

Construction, Design & Engineering

Planning for parks: include public in the process

Back in the day, public officials, generally the parks and recreation department director and sometimes the city council, would determine where a park or recreation facility would be built and what elements they wanted. They would then hire a firm like ours to create a master plan. Some Colorado cities and towns still operate this way. In recent years, however, the trend statewide has been to invite community participation in the planning process. Our firm of community and landscape architects has worked collaboratively with citizen groups to design dozens of parks over the past 25 years. We have developed some observations about how the planning process can be managed successfully.

In our first public park-planning experience in 1983, we were asked by the Boulder Valley School District and the city of Boulder Public Works and Parks and Recreation departments to work with Boulder residents on a design for a site next to Boulder High School on which sports fields would replace buildings the city intended to remove to create a more effective flood plain next to Boulder Creek. During a series of often-controversial public meetings, we helped people understand why the site would be a more effective flood plain without buildings in the event of a major flood, and how sports fields, an enhanced bike path, and new park areas along the creek would benefit the school and community. The public process was mostly

civil, and ultimately resulted in support for the plan and our subsequent design.

More recently, we worked with the city of Louisville to create a master plan for the award-winning Louisville Community Park. The goal of the 11-acre, \$2.5 million park was to create opportunities for social interaction through a variety of activities and a central gathering space. During the public meetings, some neighbors who bordered the park site, which had been private land, expressed concern about the noise, crowds, parking and degradation of land they thought would occur with a dog park and ponds. The design team addressed these concerns during a collaborative-design process. The final plan placed the dog park and ponds in the southeast part of the site, away from and screened from the neighbors by berms and tall grasses.

Working with community members often means helping them identify their goals and creating support for their values.

Working with community members often means helping them identify their goals and creating support for their val-



Axel Bishop,
ASLA
Founder and partner,
Design Concepts,
Lafayette

ues. Elected officials generally are good at understanding the values that reflect their constituency. In the planning process, people generally focus on one or two things they want, such as a playground, a picnic pavilion or a water feature. They don't realize there are a dozen other elements they actually need, including paths, restrooms, and parking. A good designer will balance 40 criteria for good park design along with the key ideas on the community's wish list. Our job is to take those needs and desires and translate the community's special qualities and culture into design.

To do this, we usually plan three or four public meetings over several months. The first meeting gives people time to adjust to the idea of change. We introduce the basic concept for the park, its size, location and possible activities, and do a lot of listening and answering questions. Some degree of community resistance usually is expressed at this initial meeting; fear of the unknown is a powerful force, and distrust of government is a common theme. We listen to all the comments, affirming that we've heard the community's concerns. Validation is a powerful neutralizer of fear and anger.

During the second meeting we often hear, "Well, maybe, but here are the problems." We like to offer some ideas in a low-key way. We allow these ideas to percolate, and usually they come up again, presented by the community as their own ideas. By the third meeting we hear, "I gave it some thought and talked to my neighbor, and here are some solutions." At this meeting, we typically start designing with the public. People like to feel they are actively involved in the park design, so we sketch out their ideas and show images of other parks we've designed to help them visualize the elements that would fit together in a finished park. We then take these concepts, produce the final design and present it to public

officials, who usually accept the plans. If done well, the plans reflect a thorough and thoughtful community design process.

The movement toward public process that began in the mid-1980s focused on "consensus building." But what we do is not so much build consensus, but rather get people to work together collaboratively to accept compromise. If everyone feels they achieved some part of what they wanted and didn't have to give up too much, the process was a success. People usually feel benevolent about acquiescing to their neighbors' wishes and compromising for the good of the community. A good public facilitator will make this process appear seamless.▲