost of providing additional recreation services or facilities apparently is higher in the smallest communities. This higher cost has probably hampered some service expansion. Future research should, therefore, examine ways for small communities to lower the per capita expenses of providing recreation services and ways to acquire, develop, and maintain recreation lands and facilities.

This study has also shown that recreation departments are for the most part organized and administered similarly, whether they serve small or large communities. Smaller departments have more staff per capita, but their smaller total staff size often makes it difficult for them to carry out all of their administrative, programming, public relations, and maintenance functions.

Small recreation agencies are providing opportunities for access to recreation land and parks, team sports, and fitness activities. With these emphases they appear to be serving a large cross-section of their constituents and to be in tune with programming trends.

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