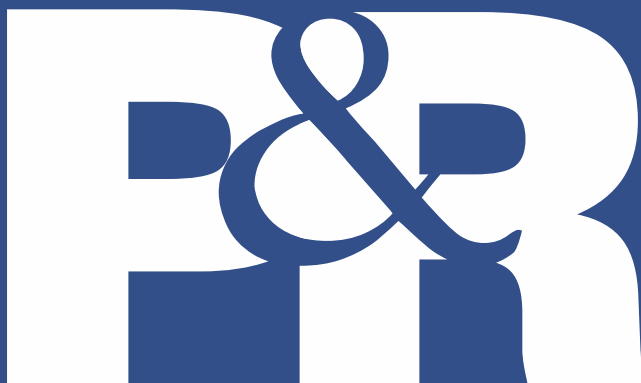


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PARKS AND RECREATION

The magazine of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association



leadership & governance



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FROM THE EDITOR

Leading Through Adapting and Accessibility

There is so much more to leadership than just making the decisions that move an agency or association forward.

Having the ability to adapt and also remaining accessible to both their team and the community can create a strong foundation to build success.

Adaptability is essential because no two days look the same. New challenges, evolving expectations, and emerging technologies demand that leaders think on their feet and respond with agility. Whether it's adjusting strategies, pivoting during a crisis, or embracing innovation, leaders who adapt quickly help their organizations stay relevant and resilient.

Just as critical is being accessible. When leaders are approachable and present—whether through regular check-ins, open-door policies, or just walking the floor—they create a culture of trust and transparency. People are more likely to share ideas, voice concerns, and feel valued when they know their leader is listening. Accessibility breaks down barriers, improves communication, and fosters stronger relationships across all levels of an organization. When everyone feels like they are contributing something of value, everyone wins.

This issue will look at how leaders are adapting both on the professional and elected official fronts, along with some insights from individuals who have previously won awards for their work at the Soaring to New Heights Conference.

I hope this issue finds you at a time where you can leverage these lessons to strengthen your team and community.

Thanks for reading,

— Wayne Utterback, Editor

Cover photo by James Lischett of the Park Ridge Park District, submitted as part of the 2024 Give Us Your Best Shot Photo Contest.



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GET ON BOARD

EXPLORING BEST PRACTICES FOR GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

By Peter M. Murphy, Esq., CAE, IOM, IAPD President and CEO

THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

The leadership issue of IPR magazine is one of my favorites because it enhances the ongoing commitment of IAPD member agency boards and staff to growing their leadership capacity. In fact, good governance is the major reason that park and recreation agencies in Illinois are so successful when compared to others around the nation.

The key to success for governance is the commitment and single-minded focus by a board and its chief executive on the mission, vision, and board culture of the agency. As new board members join in service to the community, this shared focus is critical to having the park district, forest preserve, and conservation district maintain their success and direction forward.

Recently, I responded to a board member who wrote, "Can one bad board member really influence a good board, and how do you deal with it?" In fact, it does matter who is elected or appointed to serve on a board. In most cases, a dysfunctional agency is the result of a dysfunctional board. One bad board member can, if left unchecked, change the chemistry of the board, and can chase good members off the board. I have seen it happen a number of times.

Board members need to know what is expected of them. If they don't, they might create their own expectations and role, and the rest of the board might not like the direction that takes them.

There is no room for the board member who has tunnel vision, an axe to grind, an overriding special interest or a self-serving interest, the board member who does not want to be a team player, or the board member who does not leave his or her ego at the door when they enter a board meeting.

So, who are these board members?

They are **Board Members that Nobody Wants:** (You need to practice the opposite of what I list here.)

For instance:

- They arrive late to board meetings and leave early.
- They frequently check their cell phone or text during meetings.
- They have no interest in board training.
- They criticize to the press, and the public, board decisions that were voted on and passed by the majority of the board but which they opposed.
- They think they have all the answers for every issue.
- They refuse to change their mind on any issue, regardless of the facts that are presented.
- They fail to read board packets and prepare for board meetings.
- They divulge information from an executive board session.
- They try to give directions to the chief executive in their individual capacity as a board member.
- They hold grudges against fellow board members when they do not agree with them.
- They try to dominate conversations at every board meeting.
- They appear at the office or at facilities and parks and try to give orders to employees.
- They want the agency to be a haven for hiring friends.
- They constantly criticize and question board policies and the executive's decisions and compulsively differ on almost every issue.
- They don't try to understand the perspectives of other people who serve on the board.
- They believe the executive and staff work for them.
- They love to play the game of stump the executive in public meetings.
- They argue with the public during the citizen comment portion of each meeting.

- They don't listen or respect other board member's opinions.
- They ignore the #1 rule of boardmanship which is to never surprise your fellow board members or the executive.

What is the role of the board member? It is the responsibility of a board member, with his or her fellow board members, to see that the agency is properly run; not to run the agency.

The top ten list of board responsibilities:

1. Advance the Mission

- The mission should frame all board discussions and actions. Do you know your District's mission?
- Can you repeat it?

2. Select the Executive Director

- After the selection is made, work to create and maintain a true partnership with the chief executive.
- Evaluate the executive director's performance annually.

3. Evaluate Agency Performance

- Monitor the budget.
- Track the strategic plan.
- Evaluate board performance.
- Do your performance metrics for the agency measure activity and customer outcomes?

4. Focus On Strategic Planning

- Develop and monitor a realistic strategic plan (3 to 5 years). Do you know it?

5. Ensure Sufficient Resources

- Are you familiar with your annual budget, your capital plan, your assets (parks and facilities)?
- Do you monitor and protect resources as you make governance decisions?

6. Stress Program Development

- Do you know the benefits of agency programs and services?
- Do you drop programs that exhaust resources or don't advance your agency's mission?

7. Actively Promote the Organization

- Can you express the agency's vision and goals?
- Could you do it in an elevator?
- Do you know who officially speaks for your organization?

"Unity is strength...
when there is
teamwork and
collaboration,
wonderful things
can be achieved."

~Mattie Stepanek

8. Maintain Legal and Ethical Integrity

- Do you comply with all laws and disclose conflicts of interest?
- Do you maintain the confidentiality of executive sessions?

9. Cultivate Leadership Sustainability

- Do you identify, ask, train potential leaders? Do you know someone who could replace you?

10. Individual Authority

- Do you understand that no single board member has decision-making authority for the agency, absent the board acting together in its official capacity at a properly called meeting.

I encourage you to read this entire issue of IPR. It is filled with tips and strategies to build leadership capacity in yourself and good governance for your board.

Thank you for your dedication to life-long learning and good governance.

IAPD Upcoming Events

Tuesday, May 20, 2025

Boot Camp #1

Wednesday, May 21, 2025

Boot Camp #2

Wednesday, May 28, 2025

Boot Camp #3

Thursday, May 29, 2025

Boot Camp #4

Tuesday, June 10, 2025 – Virtual

Boot Camp #5

Saturday, August 16, 2025

Conservation Day at the State Fair

Friday, October 24, 2025

IAPD Best of the Best Awards

6:30 p.m. – 10:00 p.m.
Wheeling Park District
Chevy Chase Country Club
1000 N. Milwaukee Ave.
Wheeling, IL 60090

Thursday, November 6, 2025

IAPD Legal Symposium

9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
Hyatt Lodge/Conference Center
2715 Jorie Blvd
Oak Brook, IL 60523

January 29-31, 2026

IAPD/IPRA Soaring to New Heights Conference

Hyatt Regency Chicago
151 East Wacker Dr
Chicago, Illinois, 60601





EYE ON THE PROFESSION

A CLOSER LOOK AT TRENDS AND ISSUES IN THE PARK AND RECREATION PROFESSION

By Suzi Wirtz, IOM, IPRA Executive Director

A LIFELONG WALK IN THE PARK!

