

Commentary

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**Summary:** A one-size-fits-all approach is neither necessary nor advisable for the funding and management of public parks and recreational facilities.

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## **FLEXIBILITY IS KEY TO RESPONSIBLE PARKS AND RECREATION MANAGEMENT**

By David Stokes

Everyone loves parks. Everyone deserves access to parks (and recreational facilities, too). Everyone (well, almost everyone) is willing to pay for parks and recreation. Making certain that our parks and recreation facilities are funded and managed in the most fiscally responsible manner is important, and municipalities need to consider every option for their funding and operations.

There is no shortage of parks to enjoy in Missouri. We have one national park in Missouri (America's smallest—the Gateway Arch). We have 57 state parks. There are hundreds of county parks and hundreds (if not thousands) more city parks. There are hundreds of conservation areas and historic sites, plus one very large national forest. We even have, by my count, four functioning private parks in Missouri.

How do we pay for all these parks? State parks and conservation areas are funded by state sales taxes. City and county parks are funded by both local property taxes and sales taxes. Specific recreational facilities within parks are often funded with user fees, such as your family's annual summer swimming pool pass.

Is this the right way to fund them? What alternatives exist beyond the typical system whereby the city owns a park, the city levies taxes to fund the park, and a city department manages the park system? Well, there are lots of other options, but that is not to say there is anything wrong with the standard system described above. It is, in fact, the preferred way to operate in many cases.

The needs for park and recreation facilities vary by community. Counties with major state parks, like Lincoln County, have less need for county parks. Cities with major county parks, like Ladue in St. Louis County, have less need for municipal parks. The Mark Twain National Forest has 1.5 million beautiful acres of forest across 29 counties in southern Missouri. Does all that public land reduce the need for state and local parks in many of those counties? Of course it does. People want greenspace and parks, but they don't really care whether it is the federal, state, county, or city government that is providing it.

People also want (whether they realize it or not) to pay for parks with general taxes. Nobody wants to enter a neighborhood park with their children by going to a specific gate to pay an entrance fee to walk into the park. Recreation facilities are another story. We want people to enter swimming pools, ice rinks, and golf courses at designated spots with rules governing the number of visitors, where you begin, and so on. These rules and limits are needed for safety and organization. Since people are lining up to enter, it isn't hard to have them pay a fee at the same time.

Paying for recreational assets with user fees isn't just simple, it's also fair. Most people use parks. Far fewer people play golf. That municipal golf course should get as much of its funding as possible from the people who play golf, while the cost of operating the general park can be spread over the wider community. Those fees also limit the number of participants at any one time, and that is a good thing. If a park gets crowded on a beautiful spring day, most people can still enjoy themselves there, and their experience won't be significantly impacted (although parking may be tricky). A large crowd in a swimming pool or ice rink not only hurts the experience, but it makes it unsafe for everyone. A long line at the golf course or tennis courts ruins the game for all. Fees can be used to reduce that line and, yes, while surge pricing is difficult for governments, it can still be used in some situations.

Who should operate the parks and recreation facilities? The government itself? In many cases, yes. A city parks department is perfectly capable of managing the local park. However, for more complex entities, like a golf course, contracting out the operation of the facility is a better idea. Managing a golf course is a difficult job, and cities are better off contracting with private companies that specialize in golf courses (there are many of them) than trying to manage the course itself. The same goes for swimming pools, ice rinks, and larger tennis facilities. Cities and counties can contract out for expertise in these more complicated and resource-intensive assets while focusing their in-house park management on the more general park facilities that serve a wider audience. (Staff can also oversee the contractors to make sure they are living up to their management agreements.) Forest Park in St. Louis—one of the most famous urban parks in America—contracts with private and nonprofit companies for management of several park assets.

Local governments also frequently work with each other, and we should have even more of such cooperation in Missouri. For smaller municipalities in particular, small neighborhood parks may be all the town or village has the budget for. (That's not a criticism; community parks are wonderful.) Smaller municipalities can negotiate with larger neighbors to give their residents access to facilities in nearby communities. This is, admittedly, harder in rural areas where the other municipalities may be far away, but it is a simple solution in more suburban counties.

The cities of Richmond Heights, Brentwood, and Maplewood in St. Louis County provide an excellent example of municipal cooperation. The three mid-sized suburbs joined together so that each could share its recreational assets with residents of the other cities. In this case, each city brought one notable facility to the partnership. Brentwood has an excellent ice rink, Maplewood has a classic, large outdoor pool, and Richmond Heights has a modern, indoor aquatic and workout facility. For the past 20 years, residents of all three cities have received resident rates at each facility. This type of model should be expanded around Missouri.

The examples referenced above are practiced in county and municipal parks departments throughout Missouri, but there is room for improvement. There may be political opposition to contracting in some cases. There are several cities within St. Louis County, for example, that still operate their own municipal golf courses, so clearly there are opportunities for change.

Outsourcing management of certain facilities is not selling the public trust, and contracting with other cities or counties is not a mark of local government failure. There are many ways to give the residents of Missouri the park and recreation assets they want and deserve while funding them in a way that is efficient and fair.

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**PULL QUOTE 1:** Cities and counties can contract out for expertise in these more complicated and resource-intensive assets while focusing their in-house park management on the more general park facilities that serve a wider audience.

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