

Parks Are the Answer: Help Us Prove It

Meg Cheever

In just the last year I've seen several new fitness centers spring up in Pittsburgh, PA. But unless these centers sprout up in every neighborhood—with free memberships for all our citizens—they will never be the solution to our physical activity deficit. With a population of more than 300,000 inside our city limits, we need to be talking about ways to get tens of thousands of people more active. I'm not picking on fitness centers, just using that obvious example to illustrate the problem of translating activity programs to a meaningful scale. *Is the activity scalable?* When I read about programs designed to promote teen physical activity through exciting programs in canoeing—which bus participants miles from their homes—I have to wonder how that experience will translate into long term activity patterns. How many of the teens will be canoeing in 3 months or 3 years or 30 years? *Is the activity sustainable?*

To try to understand what makes physical activity scalable and sustainable, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy recently sponsored a colloquium in New York City in association with Drs. Mindy Fullilove and Lourdes Hernandez-Cordero at the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University and the New York City Parks Department. One of our speakers, Dr. Michelle Segar, studies the psychology of physical activity at the University of Michigan. She painted a bleak picture of the success rates for people who embark on an exercise program. According to Segar, usually a doctor's warning or a glance in the mirror prompted them to start a new exercise regimen. But Segar's study of the psychology of sustained activity suggests guilt, duty, and obligation are poor long-term motivators. Apparently future health benefits may be just too abstract and speculative to motivate long-term changes in behavior.

So what does work to motivate people to engage in sustained exercise? According to Segar, it's when the activity meets our primary needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others. People stick with physical activity because it feels good and connects to their core values.

At the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, we believe urban parks can play an important role in creating a new context and brand for physical activity, building on the

established associations of parks with beauty, fun, relaxation, and play. We aim to re-position physical activity in the parks in terms of well-being, fun, stress reduction, and connections to other people and the natural world. We believe that urban parks are uniquely positioned to contribute opportunities for sustainable and scalable physical activity. And we are simultaneously working on several fronts to get that message out to the community.

We have been working to engage the Pittsburgh community through our inaugural public awareness campaign, titled "Parks Are Free" (www.parksarefree.com). Sponsored by UPMC Health Plan, the campaign has begun raising public consciousness of these rich resources through the "Parks Are Free" multi-channel marketing campaign, which is designed to sell the public parks to our own citizens. We want to continuously improve this effort to influence consumer behavior, moving beyond awareness of the park resources themselves toward re-branding an individual's use of the park as "fun." We also want to research the measurable results of the program. This effort is scalable, adaptable, and capable of leveraging our country's vast urban park resources.

To scale up parks access in Pittsburgh, we have been working for the past 15 years to make the city's 2,000-plus acres in 171 parks more attractive venues for physical activity. We are currently at work on major projects to increase park access and use across our neighborhoods and develop life-long park users.

Partnering with community organizations has been one of our most effective community outreach strategies. We are part of a confederation called "Find the Rivers," a consortium of local organizations working to help reconnect the city's Hill District with Pittsburgh's three rivers and the rest of the city. After working in the community to help establish consensus around a future vision for the Hill, Pittsburgh's historic center of African-American cultural life, Find the Rivers and Hill House Association invited the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy to bring its expertise in project management to the implementation and project management phase. Together we are working to restore neighborhood parks, trails, and public stairways that re-establish internal physical connections within the neighborhood and connect the Hill with Pittsburgh's three rivers and with the city's great parks. Our first capital project will help create a scenic overlook, nature playground, and performance space in a community park. The Parks Conservancy is serving as the project manager and fiduciary agent for this project.

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To help launch children and families on a lifelong habit of physical activity in the parks, we have targeted construction of a new Environmental Center in our largest park as a corporate priority. A community visioning process established an overarching mission for a new Environmental Center at Frick Park: *Education through Restoration*. As a theme, *Education through Restoration* is active (programming is outside and hands-on) and purposeful (programming actually helps to restore the park). This newly envisioned Environmental Center will be a joint project of the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and the City of Pittsburgh. It will offer vastly expanded urban environmental education programming for camp and school groups, and will be the hub for all the Parks Conservancy's volunteer activities, environmental education, and community outreach programs. In addition to introducing the children and their families to the web of life found in the parks, the Environmental Center will help the children and their families learn to be comfortably at home on the miles of hiking and biking trails in the parks.

While we believe deeply in these 3 initiatives and all of the work we are doing in the city's parks, at the end of

the day what empirical evidence will we have that any of them has had an impact on physical activity in our city? At best, our evidence will be anecdotal and subjective—and that weakens our case when we go to talk to funders.

If we ever hope to make our efforts scalable and sustainable for millions of people, we have to move beyond anecdotes. That's why I believe that closer, more frequent collaboration between park practitioners and active living researchers is so urgent, perhaps even on a national level. We need a long-term, detailed study searching for correlation between the physical condition of park facilities and the health and physical activity levels of residents in the surrounding community. We need to measure physical activity in a community before major park restoration/development and then afterward track any changes in activity levels and well-being.

In cities throughout the country, urban parks sit in close proximity to people who are dying of inactivity. So in promoting urban park use we're working on a strategy that is both scalable and sustainable, which is really the only kind of solution to America's health concerns that makes sense.