The summer season is upon us, and that means one of the busiest times of the year for parks and recreation professionals. It also offers the perfect time and opportunity to showcase this profession as an extremely smart option for a meaningful, rewarding career.

Two years ago, IPRA implemented a workforce task force to understand the challenges the industry faced with respect to future employees. While we all know that parks and recreation staff and services are often the unsung heroes who contribute daily to the physical, mental, and social well-being of their communities, unfortunately sometimes the workforce in this space does not receive the attention, recognition or resources it deserves. The IPRA task force, after much research and member interviews, recommended a wide variety of actions from toolkits to relationships with schools to videos and career fairs.

As a high priority within IPRA's strategic plan and with board-approved investments in both human and financial resources, last year we began work with an outside marketing firm to conduct further research and create deliverables for 2025. Research done by IAPD is also valuable when working to attract future employees. According to data collected in 2023, there are over 56,000 Illinois residents employed by park districts, forest preserves, conservation, recreation and special recreation agencies, representing \$739 million in salaries. How do we highlight all of these job opportunities with a compelling call to action? How can we ensure that the vast majority of Illinoisians recognize and realize the value of the profession and encourage employment within it? How should IPRA, as the professional association for all parks, recreation, and conservation staff in the state, utilize facts and innovation to deliver a resource for members? The answer: A robust digital kit for members that's literally downloadable and immediately available to use. This kit, now available at ilipra.org/workforce will help Illinois park, recreation, and conservation agencies, as well as universities and high schools, raise awareness of meaningful career options and attract passionate and dedicated employees.

More than a Paycheck

The research phase confirmed many anecdotes, and also teased out some universal feelings, regardless of position, size or location of an agency or stage within a career. In a nutshell, parks, recreation, and conservation careers are most satisfying for people who:

- Want to serve others
- Want to support the community
- Have a passion for the industry
- Seek flexibility and work-life balance
- Place a high priority on family life
- Love recreation, sports, health and fitness, and nature

- Appreciate excellent benefits
- Like to be collaborative and creative

The challenges, however, were a lack of understanding that the industry offers a wide variety of career opportunities in finance, management, marketing, HR, and other roles, as well as the fact that working in parks and recreation is not typically presented as a career option by career counselors. And, although many current parks and recreation employees held seasonal or part-time positions at their local parks and recreation facilities as first or summer jobs, there is still a significant lack of awareness that the parks, recreation and conservation field offers lifelong, professional careers.

Some quotes and sentiments from IPRA members likely echo what you tell yourself every day. It's our goal to make sure this type of motivation resonates across the state of Illinois, so that when students and job seekers are choosing a path, they seriously consider this field.

- "It's not just clocking in and out. This is our passion."
- "One of the coolest parts of the job and what's got me coming back day every day is not a single day is the same here."
- "I love to be of service, so this was really a perfect fit."
- "I am actually learning that it benefits us to have people with experience in the private sector who bring some of that knowledge to us to help us grow, because we want to serve the community but also have to meet our bottom line."
- "It's the networking aspect and the collaboration you get in the parks. I have friends and colleagues all over at different agencies."

What's Included in the IPRA Workforce Recruitment Resource Kit?

The online kit for IPRA members features a variety of materials to help agencies connect with potential employees and schools - connecting the dots for students interested in learning more about meaningful careers.

- **Posters & Flyers** – Print-ready and customizable materials to display at job fairs, community centers, and agency facilities.
- **Social Media Templates** – Pre-written posts and graphics for LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook to engage the right audience and potential employees.
- **Digital Banner Ads** – Customizable website and email graphics to enhance agency and educational recruitment messaging.
- **Messaging Strategy Guide** – Tips on how to effectively communicate with job seekers, including key audience personas.

- **Best Practices & Outreach Ideas** – Proven strategies for maximizing agency recruitment reach through partnerships, events, and digital marketing.

Recruit Now, Retain for the Long-term

The parks, recreation and conservation workforce is a cornerstone of vibrant and healthy communities. Your work enhances public health, mental health, strengthens social community and interaction, contributes to economic development within the state, and fosters environmental stewardship. Not to mention, it's a whole lotta fun!

By investing in and providing resources to build up, recruit and retain a skilled parks and recreation workforce, we are working to ensure that future generations continue to have access to the benefits of safe, accessible, and well-maintained public spaces. This group of talented and passionate people plays a central role in shaping the communities of tomorrow. Please take some time to review the kit at ilipra.org/workforce. You'll find a guide that walks you through exactly how to implement the materials, step by step, with expert advice and messaging. Start using the resources today and kick off your summer by letting everyone know that where you work and what you do is a walk in the park.

IPRA Upcoming Events

How to Think Big in Parks and Recreation

July 9 or July 17
Webinar

Unlock new potential in this session designed to inspire a bold, expansive approach to community development. This engaging workshop empowers parks and recreation professionals to envision and implement impactful projects, groundbreaking programs, and innovative services that address evolving community needs.

7th Annual Unplug Illinois Day

July 12
Locations throughout Illinois

The 7th Annual Unplug Illinois Day is Saturday, July 12, 2025 – join park, recreation, and conservation agencies state-wide in planning an event to highlight the programs and facilities that

make your community thrive! Unplug Illinois promotes the value that parks, recreation and conservation play in creating healthier communities and encourages people to get out, unplug, play, and engage with one another through experiences at local park, recreation, and conservation agencies.

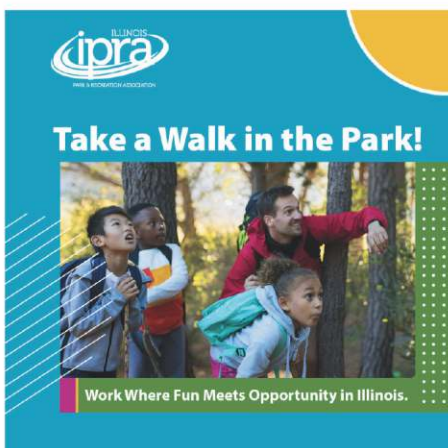
Lunch & Learn: Outdoor Adult Fitness Parks Best Practices for Promoting Community Health™

July 22
Webinar

Join us for this informative program and learn about the key benefits of Outdoor Adult Fitness Parks, their applications in outdoor park design, considerations for ensuring total-body fitness, and real-life examples from National Demonstration Sites to inspire their own projects.

[Learn more at ILipra.org.](http://ilipra.org)

WORKFORCE RECRUITMENT RESOURCE KIT



Download here



ILipra.org/workforce

IPRA helps you promote exciting and rewarding career opportunities at your agency.



