

**Nonprofit Partnerships in the Northeast Region: Assessing the Need for Strategic Support
Report Highlights
May 2006**

The NER Office of Park Partnerships commissioned this study in the fall of 2005 and hired Kristen McConnell, who coauthored the Northeast Regional Office Business Plan. The study's goal was to assess current partnership activities, evaluate them according to existing theory and best practices, and provide recommendations to benefit NER parks, partners and the Office of Park Partnerships. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used by McConnell: an on-line survey, one-on-one interviews, data review and analysis. The response rate was 86%. The final report is posted on the NER Office of Park Partnerships intranet site at: http://classicinside.nps.gov/documents/McConnell_Kristen_PR_Final.pdf. (Feel free to check out the NER Park Partnerships website <http://www.inside.nps.gov/regions/region.cfm?rgn=163&lv=2>)

Snapshot of NER partnerships--the stats:

Role of partners

Parks average 20 active partnerships during any one year.

Non-profit partnerships are only 25% of partnerships.

94% of non-profit partners worked with parks on permanent basis and have compatible missions. Indicates parks are getting more strategic and are focusing on organizations whose missions are incompatible.

Almost three quarters of managers said partners are engaged in park unit planning.

61% of partners' primary activities are interpretation and/or education compared to 38% who are involved fundraising for park-directed priorities.

Survey found that 81% of partners contribute in-kind donations, including goods, commodities or services.

Most parks averaged a \$1.00 or less financial donation per visitor per year.

Donations in general to parks increased from 1996 to 2000, then decreased and then increased through 2004.

With few exceptions, financial donations as a percentage of the parks' operating budgets are less than 4% per year; the exceptions are in the 8 to 12% range.

Assessing the health of partnerships

Northeast region parks don't have a formal program to regularly evaluate partnerships. Few managers regularly assess their partnerships and make corrections in management, priorities or activities with their partners. In spite of this, about 30% said the partnerships were highly effective; everyone else said they were effective or some what effective.

Communications

All respondents felt that they were more or less effective at explaining the NPS bureaucracy to their partners. About 80% reported partner frustration with NPS bureaucracy.

Most parks felt that the more time spent with partners, the more benefits the park received. Most managers felt that more than 20 hours per week were necessary to spend on partnerships but only 18% of parks were able to devote this much time to their partnerships.

75% of managers had between 5 and (more than) 12 meetings each year with their partners and that phone calls and emails frequently supplemented the formal communications. In general there was a high to medium level of communications. Conversely, less than half of parks are engaged in the coordination of the activities and priorities of their non-profit partners. Over 80% attend events organized by their partners.

Respondents felt that in successful partnerships it was crucial for the superintendent and deputy to articulate park needs and communicate with partners AND to share power with the partners. Superintendents reported that in 87% of the time, partners agreed with park priorities.

Resources for Park Managers

Half of the respondents turn to the NER Office of Park Partnerships for assistance; about 10 to 30% call the Regional Solicitor depending on the complexity of the issue. Others rely on park staff, other superintendents or the WASO Partnership Office (complex issues only).

Recommendations for....

Strengthening partnerships in the NER and assessing their health

Park managers should be skilled in how to build capacity into non profit organizations and how to support them effectively. They can improve a non-profit's capacity and stability by working with the board to attract appropriate board members, train staff and conduct long-range planning.

Partners should have a broader understanding of the role and responsibilities of the park superintendent as well as of the challenges of non-profit organizations.

Experienced park managers should continue to proactively identify opportunities to find partners.

Superintendents' and Deputy Superintendents' active involvement with partnerships is crucial to setting a positive staff attitude toward the partner(s).

Establish a mentoring program for superintendents who have less experience in partnerships.

Encourage the natural link between partnerships and civic engagement initiatives to identify and engage likely park stakeholders. These stakeholders are prime candidates to become park partners or, in other words, "civic partnerships."

The NER Office of Park Partnerships

Play a larger role in educating partners about the DO #21 policy and process; this may reduce the frustration partners have with NPS bureaucracy.

Assist superintendents becoming more aware of the legal and operational dimensions of the nonprofit sector—the more knowledgeable the superintendent is about non-profit organizations, the more effective the partnership.

Develop and implement a user-friendly tool that superintendents can use to assess the health of their partnerships.

Assist all levels of partnerships and meet their needs, including big construction projects with significant fundraising goals, small friends groups, as well as a myriad of smaller partnership-related issues.

Continue to promote the NER Office of Park Partnerships website.

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