

Outdoor Recreation

State's new recreation plan being developed



By **Gretchen Leslie**, Director of Education, Communications and Partnerships, DCNR

Sylvia Funk briskly walks her dogs Ziggy and Wally through the Cumberland County Borough of Shiremanstown each day. She and the dogs enjoy the exercise on the streets and sidewalks, but her preference for outdoor recreation is a sprawling township park about five miles away that has acres for off-leash play, a wooded trail along the Yellow Breeches creek and the “Doggie Dugout,” a popular doggie park for canine and human socializing.

Funk is not unlike many Pennsylvanians when it comes to outdoor recreation. She lists walking, especially with the dogs, as her favorite outdoor pursuit. In a 2008 survey of Pennsylvanians, 84 percent cited walking as an activity they participated in over the previous year. Picnicking, visiting historic sites, driving for pleasure and swimming rounded out the top five. And 64 percent thought Pennsylvania's communities should invest in more doggie parks, right behind respondents' top request for more bike lanes.

Five years later interests and trends may be different, and

Pennsylvania is embarking on its plan to find out. The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, a federally required document that outlines strategies for outdoor recreation, is currently being developed by a team of experts, led by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). The Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs (PSAB) is an active part of the committee.

Pennsylvania's last plan, which is still being enacted, was recognized in 2011 as the best in the nation by the National Park Service and the National Association for Recreation Resource Planners. This current plan outlines 28 program-oriented and five funding recommendations as action steps to help policymakers and communities deal with issues like families spending less time outdoors; children more obese than ever before; and residents who want access to close-to-home recreation, walkable and bikable communities, protected lands and waters, and well-maintained park facilities.

Last year while the current plan was in full swing, Pennsylvania began the process for writing its new plan, which is due by

the end of 2014. In order to be eligible for federal Land and Water Conservation funding, states must update their recreation plans every five years.

One of the early steps in the process for writing a state recreation plan is assembling a team of community, state, nonprofit and citizen leaders who have expertise in outdoor recreation issues. The Technical Advisory Committee formed in May 2013 and has held three meetings to discuss current recreation needs and funding issues.

Lauren Imgrund, who leads DCNR's Bureau of Recreation and Conservation and the Technical Advisory Committee, said the committee is critical to the plan's development.

“The diverse representation – from community recreation leaders to state agencies to sportsmen's group – allows us to gain a comprehensive look at the recreation needs of Pennsylvanians,” Imgrund said. “Each person brings a unique perspective to the table, and we all work collaboratively to come up with a plan that addresses current and future issues and trends.”

A critical component of the plan is research to determine trends, interests, demographics and attitudes. Each five-year plan cycle includes an analysis of data from across the state and nation. Pennsylvania State University is coordinating the research needs for the plan. Part of that work includes a statewide survey of Pennsylvanians that will serve as the primary data source for the plan. The plan was mailed to thousands of Pennsylvania residents in January; analysis of those responses will begin shortly.

“By asking questions about participation rates, favorite activities, facility needs, recreation and conservation funding priorities and more, we can get a good sense of what people are expecting from their local, county and state recreation areas,” said Penn State’s Dr. Andrew Mowen, lead researcher on the Pennsylvania Recreation Plan. “We can compare this survey’s responses to those we got five years ago and 10 years ago, and we can identify trends, which will in turn help recreational professionals determine funding priorities for the future.”

Because only a very small percentage of Pennsylvanians will have the opportunity to participate in the random survey, DCNR developed a shortened version that can be accessed online through the Pennsylvania outdoor recreation plan website www.paoutdoorrecplan.com. Although the results are not statistically valid because users self-select to take the survey, the responses still will provide valuable insight into citizens’ recreation interests. The survey is available on the website through May.

In addition to collecting residents’ opinions of recreation, the Technical



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Advisory Committee and writers of the plan are also interested in gaining insight from the providers of outdoor recreation services. A survey of municipal park and recreation departments, multi-municipal recreation organizations, county park and recreation agencies and nonprofit organizations will try to gauge staffing and budgetary needs, management issues, and challenges facing the providers. Comparisons between citizens’ needs and providers’ needs will show the nexus of opportunities. Your participation in the survey is essential. PSAB will assist in making this survey available to you.

What does the future hold for outdoor recreation in Pennsylvania? How will the state’s aging population and continued growth of ethnic populations influence what is in the next plan? Can the plan outline strategies to connect youth to outdoor activities to keep them healthy and interested in nature? How can outdoor recreation be

used to help address health issues and reduce health care burdens on society? What new and emerging recreation trends will require serious consideration?

These and many others questions are being addressed this spring by the Technical Advisory Committee as it finalizes the recommendations for the 2014-18 PA Outdoor Recreation Plan. It has identified core themes – technology, health and wellness, local parks, tourism and economic development, and infrastructure – to help guide discussion and research analysis.

A draft plan will be written in late summer and will be available for review and comment on the plan’s website. Feedback sessions will allow citizens, providers and interested stakeholders to give their input before a final document is presented to the National Park Service later this year. Make sure your voice is heard by going to the website to learn more. www.paoutdoorrecplan.com. **(B)**