

From Isolation to Integration: The General Management Planning Process

► Valley Forge National Historical Park

“These Valley Forge public meetings are the only ones I’ve ever covered where both sides are listening and learning from each other.” —Reporter, Local Newspaper



The general management planning process has been an excellent example of how the practice of civic engagement is resulting in a transformative reimagining of the park. By connecting to the community, including alienated stakeholders, the park has established a collaborative dialogue with the public. These practices have resulted in a richer planning process, a more expansive view of the commemorative experience, and a fresh role and identity for the park as part of the civic landscape

The Challenge: Overcoming Isolation

In 1999 NPS suspended the preparation of a new GMP for Valley Forge NHP after staff realized that the park did not have adequate community visibility and connections needed to develop a meaningful plan.¹ A survey revealed that the public had little awareness of the park and its cultural and natural significance. Additionally, the park realized through a series of external crises that NPS was not a serious presence in regional planning forums and discussions, and that the park had few connections and consequently little support from state, regional, or local government, or civic organizations.

Further, the park had a strained relationship with most of its visitors. Since the park’s establishment, the staff generally saw Valley Forge NHP as a ‘history’ park and its chief business was to serve only those visitors who came specifically to learn about the encampment of 1777. By the late 1990s, however, 80 percent of the park’s visitors were regional recreational users. The park failed to reach out to these visitors with interpretive programming or information. The primary types of communication that visitors received were regulations and restrictions, making them feel unwelcome.

The lack of visibility and connections forced NPS managers and employees to acknowledge how isolated the park was from the larger world surrounding it. If the GMP were going to be meaningful, the park staff and planners would have to make a concerted effort to forge new connections and change the dynamics of their relationships with regional users.

Building New Connections

To overcome the park’s low public profile, the staff undertook an extensive education and outreach campaign. The park set up briefings, beginning with local government, and continuing with other levels of government and with civic and business leaders suggested by each contact. These briefings also became vehicles for learning about community perceptions and attitudes towards the park. The more the staff went out, the more they raised public awareness of the park; and at the same time, continued to gain a deeper understanding of the community.

At first, the park had to seek invitations to speak, but as its profile grew, community organizations sought out NPS for briefings. The park continues to go out to the community, and to date, has conducted over 80 briefings.

In 2002 NPS restarted the GMP process and designed a public involvement process that would build on previous work that staff had undertaken in the community. The objective was to identify issues that seemed to be of most interest to the community, and to solicit active public engagement in the planning process, directly linking the level of participation with the quality of the resulting plan.

To obtain honest feedback a planning consultant conducted numerous stakeholder interviews. In these and in subsequent public scoping meetings, the community articulated ideas, issues, and concerns about the park and its management. The single most important message was the need for park staff to be open-minded. Visitors who had felt marginalized as “recreational” made it clear that they are hungry for information. They wanted



interpretation that enabled them to understand the park's history and significance, as well as its regulations. They asked NPS employees not to presume what their experience of the park and their commemoration of its significance should be.

The park solicited public engagement in the planning process through the press and through the publication of exemplary GMP newsletters. A great deal of time was spent building a mailing list by cleaning up old lists from various park divisions; soliciting names from each of the community briefings; and using public records to ensure all neighbors were included. The newsletters' 'lead articles' welcome and acknowledge the value of the public's voice in shaping the plan, and the sections covering the range of planning issues reflect what the park staff has heard from the community. In addition, each section ends with specific questions to stimulate the community's thinking about a particular topic.

Staff also built relationships with the media, especially with individual reporters from local newspapers, providing tours and information that later resulted in very accurate and provocative articles that sparked public interest.

Reaping the Benefits of Connecting

The huge investment of time in reaching out, learning about the attitudes of the community, and acknowledging their concerns is paying off. The park received over 1,000 written comments in response to the scoping sessions alone, and attendance at the public meetings has been standing room only. More importantly, these efforts have resulted in an informed public that has become active partners in the development of the plan's management concepts.

In addition to informing the GMP process, the feedback from the community led the staff to recognize that there are many ways for people to experience the park. A combination of hearing the public and a more expansive view of the commemorative experience has resulted in the first-ever dialogue regarding recreational uses in the park. Park management felt confident to meet proven needs and take early actions prior to the completion of the GMP. These include an assessment of park trails and means to clarify them for better visitor understanding; the provision of information kiosks throughout the park; and better and more friendly informational maps and brochures for recreational users (even attached to parking tickets.) Working with partners the park also mounted a well received month-long museum installation at an immense adjacent shopping mall. The park now recruits recreational users as volunteers, and provides informal interpretive programs in the most heavily used parts of the park.

Funding

Building relationships through outreach and education is essential to the validity of the GMP. The park has used GMP funding to cover the cost of outreach including the briefings. Staff now consider sustaining these connections as an integral part of the job and allocate non-GMP staff time to this work.

¹ A second important reason that NPS suspended the GMP was the realization that it had insufficient baseline data on which to make sound resource management decisions. Concurrent with its efforts to connect to the community, the park and regional office completed a two-year data gathering effort.

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Civic Engagement Principles & Practices

- The park invested and continues to invest significant time to learn about the community, its perceptions, and attitudes towards the park.
- NPS emphasizes, as illustrated in the headlines and text of the newsletters, the value of the public's voice in the planning process.
- The newsletters are highly substantive resulting in educated stakeholders and informed public discussions.
- As the planning process progresses, park staff continue to acknowledge what they are hearing from the public. In addition to integrating public opinion in the text of the newsletters, the newsletters include a "what we have heard" section.
- The park's management team responded to public input by taking appropriate early actions that have had the additional benefit of leading to increased visitor understanding of resources and issues.

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