Jason Anselment
IAPD General Counsel

Two Essential Resources Now Available for New and Seasoned Commissioners

One of the most rewarding aspects of my professional career has been working with locally elected park commissioners. Park commissioners serve without compensation and donate countless hours of their personal time. These citizen volunteers epitomize service, and most run for office simply because they want to improve the quality of life in their communities.

With the Consolidated Election behind us, scores of new park commissioners are taking office throughout the state. For some, this is their first time in public office. Regardless, a critical part of fulfilling the role of park commissioner is to comprehend and observe numerous laws that impact the office, the board, and the day-to-day operations of the district.

IAPD offers a wealth of resources to help commissioners fulfill their responsibilities, but newly elected park commissioners should prioritize and take advantage of two resources now. The first is a three-hour orientation at an IAPD Boot Camp being held regionally in May and June. The second is one of IAPD's more popular publications: *The Park District Code*, which is available for purchase through the IAPD website.

While the Boot Camps are a valuable training course for new commissioners, seasoned commissioners and executive directors have found them just as valuable as a refresher course on their roles and responsibilities. Likewise, every park commissioner and executive director should have their own copy of the newly released, 500-page edition of *The Park District Code*.

Understand Public Meeting Rules While Satisfying Training Requirements

Although some new commissioners have previously served on non-profit or other boards, it is important to understand that public bodies are governed by an entirely separate set of laws. For example, one key difference between private, non-profit boards and public bodies is that public bodies must comply with the Open Meetings Act.

The Open Meetings Act governs the activities of every single meeting and contains specific rules, ranging from whether an action can be taken at a meeting to the number of commissioners that can participate in a discussion outside of a public meeting. There are limits on when a board can go into closed session, specific rules for agenda and meeting minutes, and numerous other legal requirements.

In fact, the Open Meetings Act is so important that every newly elected board member is required by law to complete a one-time training course within 90 days of taking their oath of office. The IAPD Boot Camp presents an opportunity for new commissioners to satisfy this requirement by attending a live, interactive course. While only first-time commissioners are required to take the one-time training for elected officials, history has shown that the Boot Camp session is an important reminder for all commissioners.

The only other option for new commissioners to satisfy the one-time training requirement is to attend an online training course administered by the Illinois Attorney General's Public Access Counselor (PAC). Unlike that online, non-interactive course, the IAPD Boot Camp allows participants to ask questions of the presenter. Attendees benefit not just from obtaining the answers to their own questions, but also from hearing the questions and experiences from other attendees. IAPD Boot Camp attendees will also receive a copy of the same Attorney General training materials that are part of the online training.

Penalties for Ethics Violations Reinforce Need for Training

Ethics laws are another important set of rules that are critical to understand as a public servant.

Most new commissioners are likely familiar with the broad principle of a "conflict of interest," but park commissioners must also be familiar with specific laws that impact public officials. For example, the State Officials and Employees

Ethics Act sets the minimum requirements for a district's own ethics ordinance, prohibits more than a dozen different activities, and forbids gifts from specific sources.

The Public Officer Prohibited Activities Act is another important law that sets forth rules regarding prohibited interests in contracts with the district, while numerous criminal statutes also govern conduct related to public contracts and bidding.

Violations of these laws carry significant civil and criminal penalties, board members must always be mindful of these rules. So IAPD is here to help you learn and navigate. All these laws will be covered at IAPD Boot Camps along with specific rules that govern the conduct of commissioners under the Park District Code. The course will help provide new commissioners with the guideposts they need to avoid pitfalls during their public service.

Overview of Financial Procedures & Other Responsibilities

In addition to open meetings and ethics laws, Boot Camps also cover numerous financial procedures that impact a park district's operations. For example, experienced professionals will discuss the details of the budget and appropriation ordinance, the tax levy process, audit and financial reporting requirements, and other basic financial information such as an overview of park district funds. This training will provide a foundation of knowledge for commissioners to build upon during their first year.

Must-Have Publication

IAPD's *The Park District Code* is an essential resource to supplement the knowledge gained at the IAPD Boot Camp. Every law that will be referenced at the IAPD Boot Camp is contained in this 500-page book, and it is a handy resource for every meeting. The newly released revised edition contains all applicable legislation enacted through the 103rd Illinois General Assembly and includes five entirely new statutes.

While all new commissioners need a copy of *The Park District Code*, all old copies also need replaced. There have been so many changes since the last edition was published six years ago that the old versions are no longer reliable.

IAPD is Your Source for Leadership and Board Development Tools

The topics discussed here are just a portion of the information that will be covered at the IAPD Boot Camps. Other sessions include boardsmanship, inclusivity, and the importance of legislative advocacy.

Take advantage of this opportunity and other IAPD resources to help you be the best park commissioner you can be!

CPI Rate for 2025 Property Tax Levy Year is 2.9%

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) "cost of living" or inflation percentage to use in computing the 2025 tax levy (taxes payable in 2026) under PTELL is 2.9%.

Section 18-185 of the Property Tax Code defines CPI as "the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers for all items published by the United States Department of Labor." This index is sometimes referred to as CPI-U. Section 18-185 defines "extension limitation" as "the lesser of 5% or the percentage increase in the Consumer Price Index during the 12-month calendar year preceding the levy year" (emphasis added).

For the 2025 tax levy year (taxes payable in 2026), the CPI to be used for computing the extension limitation is 2.9%. The CPI is measured from December 2023 to December 2024. The U.S. City Average CPI for December 2023 was 306.746 and for December 2024 was 315.605. The CPI change is calculated by subtracting the 2023 CPI of 306.746 from the 2024 CPI of 315.605. That amount, 8.859, is then divided by the 2023 CPI of 306.746, which results in 2.9% CPI. $(315.605 - 306.746) / 306.746 = 2.9\%$. PTELL limits the CPI adjustment to the lesser of 5% or the actual percentage increase, so this year's CPI rate is 2.9%.

Information on PTELL may be accessed through the Illinois Department of Revenue's Web site at www.tax.illinois.gov under "Local Governments" link, and the "Property Tax" link and then under "General Information and Resources". Choose the "Property Tax Extension Limitation Law (PTELL)" link under the "General Information" heading.

Year	December CPI-U	% Change From Previous December	% Use for PTELL	Comments	Levy Year	Year Taxes Paid
1991	137.900					
1992	141.900	2.9%	2.9%		1993	1994
1993	145.800	2.7%	2.7%	(5 % for Cook)	1994	1995
1994	149.700	2.7%	2.7%		1995	1996
1995	153.500	2.5%	2.5%		1996	1997
1996	158.960	3.6%	3.6%		1997	1998
1997	161.300	1.5%	1.5%		1998	1999
1998	163.900	1.6%	1.6%		1999	2000
1999	168.300	2.7%	2.7%		2000	2001
2000	174.000	3.4%	3.4%		2001	2002
2001	176.700	1.6%	1.6%		2002	2003
2002	180.900	2.4%	2.4%		2003	2004
2003	184.300	1.9%	1.9%		2004	2005
2004	190.300	3.3%	3.3%		2005	2006
2005	196.800	3.4%	3.4%		2006	2007
2006	201.800	2.5%	2.5%		2007	2008
2007	210.036	4.08%	4.1%		2008	2009
2008	210.228	0.1%	0.1%		2009	2010
2009	215.949	2.7%	2.7%		2010	2011
2010	219.179	1.5%	1.5%		2011	2012
2011	225.672	3.0%	3.0%		2012	2013
2012	229.601	1.7%	1.7%		2013	2014
2013	233.049	1.5%	1.5%		2014	2015
2014	234.812	0.8%	0.8%		2015	2016
2015	236.525	0.7%	0.7%		2016	2017
2016	241.432	2.1%	2.1%		2017	2018
2017	246.524	2.1%	2.1%		2018	2019
2018	251.233	1.9%	1.9%		2019	2020
2019	256.974	2.3%	2.3%		2020	2021
2020	260.474	1.4%	1.4%		2021	2022
2021	278.802	7.0%	5.0%		2022	2023
2022	296.797	6.5%	5.0%		2023	2024
2023	306.746	3.4%	3.4%		2024	2025
2024	315.605	2.9%	2.9%		2025	2026



