



Essential Factors for Park Maintenance Efficiencies in Uncertain Times

By Brian “BK” Koehler, Director, Pennsylvania Park Maintenance Institute

The National Park System has about \$315 million in deferred park maintenance in PA.ⁱ While the State Park and Forest systems have estimated needing more than a \$1 billion for deferred maintenance / infrastructure.ⁱⁱ Neither of these figures account for the additional dollars needed for deferred maintenance in 2,100-plus county and local parks statewide. COVID-19 may have changed social and economic certainties for the foreseeable future, but it has not stopped plants from growing, trash from piling up, equipment from rusting, or trails from eroding.

With all of that in mind, park maintenance professionals are needed now more than ever, making it a good time for municipalities to implement more strategic approaches to daily operations. The following outlines three important issues to consider as the Commonwealth moves towards recovery and builds its resilience.

Identify Essential Operations

Community need vs. administrative want

Boroughs should focus on community needs first in order to deliver value every day. Identify daily tasks and specific resources that are essential to park and/or recreation facility maintenance.

This means answering questions like:

- What must happen in order to keep facilities from being damaged?
- What must happen in order to keep facilities safe and healthy for the public?
- What facilities are not able to operate due to a lack of resources?
- What supporting data is needed to make decisions?

Efficiency can be achieved with strategic thinking, conservative resource management, and data-driven decision making.

Now vs. later

When the future is uncertain, the best managers acknowledge what’s unknown but understand what tasks must happen to maintain operations.

- Where are potential bottlenecks in supply chains that would negatively impact operations?
- What steps need to be taken to maintain the essentials?
- Which staff duties based on availability / skill sets can be reprioritized to keep people employed?
- What projects need to be deferred until more certain times?
- What projects have previously been put on hold, that may now be an opportune time to complete?

Borough officials need to identify the parts of their operations that can create the greatest impact for the community while improving the longevity of facilities and capital investments.

Open, Honest, Consistent Communication

Ask Questions / Allow Responses

Valuable, open discussion can only occur when all parties feel they are being heard. Seeking advice from borough council and staff members is an excellent way to engage discussion.

Generally, people like to share their knowledge, opinions, and experience. The challenge comes with directing individual passions and energy for a common purpose.

This means managers and even council members must develop a common language and processes that encourage staff to share respectful communication, including concerns and frustrations.

These discussions must include follow-up with requests for potential solutions in order to

redirect energy and build positive momentum.

It is important to remember teamwork is not only task-oriented, so make time for staff to focus on interpersonal collaborations and strengthening relationships within the borough team.

Listen / Share Concerns

A stoic leader is not always the strongest leader. Empathy has value.

Borough officials should openly share how and why priorities have been established, allowing opportunity for employees to share feedback and digest discussions and directives.

No matter the challenges and uncertainties, it is important to maintain open dialogue to keep employees engaged, while clearly defining priorities and shared values. This will drive the borough staff forward with direction and confidence.

Direction inspires purpose and cultivates innovation that can deliver consistent value and lead to an exploration of what is possible.

Establish Communication Processes

Communication should be encouraged through dialogue rather than directives, which can lead to better engagement in the strategic process with regularly scheduled huddles to keep everyone up on daily operations.

Increasing the regularity of communication does not mean more meetings necessarily.

Valuable team communication can occur through teleconference, group chats, and many other virtual options that can be customized to the borough's needs. The intent of this communication process should be to reduce competition for resources and frustration from duplicated work.

Borough officials should promote collaboration to increase innovation, encourage sharing best practices, and reward contributions. Strengthening the idea of borough officials and employees working together as a "team" will pay off in efficiency, better morale, a sense of ownership, and quality performance of tasks.

Expanding Knowledge

Park maintenance relies on the essential work of borough employees, both the labor and the planning. Officials should look

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for talent in employees, define a game plan, and nurture individual strengths that contribute to the success of the overall game plan. Successful teamwork combines individual achievement with common goals.

This strategy includes asking:

- What are the absolute minimum skills needed?
- How should parks employees be trained and evaluated?
- Who is the most experienced member of the parks and/or recreation crew?


The answers can help identify potential knowledge gaps. This evaluation should be followed by an exercise that looks at what would happen if the borough's most experienced parks worker(s) left:

- What knowledge, skills, and abilities would be lost?
- How can the municipality capture / record that experience, such as write it down, create spreadsheets, make a video, or have the employee cross-train others?
- Who would be able to fill that gap immediately?
- How much would it cost to bring in outside contractors if there isn't experienced / trained staff to complete essential tasks?

When taking a practical approach to defining essential park maintenance operations, borough officials must consider the needs of the community and longevity of existing facilities first. To create an operational strategy, borough officials should include

“boots-on-the-ground” staff as members in developing the plan.

Park maintenance professionalism and success must be built from the bottom up for these well-loved assets to maintain their existence now and post-COVID-19.

***About the author:** Brian “BK” Koehler is the director of the Pennsylvania Park Maintenance Institute. Koehler holds degrees in educational theory and production experience in corporate training and development. For more, email Koehler at bk@prps.org, or visit www.prps.org/maintenanceinstitute. *

ⁱ National Parks Service website: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/infrastructure/deferred-maintenance.htm>.

ⁱⁱ Pennsylvania Parks & Forests Foundation website: <https://paparksandforests.org/initiatives/infrastructurestudy>.



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