

HOW TO BUILD STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS:

A Guide for Park Professionals



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I was the State Director for The Trust for Public Land for 10 years and a project manager for 5. I worked specifically on greenways, the Tennessee Riverwalk, and conserving acreage for urban open space as well as National Parks. I have worked with local City budgets, State budgets and national. I have worked with park users of all types. I enjoy building things and have been involved in building greenways to building urban infill condos. I enjoy getting things done. I know that I cannot get much done on my own. It takes a great team and it takes supporters from all walks of life. I enjoy sharing many of the lessons I have learned (usually the hard way) over the years. I hope you enjoy.

RICK R WOOD

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This resource is designed specifically for park directors and non-profit leaders who want to build more productive relationships with elected officials. I will draw from practical experience and successful advocacy strategies to offer both conceptual frameworks for understanding political dynamics and actionable strategies you can implement immediately.

Whether you're a veteran park director who has weathered multiple administrations or a new professional seeking to make an impact, the strategies outlined here will help you navigate the political landscape more effectively and position you for sustained support.

INTRODUCTION

THIS GUIDE AIMS TO TRANSFORM HOW PARK PROFESSIONALS APPROACH RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS.



We are passionate about the vital services that parks, recreation and conservation provide to communities. From creating green spaces that improve public health to offering recreation programs that build community bonds, the work we do touches countless lives. Yet despite the undeniable value of these services, many park departments and non-profits struggle to secure adequate funding, attention, and support from elected officials.

This disconnect between the importance of parks and their political prioritization creates frustration for park professionals nationwide. Why do services that benefit so many citizens often rank so low on the political agenda? The answer lies not in the value of parks themselves, but in how that value is communicated and positioned within the political ecosystem.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

WHY PARKS OFTEN RANK LOW IN POLITICAL PRIORITIES

The paradox of parks in politics is striking: while parks and recreation services are among the most visible and widely used government services, they often receive disproportionately little political attention and support. Several factors contribute to this disconnect:

1. Parks are seen as amenities, not necessities. Unlike police, fire, and infrastructure services that are perceived as essential to public safety, parks can be mischaracterized as "nice to have" rather than critical community assets.
2. Benefits are diffuse and long-term. The positive impacts of parks—improved public health, increased property values, environmental benefits, and community cohesion—accrue gradually among dispersed populations making them less politically compelling.
3. Economic value is underappreciated. Many elected officials fail to recognize parks as economic drivers that attract residents and businesses, boost tourism, increase adjacent property values, and provide cost-effective solutions to other municipal challenges.
4. User bases may be politically disengaged. The diverse constituencies that use parks may not be organized or mobilized to advocate effectively.
5. Success often goes unnoticed. When parks function well, their benefits are often taken for granted; problems like crime, infrastructure failures, or service interruptions are more likely to capture political attention.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

THE CONSEQUENCES OF INSUFFICIENT SUPPORT

When parks fail to secure adequate political support, the consequences are far-reaching:

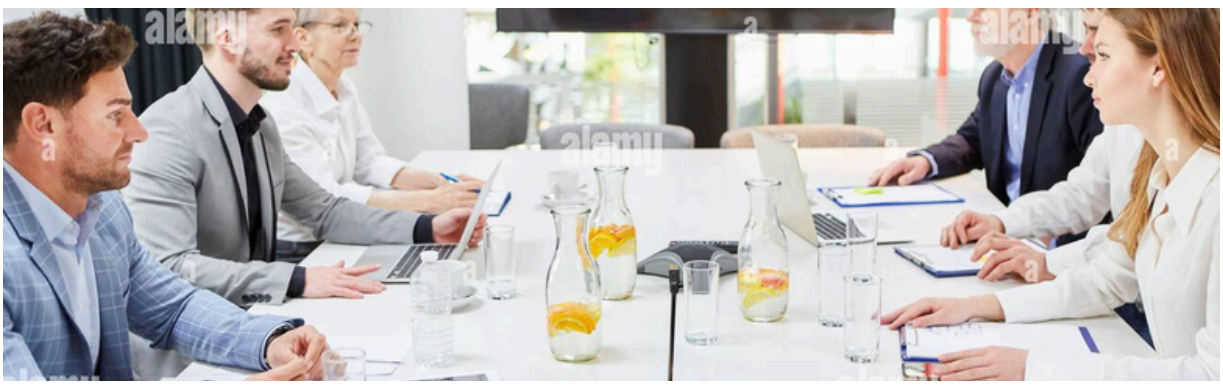
- Deferred maintenance creates downward spirals. Postponed repairs and upgrades accelerate deterioration, creating safety hazards and diminishing user experiences.
- Staffing shortages compromise service quality. Reduced personnel mean limited hours, canceled programs, and insufficient maintenance.
- Innovation and improvement stagnate. Without investment in new facilities or programming, parks systems fall behind community needs and expectations.
- Equity gaps widen. Underresourced parks departments often struggle to provide equal quality services across different neighborhoods, reinforcing patterns of disadvantage.
- Morale among park professionals suffers. The continual struggle for basic resources drains energy and enthusiasm from even the most dedicated staff.

