Sustainable Communities – Laying the foundations for our community’s future

There are four basic planning steps we must undertake if we are to ensure that our future communities’ park provision and level of service is sustainable.

1. Determine current and future park provision
2. Understand who our customers are
3. Know what assets are provided
4. Plan for long term asset replacement

1 - Determining Current and Future Park Provision
With poor or no forward planning, urban wastelands are all too easily created, void of public open spaces, or access to nature generally. Yet the planning and processes involved are relatively simple.

The real challenge is having the vision! An unfortunate trait of our species is short-term thinking. In a local government context, how often do we get caught confined in an annual frame of mind, or only slightly better, aligned to a political cycle? We must raise our eyes from our footsteps, and look to the far horizon to see where we are going, and to plan how we are going to get there.

You do not have to look far, to see the impacts of urbanisation. Infill house development, expansion of associated services, and higher use rates all put pressure on existing parks networks. Surrounded by development, land soon becomes too expensive to make extensions of existing parks financially viable, and pressure on urban fringes starts to take over otherwise natural areas.

There are some basic steps in planning for our communities’ future park provision that should be made, if we wish to avoid this situation:

- Develop a land database of existing parks. Record land information on a database so that it can be reported on. Ideally also map each park through the use of GIS systems.
- Establish a system of categorising each park by use e.g. sports parks, local parks, destination parks, natural parks etc. Categorise each park, and record this on the land database/GIS.
- Identify appropriate provision and land distribution levels. Are there enough parks overall? Are there enough parks of each park category? Are they in the right place?
- Identify what demographic changes are likely going to occur in the community over the next 20 or so years.

The hardest of these steps is to know how much is enough when it comes to park provision? One way to assist with approaching this step is to find out what others are providing. That way we can assess if we have more or less parks, and make informed decisions about whether we should be changing these levels of provision.
In 2010 the Yardstick Parks project benchmarked park provision across 81 New Zealand, Australian, and South African councils. What were the results?

**Hectares of Parkland/1,000 Residents**

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<th>NZ Median</th>
<th>AUS Median</th>
<th>SA Median</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hectares of Parkland/1,000 Residents</td>
<td>20.87</td>
<td>16.44</td>
<td>3.23</td>
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Provision can be greatly affected by the amount of large relatively unmaintained "natural reserves" which are usually provided on urban fringes, and rural communities. For this reason, Yardstick Parks also measured the provision of actively maintained (predominantly urban) park provision, versus natural park provision.

**Hectares of Parkland/1,000 Residents**

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<th>NZ Median</th>
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<tr>
<td>Maintained Parkland</td>
<td>7.67</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>2.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natural Parkland</td>
<td>13.41</td>
<td>11.41</td>
<td>0.94</td>
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Yardstick Parks breaks the maintained park provision further still, and looks at provision of neighbourhood (local) parks.

**Neighbourhood Parks Per 1,000 Residents**

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<tr>
<td>Neighbourhood Parks Per 1,000 Residents</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>0.62</td>
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What is your park provision, and how does it compare to these results? These are questions you should hopefully now be thinking.

2 - Understanding Who Our Customers Are
Any successful business owner will tell you that the key to success is knowing who your customer is, and what they want. It’s quite simple, if you give a customer what they want, at a price they are prepared to pay, then they will be happy, and will come back. Whether we admit it or not, managing parks and recreation activities is no different to running a business. We have customers who use our facilities and services, and they have to pay for them.

With financial resources always under positive pressure from external sources, and political will always trying to minimise resident rates increases, resources must be wisely allocated to gain the best value for the customer. We must find out how important our facilities and services are to customers, and also how satisfied they are with their provision. We can then reallocate our resources and efforts to where it counts most – from our customer’s perspective. If we get this right, complaints should reduce, and use should increase.

How do we go about this? There are three basic approaches that can be taken.

- **Community mail out survey** – Although this will reach most members of the community, it is a very blunt instrument for identifying customer desires and satisfaction levels. Generally only those educated or well resourced enough, or with a point to prove, will respond.