By Duane Smith, CPRP
IPRA Education Director

Just a Summer Job? From Seasonal Employee to Future Professional

Every summer, young people step onto the pool deck for what many consider just a seasonal gig. For some, it's their first experience earning a paycheck. They learn responsibility, time management, and how to respond under pressure - all while ensuring the safety and enjoyment of their community. But when the final whistle blows sometime around Labor Day, many of these lifeguards hang up their uniforms and move on, unaware they've just taken their first steps into a much larger world.

In parks and recreation, lifeguarding is more than a summer job. It's a gateway into a profession that spans myriad interests including aquatics, programming, facility management, conservation, marketing, information technology, and much more. If we want to build the next generation of leaders for this amazing industry, we mustn't continue the habitual behavior of treating seasonal roles as one-and-done. We need to inspire a vision for a future in this field, and who better to lead this charge than the outstanding professional in the mirror.

Through mentorship, visibility, and intentional engagement, you can help your seasonal aquatics staff see themselves not just as guards, but as future park and recreation professionals. It doesn't require a lot of work - just simple, intentional everyday actions that build awareness and confidence.

As you prepare for the summer ahead, consider these five practical strategies to help your lifeguard team see parks and recreation for what it truly is: a career with purpose, growth, and lasting community impact.

Pro Tips from an Old Pro

Tell Your Story

You don't need a formal presentation - just take a few minutes during weekly wrap-ups or quiet moments during rotation to share how you got into the field. Talk about what your job entails beyond what's visible from the pool deck. Most seasonal staff have no idea how many different roles exist in parks and recreation or what those roles involve. Your story makes the profession real and reachable.

Show Them the Career Ladder

Create a simple visual that maps out roles within your agency - from seasonal positions to full-time leadership roles. Start with familiar titles like Senior Guard and include paths beyond aquatics such as recreation programming, special events, facility operations, finance management, or inclusion services to name a few. Post it in the breakroom, review it during onboarding, or discuss it in 1-on-1 meetings. Connecting opportunities to their interests helps them see how this could be a viable career option.

Offer Small Leadership Roles

Every seasonal staff member can take on meaningful responsibilities. Let them lead warmups or drills, mentor new hires, assist with scheduling, or help plan staff events. These micro-leadership moments build confidence and show what it feels like to guide others. Leadership development doesn't have to wait until they're full-time—it starts now and it starts with YOU.

Encourage Certifications and Training

Talk about certifications that can enhance their skills and open doors, such as Lifeguard Instructor (LGI), CPR Instructor, Aquatic Facility Operator (AFO), or Certified Pool Operator (CPO). For those thinking beyond aquatics, introduce the Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP) and Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI) credentials. If your agency offers in-house opportunities, let them know and show them how park and recreation professionals work together and care for each other.

Invite Them to See More

Exposure sparks curiosity. Invite seasonal staff to shadow a recreation supervisor, attend an agency event, or sit in on a staff meeting. Ask colleagues from other departments to swing by and chat about their roles. These simple, informal interactions help lifeguards see the bigger picture and envision themselves as part of it.

When we invest a little time and intention into our seasonal aquatics staff, we do more than build a great summer team - we grow future professionals. The park and recreation industry offers careers rooted in leadership, service, and connection. Let's help our lifeguards and other seasonal staff see those amazing opportunities and conclude that this isn't just a summer job - it's a fruitful and rewarding career.

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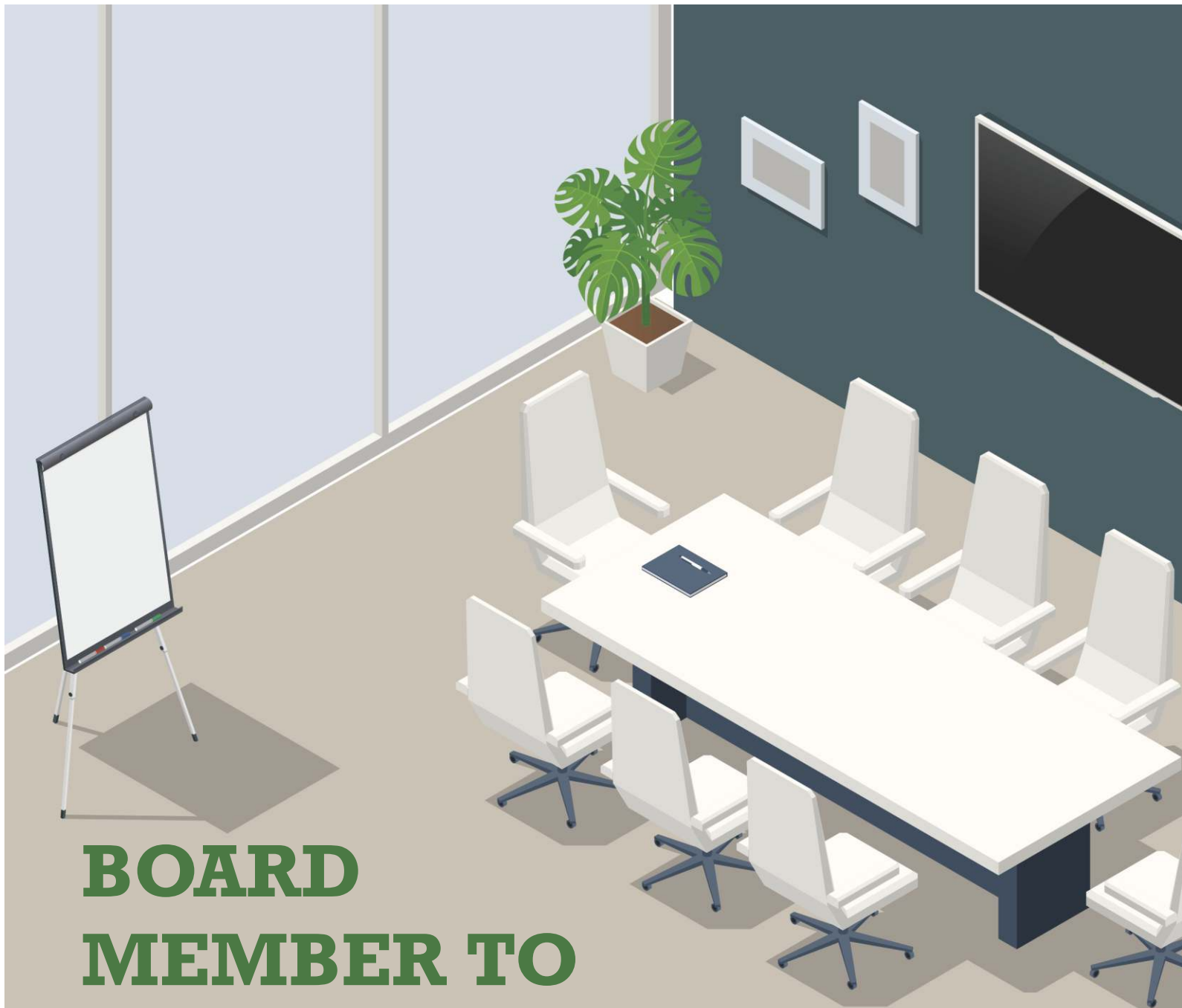
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BOARD MEMBER TO BOARD LEADER

By Dannielle Wilson, Manager, Berry, Dunn, McNeil & Parker, LLC

At the heart of every park board and foundation board is a good-intentioned citizen who wants to give back to their community. Whether a new eager-beaver or a seasoned veteran, board members share the same desire to do a fantastic job.

