Your Facility Needs Assessment May Be Built on Unreliable Public Input

by Pamela S. Wooldridge, Research Northwest LLC, and Christine Coman, Coman Consulting

Historical Methods of Facility Planning

Recreation planners have long employed level-of-service (LOS) standards to assess the need for community recreation facilities. Historically and currently, many communities adopted standards based on NRPA guidelines that originated in 1971. The application of these national standards by many communities of different sizes and circumstances across the nation resulted in recreation facility inventories in these cities that bear a striking resemblance to each other, despite the fact that the communities are quite disparate.

In 1995, NRPA recognized that national-based standards may not be getting communities what they really need, and, thus, NRPA replaced the “yellow book” standards with a process to develop standards based upon assessing the adequacy of current facilities through actual user participation rates (demand) and comparing that participation to the available facility inventory (supply) to quantify facility needs. This method of needs assessment requires an approach that is both inclusive and representative of the community to accurately reflect the unique recreation characteristics of each community while also engaging the public constituency and securing their consensus regarding recreation facility and program priorities.

Focus Groups and Internet Surveys May Be Misleading

Inclusive community outreach tools such as public workshops, community organization surveys, Internet surveys, mall surveys and stakeholder interviews are essential in securing public participation in the needs assessment process, in understanding the goals and priorities of facility stakeholders in the community and, most importantly, building consensus for the conclusions of the needs assessment. Of greater importance is the requirement that the needs assessment be representative of the community, because those members of the community who choose to participate in workshops and self-administered surveys are seldom representative of the remainder of the population. In today’s public finance environment, a needs assessment that is representative of the entire community responds to the realities that (1) accountability to the public constituency is mandatory and (2) facility needs must reflect the entire community rather than special interests.

Statistically Reliable Public Outreach

In the Defensible, Actionable Needs Assessment, this accountability relies upon a communitywide quantitative calculation of facility need for the community as a whole, not just vocal stakeholders. Such community representation can only be accurately accomplished through a survey that has controls over
Pamela Wooldridge is with Research Northwest, LLC located in Gig Harbor, Washington. Christine Coman is with Coman Consulting, located in Palm Desert, California.

The Advanced Needs Assessment Method

The accuracy of the advanced facility needs assessment approach is primarily due to the statistically reliable collection of actual recreation activity participation communitywide and the identification of facility needs based on those levels of participation. This methodology provides the only recreation facility needs assessment that can accurately reflect the specific recreation needs of all residents, not just those residents who choose to be active in the public meeting process. The advanced needs assessment approach does not simply parrot national, state, or “similar” community standards. There are no similar communities because each community presents a unique demographic profile, unique availability of facilities and programs, unique proximity to major recreational opportunities, unique weather conditions and unique socio-demographic or lifestyle characteristics.

Tasks in the core advanced needs assessment methodology include historical and current analysis of demographics, population and recreation trends; collection of statistically accurate recreation participation rates for current residents through a communitywide survey; surveys of organized recreation sports user groups to compile their statistics and opinions; input from stakeholder interviews; focus groups; and consensus-building public workshops.

A Better Forecast of Future Needs

The communitywide survey that supports the quantitative calculation of facility needs includes demographic characteristics of the surveyed households. By analyzing recreation activity by a menu of demographic characteristics, those demographic variables that are predictors of change in future recreation activities incidence can also be identified. This enables a forecast of needs that not only represents the additional volume of population that is anticipated but, importantly, a forecast of participation rates that reflect changes in the demographic composition of the population as a whole as well. This forecast of needs in the future becomes vital in making decisions for today. Contemplation of major capital expenditures for facilities must take into account not only today’s needs but also the needs of the future community.

1 According to the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the challenge with self-selected polls is that there is no way to know how well (or how badly) the responders represent the views of the total population. Internet opt-in surveys — a “take this poll” or “tell us what you think” box on a Web site — are perhaps the most obvious examples. Margin of sampling error cannot be estimated for a self-selected poll, no matter how large. The reporting of a margin of error associated with an opt-in or self-selected poll is misleading.

Pamela Wooldridge is with Research Northwest, LLC located in Gig Harbor, Washington. Christine Coman is with Coman Consulting, located in Palm Desert, California.