

BEST PRACTICES for Parks and Outdoor Recreation Summit

Wednesday, April 5, 2006 at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum in Chaska, Minnesota

Capstone Speaker: Ellen O'Sullivan, President, Leisure Lifestyle Consulting

Is this the best of times or the worst of times? Everything that Phil (Phil McNelly, Executive Director of National Association of State Park Directors) said yesterday was right on target. The money is missing. The density of development is getting closer and closer together. Technology is a mixed bag. This is the worst of times.

Out of chaos comes opportunity.

The first Golden Age of Parks and Recreation was 100-150 years ago with the birth of Public Park and Recreation. I didn't say it was nice and pretty during the chaotic movement from an agricultural to industrial economy. The population was leaving acres and acres of open space with large social support systems and moving into congested areas without those support systems.

Just being around open space provides big benefits. Statistics show that currently about 70% of health related visits to the doctor are due to stress related conditions. A connection with open space helps individuals cope with stress.

Then there was the immigration from Europe. How did new immigrants feel? The Irish in Massachusetts were outcasts that employers wouldn't hire.

Now there is more chaos with the shift from an industrial to a knowledge based economy. Chaos is going on. Does opportunity come out of chaos?

In preparing for the Summit, I spoke with Cortland Nelson from the Minnesota DNR. Cortland told me that there is "mile high and inch deep" support for Parks and Outdoor Recreation. That doesn't sound good for us. At any kind of public meeting residents rave about Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces. But when they are asked, "What are your priorities?" They list sewers and affordable housing. We don't make it over to that essential services list. How do we move people from satisfaction with our services to support for our services?

We have people who define Outdoor Recreation so differently – soccer mom's, hunting and fish enthusiasts, and the wide variation in definitions of "camping" (the RV with all the conveniences vs. the wilderness experience). We are trying to do so much with that chaotic situation. It is our opportunity to reinvent ourselves and what we do.

I was talking with Dan (Dan Collins, MN DNR) about the tennis program life cycle. In the 70's we couldn't build enough tennis courts. Today many of the tennis players are dying. Courts are sprouting grass. The USTA (United States Tennis Association) loves tennis. They decided not to fold up their tent. Instead they asked, how are we going to get more people interested in and playing tennis? They changed the rules, promoted "cuter" equipment, made the game easier for beginners to learn and for boomers to continue to play. The USTA is doing something about the decline of tennis; and they are beginning to make a difference, based on sales of equipment, etc. The trend will be toward anything that does not cause pain to the knees.

What we have in common with the USTA is that we love Park and Recreation as much as they love tennis. How do we pull that passion back together so that we have the will to change? What did the Dali Lama say about change?

The Dali Lama said, “Open your arms to change, but don’t let go of your values”. If you look at the backs of the new quarters, only two states have something to do with economics. The original 13 states have depicted history. All of the rest of the states have ducks, lakes, etc. Nature and open space is valued in this country.

How do you like my necklace? What they say about “Minnesota Nice” is true. They are “pop-it beads”. I wear them to remind me of where I came from. We are about some things that no one else does. As we move forward to change, let’s not lose our values.

In order to understand this shift, let’s consider how we got off course. How many of you remember Proposition 13 in California? If you look at what happened, a shift was made from what we made happen and became how we can make money. We started down the road to charging for absolutely everything. This younger group of professionals at the front table is our future. Not only have they never been outdoors, but they don’t remember a time when you could go to the swimming pool for free.

We have gone over board on statistics. Chris Kimber from the MN Department of Health told us that \$490,000,000, or half a billion dollars could be saved per year; if we could just get every adult in Minnesota to be physically active for 30 minutes every day. In Minnesota 70% of all residents get their drinking water from ground water. What happens when the water gets tainted or polluted? We can quote statistics all day.

It is about the story. Do you ever watch the drug adds on TV? Do they tell you about pain, bad ingredients, or side effects (except in the fine print or with a fast talking announcer)? They tell a story. They are not talking about what the drug is doing, but what the drug makes happen.

Think about our stories – not about what we do. It is not about how do we do this, or how do we do that. It is about what we make happen. When you start to look at best practices and where we will get the money to maintain infrastructure; don’t forget about what we make happen for other people.

The change won’t happen without you. What are you going to do? What is it that you are going to walk away from this Summit with? What are you going to make happen? Don’t forget the power of one person with the perseverance to make things happen. Eric Blank, Plymouth Park and Recreation Director, told about the R2D2 style back pack their staff uses to document park assets. He made that happen. At an informal meeting of Ramsey County staff this morning, they were talking about this one guy whose property abuts a park. That one guy is making a difference; they are going to run out and change the park signage.

Pick up a tag from the middle of the table. Write down at least one thing, one insight, one piece of information that you are going to take back to work and make happen. Information with out action is just overhead. Take this tag back with you to make sure that you do something with what you have learned here.

I have done a lot of work with the VIP (Vision, Insight and Planning) Action Plan in California. It is very clear that I still need to direct more efforts in that direction. It’s about you. It is about us, the collective us. We need to pull everyone together. We all get better, when one of us gets better.

On the back of your nametag, write down your commitment. What would you like to contribute to this best practices project? Do you want to ask good questions? Those who ask questions are equally as valuable as those with the answers.

I'm going to put something on the Best Practices Website about strategic planning. What can you contribute to the website? Think about your very best story. On your way home think about the fact that statistics are nothing without the stories.

How many people get tired of explaining what we do? I now say something about bio-energetic engineering. My story is about my husband's friend. The friend lives in California. We were visiting him in December. College professors are really tired by December. We went out to dinner with my husband's friend and some friends of theirs. The inevitable question came up, "Ellen what do you teach at the University?" My husband said, you won't believe what she teaches. I was so tired that I just let it go. The next morning the friend was talking about his parents that live in New Jersey. I asked, how is your mother doing? Great! She goes to the community center and is very busy going to lunches, activities, trips, etc. My father won't get out of the house. He sits and plays the piano. But, every month a women at the community center calls to ask him to come to the center to play the piano for groups. It is his only social interaction. I responded; "thank God for Park and Recreation".

People value what we do. They just don't understand it. Think about people want to have happen. That will be the next Golden Age of Park and Recreation.

Put your tag someplace where it will remind you to do the right thing. Leave your name tag as a way of letting folks know about the contribution you would like to make. We are about to embark on the second Golden Age of Park and Recreation. Whether that ship sails depends on each one of us.

Information without action and statistics without stories are just overhead.

I just know that you are going to make a contribution.