Extending beyond the nuts and bolts of the role, it's helpful to remind ourselves of leadership fundamentals. Leading isn't only for those who hold the president or chair roles—it's for all of us, in every interaction and decision. Read on for reminders on how to be a positive, impactful leader.

KEEPIN' IT REAL

Leadership moments often present themselves incidentally and certainly extend beyond the boardroom. A few of my favorite small-but-impactful leadership moment examples, and the practicalities surrounding those moments, are:

- **Being present isn't always a present.** Staff are busy doing great things, so try to respect their schedules. Schedule a time to meet in advance in lieu of “dropping by.”
- **Mind the hourglass.** Board communication should funnel through the director, then disseminated to the employees; same thing in reverse—employees communicate through the director.
- **Balance trust with accountability.** Even the most tenured, trustworthy directors need oversight. Take care to not micromanage while monitoring checks and balances.
- **Don't gossip.** 'Nuf said.
- **Do your homework.** Read the board packet; come prepared. Get the “A.” (*You want to be a leader, right?!?*)
- **Be the fuel, not the cog.** Energize the staff engine with your support and encouragement; unnecessary requests can slow their progress. (*Is the extra data you've asked for need-to-know or nice-to-know?*)
- **Follow the rules.** (*Does this one really need to be included? Unfortunately, yes – it does...*)

- **Don't choose the paint color.** Our job is to help select the color palette, but not which wall gets which color. Similarly, we approve the tree budget allocation, not where the trees will be planted.
- **Be a champion!** Celebrate the agency's successes, promote the value of parks and recreation, and advocate for the future of open space!

AN EYE FOR WHAT IS POSSIBLE

Serving as a board member is not always easy. As we find ourselves in the middle of difficult situations or decisions, we must keep our eyes open for the *opportunity* in that difficulty. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, opportunity is, “a set of circumstances that make it *possible* to do something.” As a board member you have the opportunity to lead. If you choose to lead, you have the opportunity to set the tone and capitalize on what is possible—regardless of how difficult the situation.

DECISION-MAKING

Whether you feel decision-making is easy or hard, before every decision, remember to:

- Actively listen
- Keep an open mind
- Focus on the overall picture
- Ask questions early and often

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Practicing civility does *not* mean that we need to agree with our fellow board members. Establishing boundaries and engaging in healthy conversations demonstrates (to each other, the staff, and your community) that your board values respectful dialogue.



When you find yourself weighing an important decision or are unsure of which direction to take, consider asking yourself the following questions:

1. Have I listened to all sides of the decision openly and heard the rationale?
2. How will this decision benefit the community?
3. What feedback do I have from my constituents and neighbors?
4. Is the decision in line with our mission, strategic plan, comprehensive plan, and/or budget?

BE NICE

While you might think “being nice” is an obvious leadership trait, our society’s ability to remain civil during disagreements has been put to task in recent years. Practicing civility does *not* mean that we need to agree with our fellow board members. Establishing boundaries and engaging in healthy conversations demonstrates (to each other, the staff, and your community) that your board values respectful dialogue.

THE SECRET SAUCE

A few years ago, a survey of our fellow Illinois board members and executive directors asked a series of questions to decipher what it is that makes a board member a “great” board leader. Integrity was voted the top quality of a great board member. When asked about the

skills needed, impactful things that improve group dynamics, what to do before every vote, how to maintain civility during disagreement, and what sets great leaders apart—remarkably, every top answer was the same: *Listening*. Sure, there were other answers like, “accept the final vote,” and “don’t respond in anger,” yet the resounding message from our peers was to *listen* to each other. Active listening is the secret sauce.

FAVORITE QUOTE

One of my all-time favorite pieces of advice about becoming a board leader was given by someone for whom I am eternally grateful—but am afraid I will never know. I leave you with these insightful words of wisdom, shared anonymously:

“A leader is vocal without being loud, fair and kind regardless of agreement, collaborative without force, and respectful of the right of each board member to participate equally while valuing the professional experience and perspective of the executive staff.”

- Anonymous Survey Respondent



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INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD:

Q&A with Parks and Recreation Leaders

We reached out to an IAPD Rising Star Award Winner and an IPRA Young Professional of the Year to get their perspective on the field of parks and recreation since winning.



ADRIANE JOHNSON

Illinois State Senator

Former Buffalo Grove Park District Commissioner

2014 IAPD RISING STAR AWARD WINNER

WHAT DID IT MEAN WHEN YOU RECEIVED THE RISING STAR AWARD?

It was truly an honor being recognized as a rising star in the parks and recreation field. Receiving the Rising Star Award meant that the collective work of our Board of Commissioners, our staff, and our volunteers was being amplified through my service. But if not for the Buffalo Grove Park District being one of the premier park districts in Illinois (and I would argue, the nation), I am not sure if I would have received this prestigious award.

SINCE THE AWARD, WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT SERVING AS AN ELECTED OFFICIAL?

Winning the Rising Star Award affirmed my belief that when you put in the work, when you put service above self, when you prioritize the people that you serve, when you serve with honor and distinction, when you lead with ethics and integrity, when you show up as your true authentic, unassimilated self without fail, you will make a long lasting, meaningful impact, and positive difference in your community.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE SOMEONE INTERESTED IN SERVING AS AN ELECTED OFFICIAL?

Only seek the role if you want to help everyone you will serve, if you want to solve problems that will benefit all of the people, and if you want to make a positive impact in

your community, state, or nation. I also suggest that they serve from the heart and that the role they are seeking is not about self-aggrandizement. It should be about empowering the people that they serve!

ARE THERE ANY CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTERED IN YOUR ROLE AS A COMMISSIONER?

I cannot think of any that stand out. However, challenges typically arise when there is a lack of positive relationships or when the relationships are being tested. Positive relationships build trust, enable effective outcomes, facilitate cooperation, and influence desired actions. Positive relationships foster connection between government and the people. I find that when you build positive relationships, you are able to overcome obstacles and achieve common goals due to the speed of trust. Amazing things get done with the speed of trust!

WHERE DO YOU SEE PARKS AND RECREATION HEADED IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS?

