

# Park Foundations: New Challenges, New Models

By Andrea Lynn

AS PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY CONTINUE TO FACE BUDGET CUTS, the role of park foundations becomes more and more critical. Foundations are versatile creations, addressing the needs of the government agency they represent while wielding the fundraising power of a nonprofit. No longer are foundations a mere afterthought—a convenient repository to catch any private-sector funds that might trickle in. More and more, parks foundations are vital to ensuring that new parks are built and existing parks are maintained.

Foundation consultant and former parks director Barry Weiss says the mechanics of setting up a foundation are the easiest part—just find an attorney to set up a 501(c)3 nonprofit. The real legwork comes in mapping out a strategy for raising money.

"I've been in the profession since the early 1980s. Sometimes, departments would create the foundation and then wait for the money to come in. The foundation itself is purely a vehicle and not the strategy. You need to be strategic in how to go after the money," Weiss says. "There are numerous ways to increase the success of a foundation, even in today's tough economic climate."

## Show the Benefits of Free Parks

Now is the perfect time to translate parks' benefits into donation streams. While it's true that most individuals and organizations have tightened their charitable budgets, Sue Black, director of the Milwaukee County Park System, insists there is still cash out there. One of the most important steps to take right now is to promote the advantages that parks offer. "In times when people don't have cash to spend, we are doing things like offering free skating. That means a lot to people right now. A family can go on a picnic, walk a dog, fly a kite—do all of these things that are affordable. That's when people see the real value of our public spaces," Black says.

Former executive director for the Parkways Foundation in Chicago and current consultant Brenda Palm couldn't agree more. "In down economic times, parks are vital for families to go and play." Palm points to increased attention on nature deficit disorder in children, as well as childhood obesity and Michelle Obama's health and wellness platform. She says there's never been a better time to turn the benefits of parks into fund-raising opportunities. "This is prime time for park foundations to really rise up and be investors in the history and legacy of our parks." Palm adds, "As I saw [when] the economy turned, the private sector seemed to realize that it was their responsibility to help."

## The Right People

A successful fundraising foundation requires that all board members believe in and support the foundation's mission. A good board should include people with technical skills, like attorneys and bankers, as well as visionary individuals who can direct the foundation's strategy. "The strategic ones are the hardest to get but... [they are also] the most influential," Weisa says.

Even more essential is that board members be networkers. "Our board helps open doors for me to meet with donors... and provides expert assistance and advice," says Nick Hardigg, executive director of Portland Parks Foundation in Oregon. "No matter how good your cause or case is, if you don't have a connection—someone to open the door for you to start a dialogue to giving—it becomes much more difficult."

Recently, when a large parking lot in the heart of downtown Portland was moved underground, the developer dreamed of having the ground level transformed into a city park. He donated the surface rights to the city but there wasn't money in Portland's budget to make the dream come true. That's when the foundation's board of directors stepped in. Their connections resulted in a \$1.6 million gift that became Simon and Helen Director Park—a 44,000-square-foot piazza park with a covered glass canopy, fountain, and café.

## Good Direction

Another key to a successful foundation is finding the right executive director to run the show. Hardigg says an executive director of a nonprofit requires "a generalist's skill set, from finance to volunteer and board management to the most important of all—fundraising." Other skills should include working inside and outside of government.

For Drew Satariano, executive director of Partners of Parks which supports Long Beach, California, a position like his demands not only creativity and energy but "getting around the community and telling the story about the foundation. It takes time to build up that flow of money. It's not easy, but it's very rewarding once you get it going," Satariano says.



**An effective foundation requires a well-connected, activist board of directors, says Nick Hardigg, Executive Director of Portland (Oregon) Parks Foundation.**

## Naming Rights

Weiss notes that the use of naming rights is a great strategy for tapping into private sector money. "People will give you money to get their name on things," he says. "Also, corporations are sitting on a record amount of cash. They like their name associated with healthy things, and we are it. It's a business deal, so you have to give them certain recognition."