THE POLITICAL REALITY OF PARKS

UNDERSTAND FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE

To build effective relationships with elected officials, park professionals must first understand the perspective from the other side of the table. Elected officials operate in an environment defined by:

- Competing priorities and limited resources. Every budget cycle forces difficult choices between worthy services, and officials must justify these choices to constituents with diverse interests.
- Electoral considerations. Officials must constantly evaluate how their decisions will affect their chances of reelection, focusing on issues that motivate their core supporters and swing voters.
- Risk aversion. Most officials prefer to avoid controversy and negative attention, gravitating toward "safe" decisions that won't generate backlash.
- Visibility and credit. Projects that offer opportunities for ribbon-cuttings, photo ops, and clear attribution of positive change hold special appeal.
- Constituent feedback. The volume and intensity of citizen communication on an issue significantly shapes officials' perceptions of its importance.



THE POLITICAL REALITY OF PARKS

COMPETITION FOR LIMITED RESOURCES

Municipal budgets are zero-sum games: every dollar allocated to parks is a dollar not spent on police, roads, economic development, etc. This reality creates an environment where departments must actively compete for resources rather than simply demonstrating their value in isolation.

Successful advocacy requires understanding not only your own department's needs but also the broader fiscal context in which decisions are made. This includes:

- Revenue constraints facing your municipality
- Statutory obligations that limit discretionary spending
- Political commitments made during campaigns
- Emergent priorities that can suddenly dominate attention
- Bond capacity and debt considerations

By acknowledging these constraints rather than ignoring them, you position yourself as a pragmatic partner rather than just another department making demands.



THE POLITICAL REALITY OF PARKS

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL CALCULATIONS

The challenge of securing political support for parks is about aligning the interests of park departments with the interests of elected officials. This requires recognizing that officials make decisions based on a complex set of calculations

- Value to constituents: Will this decision benefit people who vote or could vote for me?
- Political capital: Does this strengthen my position and influence?
- Risk management: What could go wrong, and what would be the consequences?
- Resource efficiency: Does this provide good value for limited resources?
- Personal legacy: Will this contribute to my record of accomplishments?

Effective advocacy frames parks and recreation services in ways that positively address these calculations. Rather than simply stating that parks deserve support because they are important (which officials already know in the abstract), successful park advocates demonstrate specifically how supporting parks serves officials' political interests.

HOW TO MAKE PARKS POLITICALLY VALUABLE

CONNECT PARKS TO VOTER PRIORITIES

To help shift the mindset of the official and their staff, try and figure out where your park services intersect with many of the issues voters care most about, but these connections aren't always obvious to elected officials.

Your advocacy should explicitly highlight these relationships:

- Public Safety: Well-maintained, activated parks reduce crime and provide positive alternatives for youth.
- Economic Development: Quality parks increase property values, attract businesses, and create jobs.
- Public Health: Park access correlates with reduced healthcare costs and improved physical and mental wellbeing.
- Environmental Sustainability: Parks provide stormwater management, urban cooling, habitat preservation, and other ecological services.
- Education: Parks offer educational programming, partner with schools, and provide essential developmental opportunities for children.
- Social Equity: Parks are one of the most democratic public services, providing equal access to benefits regardless of income.

Draw connections to these voter priorities rather than focusing narrowly on park-specific benefits. For example, rather than requesting funding for a new playground simply because the old one is outdated, emphasize how the investment will improve physical activity levels among children in an area with high obesity rates, provide safe recreation space in a neighborhood with few alternatives, and increase property values in an area seeking revitalization.

HOW TO MAKE PARKS POLITICALLY VALUABLE

DEMONSTRATING PARKS AS SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

Elected officials are constantly seeking solutions to community challenges. Positioning parks as part of these solutions transforms them from spending obligations to strategic investments:

- Juvenile Crime: Expanded recreation programs provide constructive alternatives during high-risk hours.
- Workforce Development: Parks departments can offer job training and employment pathways.
- Flood Control: Green infrastructure in parks can manage stormwater while providing recreation benefits.
- Community Division: Parks create neutral gathering spaces that build social cohesion across divides.
- Public Health Crises: Parks provide affordable access to physical activity and mental health benefits.
- Educational Disparities: Out-of-school park programs can complement classroom learning.

This approach positions you as a partner in governance rather than a competitor for resources. When officials face a challenge in their district, proactively reach out with ways your department/organization can contribute to the solution

HOW TO MAKE PARKS POLITICALLY VALUABLE

DEMONSTRATING PARKS AS SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

Imagine being able to say things like:

- “This park improvement would help address the traffic congestion your constituents have been complaining about”
- "This program expansion would serve the youth development goals you highlighted in your campaign”
- "This facility renovation would create jobs in the district you represent"
- “By creating this linear park we could help reduce the the flooding in the neighborhood”
- “By partnering with the health department we believe we can help reduce obesity related diseases in these neighborhoods”
- If we conserved this area of town, we could reduce stormwater burden on the city system, increase quality of life for the nearby residents and turn an eyesore into something positive.”