I see parks and recreation playing an integral role in solving the mental health crisis. I heard from residents that having access to parks during the COVID-19 pandemic literally saved their lives and helped to address their mental health issues. I also see the need for more digital engagement as technology is prevalent in all aspects of our daily lives. I see the industry having a greater focus on sustainability and holding true to its roots of preserving diversity, equity and inclusion.

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD:

Q&A with Parks and Recreation Leaders



JASON POSLUSZNY

Operations Manager

Fox Valley Special Recreation Association

**2016 IPRA YOUNG PROFESSIONAL OF
THE YEAR AWARD WINNER**

IN YOUR TIME SINCE WINNING THE YOUNG PROFESSIONAL AWARD, WHAT HAS YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN PARKS AND RECREATION BEEN?

At the time I received my Young Professional Award, I had transitioned from a recreation supervisor at Bloomingdale Park District to the operations manager at Fox Valley Special Recreation Association (FVSRA). I have recently celebrated my ten-year anniversary enriching the lives of people with disabilities through therapeutic recreation as the senior operations manager at FVSRA. I also currently serve as a member of the Park District Risk Management Agency (PDRMA) Risk Management Committee.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT INSIGHTS YOU HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE FIELD SINCE THEN?

An important insight that I have learned in the field since receiving my award is that parks and recreation is an industry like no other. Unlike the private sector that traditionally competes by jockeying for market position, we have the opportunity to cooperatively work with all organizations in our community. Outside of being able to work with the other organizations in our specific community, we are also blessed to have other park districts, IAPD, IPRA, NRPA, PDRMA, (to alphabetically name a few that have been impactful on my career), etc. at our fingertips as reliable resources to help us make things better for the community we serve.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A YOUNG PROFESSIONAL TRYING TO EXCEL IN A CAREER IN PARKS AND RECREATION?

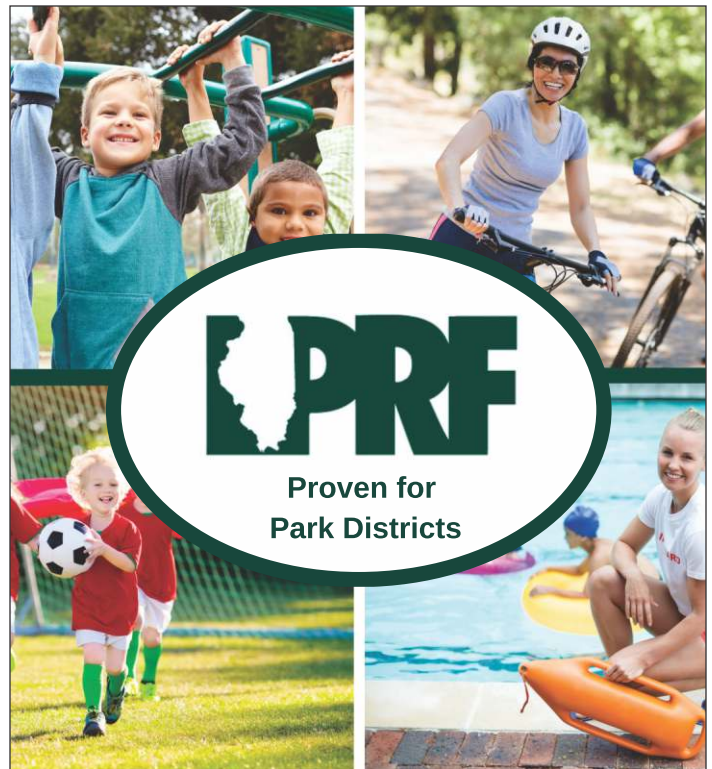
For any young professional wanting to excel in parks and recreation, my advice would be to get involved! Whether it is career advancement, a sympathetic ear, or to make things better for those you serve, there are numerous committees and sub-committees that are relevant to any position within the industry. Find those like minds to learn and grow together. For the most part, this industry is made of people who desire to create opportunities for others, so there are handfuls of people who are able, willing, and wanting to assist.

ARE THERE ANY CHALLENGES THAT YOU'VE ENDURED THAT YOU'VE LEARNED FROM?

I have encountered several challenges through my career on a personal and professional level. On a personal level, it is always good to do a periodic self-audit, assessing where you are, where you want to be, and what you are doing or need to do about getting there. On a professional level, I have learned to list out as many solutions to a challenge and determine what is best for all of those impacted by the decision. In a field where we strive to make everyone happy, most of the time, you cannot make everyone happy. But with strong data and reasoning at least you can present your findings that led to a decision that makes bad news more palatable.

WHERE DO YOU SEE PARKS AND RECREATION HEADED IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS?

It will be interesting to see the changes in the industry over the next few years. It was clear during Covid there was a need for park district open spaces and trails, as well as the need for mental health outlets. Prior to Covid, we did not have enough resources to meet the mental health crisis in the US. Post-Covid, it was estimated that one of every two people were struggling with a mental health issue. I think there is still an opportunity for districts to inculcate our relevancy into our communities by strategically connecting those dots via marketing platforms with the how and why park district programs help provide opportunities to assist combating mental health issues. Whether that is through program descriptions, brochure callouts, mailers, website page, or adopting into an agency mission, vision, and values, the idea to have people associate “positive mental health” with “park districts” is there. Another initiative some park districts are working on is sustainability versus growth. It is inherent for humans to build bigger, better, faster, and more, but how will our future generations sustain this and how will we eradicate those maintenance backlogs in relation to economic inflation of costs for goods and services. I see some communities with lots of development, but the infrastructure is not there. Another movement that is taking shape is the shift regarding equity of access to park district programs and space. When a community park is overrun with special interest groups that receive heavy subsidization through a park district, as stewards of the taxpayer's dollar, we missed the mark. As a district representative, we need to serve our community at large; it is our duty to ensure we are receiving their input and providing the best services and resources we can. Perhaps we will see more boots to the pavement campaigns when we are not receiving an adequate response to our electronic surveys or receive a skewed representation from special interest group that does not adequately represent the community at large. And lastly, along the lines of equity, when serving those in our community, it is important that things are accessible to all. I hope to see more park districts request the opinion of their local special recreation association (SRA) regarding construction and program design. ADA minimum standards are merely a suggested conversation starting point. It reminds me of a cartoon comic I once saw where a maintenance person says to the person in a wheelchair waiting to enter a building: “I will clean off of the ramp once I am done with the stairs,” when if the ramp was done first, every person would have had access.