For Portland Parks Foundation, naming rights have

not only brought in significant funding—but the attributions have also been applied in tasteful ways. "I think there's a misperception... that putting a company or nonprofit's name on a donated park or piece of equipment somehow hurts the visitor experience," Hardigg says. "If done respectfully, it accomplishes a lot of good: it makes the donor feel appreciated, so they're more likely to give again." And the public, when they see the names engraved in plaques

### PROFILE

## Portland Parks Foundation in Portland, Oregon

THE PORTLAND PARKS FOUNDATION was founded in 2001 and is currently led by Executive Director Nick Hardigg. It has raised more than \$10 million since the hiring of its first executive director in 2002. Projects they have helped to fund include the creation of Holly Farm Park in a low-income neighborhood, equipping parks with handicap-access and resurfacing 96 outdoor basketball courts.

According to Hardigg, the foundation's current operating funds are largely provided by major donors—a core group of 100 people in the "Legacy Circle," who give a thousand dollars or more per year to cover the foundation's basic costs. "We then raise restricted funds for projects, programs, and parks, and charge an administrative fee and sometimes direct fundraising expenses to defray at least part of those costs," Hardigg says. During its first decade of existence, he says foundation grants were essential in building that base of donors. "The other major revenue source is 'in-kind' support—the volunteer engagement of our board. Our board helps open doors for me to meet with donors, can fundraise for us, and provides expert assistance and advice," he says. One area not in Portland Parks' business model, but recommended by Hardigg is earned revenue. "If parks foundations can have earned revenue through renting out space or selling merchandise, that can be helpful," he says. ●



Nick Hardigg

Les Smith and Mamie Wheeler of the Portland Marathon (center) present a \$4,000 donation to Portland Parks Commissioner Nick Fish (far right) and Nick Hardigg, Executive Director of the Portland Parks Foundation (far left).





Portland

THEMISTOCK

or bricks, know that their tax dollars are being spent carefully—and that the private sector is stepping up to help parks succeed. Hardigg advises taking care to give recognition without “making the parks look like a billboard.”

Palm notes that that most of the time that balance is not difficult to achieve. In her work with the Chicago Park District, she found that “anyone who is giving to parks wouldn’t expect that their logo be splashed around. They want their donation to be respectful and in line with the park.”

### Cater to the Community

Hardigg says the main difference between the current fundraising model as compared with that of few years ago is the reality of widespread economic constraints. “Now, everyone has to make due with less,” he says. “You need to offer a solution to a problem, not just speak to the problem.” He stresses the importance of finding out when setting project goals what excites the community. For example, in Portland, many people would rather improve existing park amenities than build new parks. “You have to have that awareness in community of what is fundable. In Portland, that is concentrating on doing the best we can with the parks we have,” he says.

And tapping into the community’s priorities can also lead to repeat donations. “Would you rather have a dollar from [each of] a million people or a million from one person?” asks Black. “If you had a dollar from one million people and spend it wisely, you can come back to them and ask for another dollar next

year.” And there are other benefits to having a large pool of small repeat donations. “Beyond the cash,” says Black, “you get the advocacy—whether for funding or policy.”

### Utilizing Social Media

Leveraging social media is also a powerful tool for communicating the needs of parks and raising money for projects. Portland Parks Foundation, for example, recently nabbed \$20,000 from Safeway through social media. When Safeway sponsored a national competition looking for “America’s Most Natural City” via Facebook, the parks department and Portland Parks Foundation garnered votes through their social media presence—and ultimately won the contest.

### A Successful Model

Today’s new economic reality has resulted in increased pressure on parks foundations to produce results. Successful foundations will embrace the new challenges and use an array of strategies to engage the public and raise money. Satariano notes that when it comes to fundraising for foundations, there’s not a one-size-fits-all solution. “Parks and rec departments are as unique and individual as the city they are in. Understand your city and its needs, then develop your goals and objectives. Fundraise to accomplish these goals,” he says. Since each foundation is unique, it is up to the executive director and board of directors to tweak their business model to their advantage. ●