

**Fees and Sponsorships: Comments from the Field**  
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In the summer of 2005 I conducted a small research project on how public park and recreation professionals at selected agencies in Minnesota are dealing with the issues of fees and corporate sponsorships. I interviewed the following professionals:

- Courtland Nelson, Director, Minnesota State Parks
- Margi Walz and Tom McDowell, Directors of Resources, Facilities and Programs, Three Rivers Park District
- Bob Biersheid, Director St. Paul Parks and Recreation
- Steve Michaud, Director of Lakeville Parks and Recreation
- Mary Bisek, Director of Inver Grove Heights Parks and Recreation
- Jeff McKay Director, and Tim Truelson Program Supervisor, Owatonna Parks and Recreation.

All of these agencies and professionals are dealing with the fees issue. Each agency is working to better define fee structures. As an example, Three Rivers is working with a consulting firm to develop a rationale for fees and the level of fees. They are categorizing their services into “basic” (mainly tax supported services) and “value added” services which need to be supported by fees. A major filter in this determination is which services offer benefits for the entire community (e.g. overall health, environmental quality, youth development) and which services offer benefits more for the individual (e.g. adult personal development).

There is some evidence of a retreat from fees. Three Rivers has recently eliminated their long standing entrance fee to their parks. Their Board decided that the entrance fee was an obstacle for the poor and for families on the margins. The District now offers free access to parks, trails, beaches, nature centers, etc. The Board believes people need access to outdoor recreation without the barrier of fees. The Board is willing to raise taxes a small amount and to raise fees on the more “value added” services to make up for the lost revenue. The City of Owatonna is working with their Park Advisory Committee to ask the City Council to allow the Park Dept to reduce fees for youth after school recreation programs. The Department has seen a reduced participation in these programs due to increased fees. They also have documented increased vandalism at schools and parks after fees were raised and program participation dropped. State Parks is trying to lower fees due to reduced day visitation, which resulted from recent fee increases.

All the professionals interviewed were concerned about the impact of fees on those on the margins. Many have scholarship funds to assist those who have difficulty paying the fees, but some Departments have seen a significant increase in demand for these scholarship funds. City of St. Paul is committed to keeping 42 recreation centers open even in the face of budget challenges. The Director of St Paul sees increased fees in City facilities as a form of “gated recreation” where only those who can pay high fees will participate in public recreation programs and facilities.

All the agencies are also dealing with the issue of corporate sponsorships for park and recreation facilities and programs, and they are all struggling to a certain degree with the potential benefits and drawbacks of such corporate relationships. St Paul has hired a consultant to help them develop policies on corporate sponsorships and to then go out and establish contacts with corporations that see parks as an asset. Owatonna is exploring a new water park with a corporate partner that will give \$1,500,000 and have its logo painted on the bottom of one of the pools. Most agencies would allow naming rights for most facilities, and unobtrusive brand names in kiosks at entrances. But the issue gets more difficult when considering more natural areas and placement of signs onsite. The more resource oriented agencies like State Parks and Three Rivers have more concern about the presence of brand names on more natural facilities, and how traditional park advocates would react to having brand names associated with facilities like trails and parks.

The professionals interviewed in this study expressed five major themes regarding fees and corporate sponsorships:

- The all see a continued need for many public park and recreation services and facilities to be available to the entire community on a no-fee basis.
- All see a need to convince citizens that public parks and recreation should not be dominated by the affluent, or by corporations who only want to advertise their products on public land.
- Many of those interviewed see a changing role for the park and recreation director towards mainly being a fund raiser. They gave a number of examples.
- Repositioning is seen as a major goal and activity for these directors. They are trying to improve the image and standing of their departments in the minds of their constituents and communities. These professionals recognize they have to show that their programs and facilities are providing benefits to the entire community, and not just to those who participate in their programs. They are trying to show their services contribute to: community health and wellness, community tolerance and understanding, youth development, property values, and environmental quality.
- All the professionals interviewed in this research emphasized the need for park and recreation professionals to not lose sight of the historic mission of their agencies, the mission to provide a broad range of park and recreation services to a broad range of the community. They were very eloquent in expressing this sentiment. They are all struggling to some degree with the fees and sponsorship issues. But, they all commented that if our fees are so high that public parks and recreation facilities are only accessed by economic ability then we might as well close down our agencies because we would not be providing “public” parks and recreation as a “public” good. We would only be providing fees based entertainment for those with the economic ability to participate.