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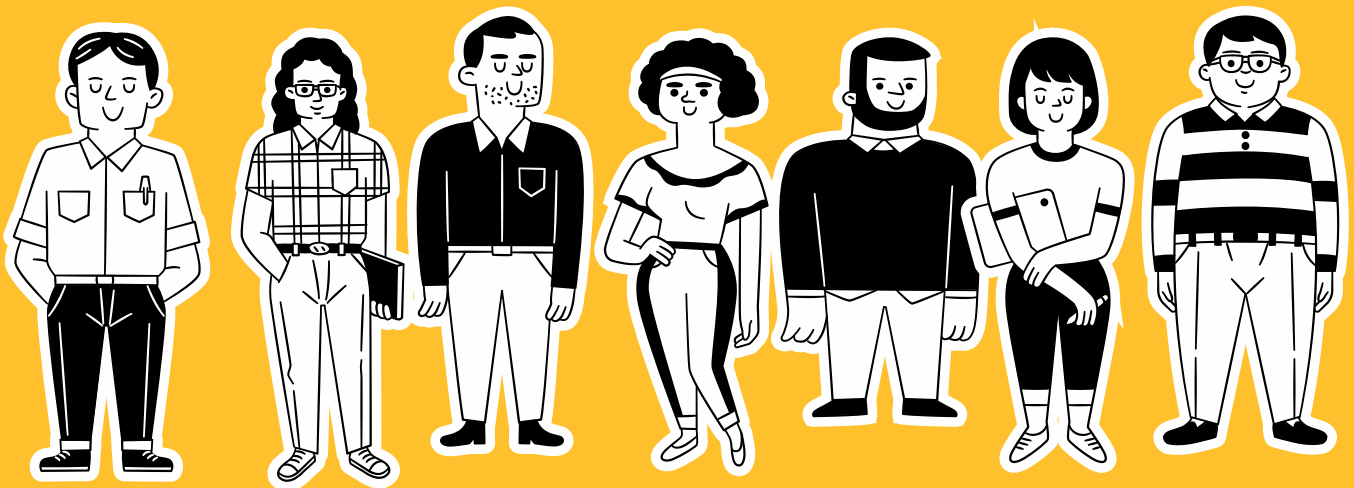


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ENGAGING THE NEW-COLLAR WORKER

BY BOB JOHNSON, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, OAK BROOK PARK DISTRICT



As individuals who serve the field of parks and recreation, we often pride ourselves as being on the forefront of new ideas and creative solutions. Hiring qualified staff presents a challenge for agencies across the country, but one remedy may be right in front of us. Enter the “new-collar” worker. The term was coined in 2012 by then CEO of I.B.M., Ginni Rometty. It refers to individuals who have specific skill-sets and abilities, but not necessarily a traditional four-year degree. While the term emerged from the workforce associated with tech-jobs, the same philosophy can be applied to this field.

The new-collar approach places more emphasis on skill and ability, and less on higher education accomplishments.

This in no way diminishes the value of a degree, but it encourages us to look through a wider lens during the hiring or promotion process. Too often we post job openings in our organizations which place front and center a requirement or preference for a college degree, to apply for a position which includes supervision of a concession stand or managing room rentals at a community center. In doing so, we are limiting our exposure to candidates who can begin an entry-level position in some private sector companies, and earn a promotion to assistant manager or manager within 3-6 months. By placing emphasis on education for roles like these, and many others, we may be discouraging an otherwise capable individual for applying, or worse, creating a barrier to entry.

Even when hiring or promoting from within our own organizations, we may overlook someone with untapped potential. We unconsciously create silos with the staff who manage our grounds and facilities over here, and those who manage recreation and programming over there. The field of parks and recreation is diverse, and filled with people from different backgrounds, with varying levels of experience, skills, and education. While not all team members are interested in exploring a position in a different department, we should make these opportunities available consistently and equitably.

If these ideas seem reasonable, why do some antiquated roadblocks still exist for so much untapped talent? First, change is hard. It is difficult to challenge traditional norms and can be even more uncomfortable to set a new way forward. As professionals in the field, we want to hire the best people to drive our organizations forward, and we often equate success with educational accomplishments. There is certainly significant value associated with higher education, but it should not always be the primary measure of potential and ability. However, we still implement academic gatekeeping when hiring and promoting because, traditionally, that is what we have always done. Very few people can say they learned everything they needed to excel in their job in school. Instead, we learn to perform and succeed in our roles through a varying combination of life and job experience, hands-on training, coaching, and education. There is not one specific recipe that guarantees success, and we should acknowledge this by being more flexible in our expectations when considering a candidate.

So how do we adjust and re-frame our approach to hiring and promoting through a new lens? It starts with an internal review. We can evaluate our job descriptions and

job postings to determine if education should be a primary qualifier for a candidate, or if other skills-based competencies have higher value, depending on the position. In doing so we can cast a wider net and potentially entice individuals with adaptable and unique abilities, who may be a great fit for your team.

Particularly for staff who are already part of your organization, consider how you can create pathway to advancement to help the more non-traditional individuals find success. One of the many benefits of attending national and state conferences is the opportunity for students to participate in mock interviews with professionals from the field. However, do we have such a resource for those who did not graduate a college or university? How can we help these individuals hone their interviewing skills or update their resumes? This can be done locally. We can create a support network at your own organization or with neighboring agencies that allows staff, regardless of background, a chance for mentorship and feedback from more experienced individuals. Another helpful tool is to create a professional development plan with achievable milestones that helps staff develop and position themselves for advancement within their current department, or transition to another. This can include certifications like C.P.R.P and C.P.R.E, skills-based training programs, or courses like ASRE which provide innovative programs that focus on essential “soft-skills” training and mentorship for current and future leaders.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to engaging the new-collar worker, but if we are willing to consider a new approach and set down our preconceptions of non-traditional individuals, we can empower a new generation of leaders and difference makers in the world of parks and recreation.



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PEOPLE & PLACES



Jennifer Fullerton Announces Retirement

Jennifer Fullerton, the executive director of the Hickory Hills Park District, has announced her retirement after 32 years of service in the parks and recreation industry. Jennifer

began her career in 1993 as marketing manager at the Elk Grove Park District, where she played a pivotal role in developing the *Take Time for Fun: Benefits are Endless* campaign for Illinois park districts. She also led focus groups and conducted surveys for several park districts. She earned the prestigious NRPA Best Overall Communicator Award in 1996.

From 2001 to 2004, Jennifer served as executive director of the Butterfield Park District, where she oversaw the successful renovation and expansion of their recreation center and pool. During this time, she also earned certification as the district's Certified Pool Operator.

In 2004, Jennifer joined the Hickory Hills Park District as executive director, a role she has held for the past 20 years. Under her visionary leadership, the district saw the successful renovation of two multimillion-dollar recreation center projects and the transformation of its parks. Jennifer's strategic efforts also secured \$2.8 million in grants, helping fuel the district's substantial growth. During her tenure, total revenue surged from \$1.3 million to \$4.5 million. Additionally, she was instrumental in securing funding for the district's membership in the South West Special Recreation Association (SWSRA), while also saving the district significant resources by assuming dual responsibilities as both chief financial officer and executive director.

Jennifer served as chair of the IPRA/South Suburban Salary Survey Committees from 2007 to 2020. In 2012, she was honored with the IPRA Chairman's Award for her outstanding contributions to the industry.

STAFF UPDATES AT NAPERVILLE PARK DISTRICT



Sue Stanish, Outgoing Director of Finance

Sue Stanish, director of finance, retired in December 2024 after serving in the role for nearly fourteen years. Over the years, she helped the Naperville Park District successfully navigate numerous financial scenarios including budgets, audits, software changes and large-scale capital projects, most notably the building of Fort Hill Activity Center and Knoch Knolls Nature Center, renovations of Centennial Beach, and the implementation of large community

parks like 95th Street Community Plaza and Wolf's Crossing Community Park. Throughout her tenure, Sue was instrumental in maintaining the Naperville Park District's Aaa bond rating, which indicates the district's continued financial strength and stability. Sue was a member of the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) and the Illinois Government Finance Officers Association (IGFOA) where she served as past president of the executive board. Additionally, Sue served as an executive board member of the Illinois Metropolitan Investment Fund (IMET) and as an executive board trustee of the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund (IMRF).