- **Focus group consultation** – For this to be successful, a truly representative cross section of the community will need to be included. It is a good way of having “one on one” dialogue with the community. It is the best method of being able to introduce the cost of providing services into the equation. When costs are associated with levels of service people are better able to make decisions about prioritising expenditure.

- **User intercept survey** – This is the best way of finding out from actual users of parks what they want, as opposed to views of the general community. It is also a good way of gathering information about user demographics.

ParkCheck (and LeisureCheck for pools and leisure centres) is a Yardstick project that assists with determining customer expectation and satisfaction levels, using the user intercept survey methodology. The following results are from the 2010 survey of New Zealand members.
Users are also asked to identify how important each of the following facilities and services are to them, followed by how satisfied they were gardens and trees; playgrounds; seats and tables; toilets; signs; cleanliness; grass maintenance; paths and...
tracks; shade and security. The facilities and services with the biggest gap in importance and satisfaction, should become the focus of available resources. Some examples of the findings of the 2010 ParkCheck of New Zealand members follows.
Neighbourhood Park Playgrounds

Sports Park Seats and Tables

We have traditionally told our community what they wanted. Perhaps it is time we listened to them instead?

3 - Knowing What Assets are Provided
Do you know how many seats and signs you currently provide? What is the total length of your sealed paths? How many street trees do you manage? Answers to these and similar questions are important, if you wish to make strategic decisions about levels of asset provision, and consequential allocation of resources.
A good asset register is the engine room of a well managed parks and open space network. Organisations that have up to date information on their assets, are able to assess if they have over or under provision compared to other organisations. They can also have more meaningful dialogue with their community about where savings can be made to make improvements elsewhere.

As well as information on what assets are provided, additional information will enable sound asset management decisions to be made.

When establishing an asset register, start first with the high risk and high value assets. Then collect information on other asset types as resources allow, leaving “living assets” until last. Always remember that asset information needs to be kept up to date as assets are created and removed. This means you not only have to have sufficient resources to capture the data, but also to review it, at least on a 3 to 4 year cycle.

Collect a description of each asset; its location; installation date and manufacturer (if known); give it a condition grading using a scale like 1-5, where 1 is excellent; also estimate remaining useful life; and take a photo, and a GPS co-ordinate if you plan to map your assets on a GIS system.

It is a slow process that is better to start, and complete over time, than not start at all.

4 – Planning for Long Term Asset Replacement
A constant feature of local government is the positive pressure to always increase levels of service - to build new features and facilities. This is often undertaken at the behest of political whim, or local pressure groups, and little or no forward planning is undertaken to understand the whole of life costs of committing to new projects.

Renewal of existing assets and facilities, on the other hand, is often the poor second cousin, and little or no funding is identified for their replacement.

This approach of continually adding new assets and facilities, and not replacing existing assets, coupled with short term financial planning, is a ticking time bomb. Are we creating assets or liabilities for our future generations?

To address this, we need to report the whole of life cost of new assets to our decision makers, so that they are fully aware of the financial burdens they are creating for future generations. As a rough guide, assets costs approximately eight times their installation cost over their life, when you take maintenance, insurance and loan servicing into account.

In addition we need to be projecting financial estimates out at least 10 years, and in some cases 20 or 50 years for high cost assets.

In doing so, this will prevent financial ‘surprises’ from ending up on the council table, and allow elected representatives to weigh up alternative uses of funding, as well as to be able to plan for asset replacement when it is need.

In the ideal world, funding for asset replacement should be the first priority, with new capital second, and then only where it is needed to bring a park or facility up to an agreed level of service that can be afforded.

It is unlikely that our elected representatives will take these steps themselves. If these changes are to happen, they will either need to be driven through legislation, or from the bottom up. Rather than waiting for Central Government to step in, the bottom up approach can be started now. Begin work on collecting land and asset information. Develop a parks strategy, and start to find out what your communities really want out of their parks. Start reporting the full life cycle costs for all capital projects, and present senior management and the elected representatives with long term financial projections.
The funding decisions associated with our recommendations are out of our hands, but at least we will have done our jobs as parks professionals.

Perhaps one day a future generation will look back at our time and say ‘what vision our city forefathers had’. So mote it be.