Tricia Dubiel, Incoming Director of Finance

Naperville Park District welcomed **Tricia Dubiel** as the agency's new director of finance. Tricia brings a wealth of accounting knowledge, especially in the realm of park district finance and leadership. She served as the assistant finance director at the Wheaton Park District from 2008-2011 before becoming the superintendent of business & finance at the Bolingbrook Park District. Tricia has been an active member of the Illinois Government Finance Officers

Association (IGFOA) for over 16 years. Additionally, she serves as the park district team leader and as a member of the Professional Education Committee. Prior to those roles, she was involved with the IGFOA as a South Metro Board Member and executive board member, as well as on the Membership Committee between 2011 and 2022. Tricia is a member of the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association (IPRA), and she served on the Software Symposium Committee with IPRA in 2023.

PEOPLE & PLACES



Elmhurst Park District Announces Leadership Changes Following Referendum Approval

The Elmhurst Park District recently welcomed **Kristi Solberg** as its new director of facilities and appointed Angela Ferrentino to the newly created role of director of referendum project construction. These leadership shifts come as the district prepares to implement projects funded by the recently approved \$89.95 million referendum.

Kristi Solberg brings 18 years of experience in parks and recreation to her new role, having worked at the Naperville, Park Ridge, and Wilmette Park Districts. Most recently, she served as superintendent of parks and planning at Wilmette. A graduate of Illinois State University with a degree in Recreation Programming, Solberg got her start in the field through a part-time role in park maintenance at Naperville Park District. Her passion for parks and public spaces led her to a full-time career in the field, where she has built extensive experience in facility and park operations.

Solberg has been actively involved in the profession beyond her day-to-day work, serving as past president and board member of the Midwest Institute of Park Executives (MIPE), a board member for the Great Lakes Park Training Institute, and a committee chair for the Illinois Park and Recreation Association's (IPRA) Parks and Natural Resources Section.



Angela Ferrentino, who has dedicated nearly 30 years to the Elmhurst Park District, now takes on the role of director of referendum project construction. With a Bachelor of Science in Recreation from Southern Illinois University and a background as a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist, Ferrentino has held a variety of positions within the district, including director of facilities and director of parks and facilities.

In this new role, Ferrentino will manage the construction of a new \$85 million community center, an artificial turf field, a community bandshell, and four heated public restrooms in parks across Elmhurst. For the first time in her career, she will step away from supervising staff and daily operations to focus solely on project management.

Ferrentino has been actively involved in the profession, holding certifications as a Certified Park and Recreation Professional (CPRP), Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI), and Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS). She has also served on the NRPA Certified Playground Safety Inspector Exam Committee.

IN MEMORIAM

Gurnee Park District Mourns the Loss of Park Board President James Goshorn



The Illinois Association of Park Districts extends its condolences for Gurnee Park District Board President **James "Jim" Goshorn** who passed away on February 13, 2025 at the age of 69.

Jim was a beloved member of the Gurnee community and served as a commissioner for the Gurnee Park District for 15 years. He began his journey as a volunteer sports coach and a dedicated supporter of the "Friends of Gurnee Park District Foundation" in the early 1990s. In 2009, Jim was elected to the park board, where he served as secretary until 2013, and then as president until his death. As president, he led with vision, integrity, and passion, overseeing countless initiatives that enhanced the park district and enriched the lives of residents.

During his time on the board, Jim's commitment to fostering growth, inclusivity, and opportunities for all residents was evident in every project he championed and every decision he made. Jim played an integral role in the advancement of key facilities, including the Hunt Club Park Community Center and Hunt Club Park Aquatic Center. In 2013, Jim's leadership was essential in the acquisition of the former Gold's Gym, which was transformed into the thriving FitNation Gurnee, fitness center. His commitment to enhancing the Gurnee community was evident in the numerous park renovations, playground upgrades, and trail improvements he supported. In addition, Jim's dedication ensured the continued expansion of recreational programs, making a lasting impact on the lives of residents for generations to come.

PEOPLE & PLACES



Szpylman Named as Gurnee Park District Executive Director

Gurnee Park District has announced the appointment of **Michael "Mike" Szpylman** as its new executive director, effective May 1. Szpylman will succeed Susie Kuruvilla, who will be retiring after 27 years of service with Gurnee Park District on April 30.

Szpylman has been an integral part of the Gurnee Park District since October 2010, serving as the director of business services and treasurer. His leadership in developing long-term financial strategies has supported

critical capital improvement projects and helped the district achieve recognition through GFOA awards for financial reporting and budget presentation. Beyond financial management, Szpylman has played a pivotal role in many of the district's most significant projects, including the acquisition and operational planning of FitNation as well as being the co-lead on the development and implementation of the current Comprehensive Strategic Master Plan.

With over 20 years of leadership, financial management, and strategic planning experience, Szpylman brings a wealth of expertise to the executive director position. Prior to joining the Gurnee Park District, he held key financial leadership roles, including finance director/treasurer for the village of Kronenwetter, Wis. and vice president of finance and administration at Topgolf USA.



Bond named Addison Park District Executive Director

The Addison Park District is pleased to announce the appointment of **Rob Bond** as its new executive director, effective April 10, 2025.

Bond joins the district after nearly seven years as the superintendent of aquatic & maintenance operations at Oak Brook Park District. During his tenure, he played an integral role in overseeing all aquatic operations and facility maintenance. While

there, the Oak Brook Park District earned national recognition as a finalist for the National Gold Medal Award for Excellence from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in both 2023 and 2024. Additionally, the district achieved both CAPRA Accreditation from the NRPA and Distinguished Agency Accreditation from the Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD).

Prior to his role at Oak Brook, Rob's career spanned various fields, including professional swim coaching, collegiate athletic administration, and high school education. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from Northern Illinois University and is a Certified Parks and Recreation Executive.



Hickory Hills Park District Announces New Executive Director, Renee Chavez

Hickory Hills Park District is

thrilled to announce the appointment of **Renee Chavez** as its new incoming executive director. This appointment comes as the district prepares for the retirement of the current executive director, Jennifer Fullerton, who will begin her well-deserved retirement in May 2025.

The search process, conducted through the Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) started in December 2024, has led to the selection of Renee Chavez, an experienced leader with a proven track record in park and recreation management. Chavez holds both a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science degree in Park and Recreation Management from Illinois State University. With over 14 years of experience as an executive director and 15 years in recreation programming and facility management, she brings a wealth of expertise to the role.

Chavez expressed her admiration for the district's commitment to excellence, noting her appreciation for the "detail to organization, cleanliness, and visible pride the staff have taken in caring for the parks and facilities." She is eager to join the team, stating, "I look forward to getting to know the community, working with the staff, and continuing the great traditions while bringing new ideas to better serve the community."

Renee Chavez will officially begin her tenure as the executive director of the Hickory Hills Park District in February 2025. The board and staff look forward to working alongside her in the years ahead to continue making Hickory Hills a great place to live and visit.

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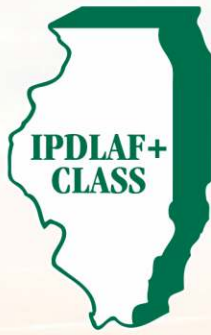
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