Be a problem solver

STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

MOVING FROM FRUSTRATION TO STRATEGIC ACTION

Many park professionals experience frustration when elected officials don't seem to share their passion for parks or prioritize park funding. This frustration can lead to disengagement, cynicism, or antagonistic relationships—none of which advance your department's interests.
The strategic approach requires a fundamental shift in mindset:

- From expecting elected officials to inherently value parks to demonstrating why parks should matter to them politically
- From passive disappointment to proactive relationship building
- From treating all officials the same to tailoring approaches based on individual interests and priorities
- From focusing only on departmental needs to aligning park priorities with broader community goals

This shift transforms you from a supplicant hoping for support to a strategic partner offering political value.

STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

THE VALUE OF PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

As in many areas of life, personal relationships can transcend institutional barriers in politics. Building authentic connections with elected officials creates multiple advantages:

- Access: Officials who know you personally are more likely to take your calls, read your emails, and make time for meetings.
- Trust: Personal familiarity builds credibility for your requests and information.
- Understanding: Regular interaction helps officials comprehend the complexities of park management that may not be obvious from the outside.
- Advocacy: Officials who feel connected to your department become internal advocates during closed-door discussions and negotiations.

Can you find some common ground with the official? Maybe they have vacationed or traveled to a National Park that you love.



STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

THE VALUE OF PERSONAL CONNECTIONS CONTINUED

Building these relationships requires regular effort beyond formal interactions:

- Invest the time to get to know them - authentically
- Be curious about them and their personal life (without being creepy) - ask questions
- Attend community events where officials will be present
- Participate in civic organizations and professional networks
- Create informal opportunities for interaction outside of formal requests
- Learn about officials' personal interests and backgrounds (I guarantee you can find a connection about vacations, or hobbies or food)
- Remember and reference previous conversations and shared experiences

Don't Forget the Staff: All of these notes also go for the elected official staff as well. The staff often hold the access key and will provide influence and advice to the official. If they like you, connect with you, trust you, believe you are a problem solver, then there is greater chance you will have an impact.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES



PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

#1 -TRACKING ELECTED OFFICIALS' PRIORITIES AND PROMISES

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

- Campaign promises and priorities: What did they commit to during their campaign?
- Public statements: What issues do they highlight in speeches, social media, and interviews?
- Voting patterns: Which initiatives have they supported or opposed in the past?
- Committee assignments: What specific responsibilities do they hold?
- Constituent base: Which neighborhoods and demographic groups form their core support?
- Personal interests: What causes, hobbies, or backgrounds might influence their perspective?

This information allows you to tailor your approach to each official, framing park issues in terms that resonate with their specific priorities. For example, an official focused on economic development might be most receptive to data on how parks increase property values and attract businesses, while another concerned with youth issues might respond better to information about recreation programs that reduce juvenile crime.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

#2 -CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR VISIBILITY

VISIBILITY

Elected officials value opportunities to be seen positively by constituents. Parks offer numerous possibilities for such visibility:

- Ribbon-cuttings and grand openings for new or renovated facilities
- Program launches that address community needs
- Special events that draw media attention and community participation
- Award ceremonies recognizing volunteers, staff, or community partners
- Milestone celebrations marking anniversaries or achievements

When planning these events, be strategic about which officials you invite and how you involve them.

- Give them speaking roles that highlight their contributions
- Acknowledge their support publicly
- Create photo opportunities with diverse community members
- Invite media and provide press releases that mention their involvement
- Following up with impact data and constituent testimonials

These experiences create positive associations with parks and recreation services and offer concrete examples of how supporting parks benefits officials politically.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

#3 - PROVIDING TURNKEY SOLUTIONS

SOLUTIONS

Elected officials and their staffs are typically overextended, managing numerous issues with limited resources. Make it easy for them to support parks by providing complete, ready-to-implement solutions:

- Fully developed proposals rather than general requests
- Draft language for resolutions, budget items, or policy changes
- Talking points they can use in public statements
- Response strategies for potential objections or questions
- Implementation plans that minimize demands on their time and staff

For example, rather than simply asking for support for a new a new 100 acre park, provide:

- A complete funding proposal with multiple options
- Design concepts with safety and accessibility features highlighted
- Letters of support from community organizations
- Draft remarks for the announcement
- A timeline for implementation
- Suggestions for how the official can remain visibly involved throughout the process

This approach respects officials' time constraints while increasing the likelihood that your initiatives will move forward as intended.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

#4 - QUANTIFY AND COMMUNICATE IMPACT

Elected officials need to justify their decisions to constituents and colleagues. Help them make the case for parks by providing compelling data and stories about impact:

1.COLLECT MEANINGFUL METRICS:

- Program participation numbers and demographic breakdowns
- Economic impacts (property values, tourism spending, job creation)
- Health outcomes (physical activity levels, health care savings)
- Environmental benefits (stormwater management, air quality improvement)
- Crime reduction in areas with activated parks
- Survey data showing constituent satisfaction

2. TRANSLATE INTO NARRATIVES

- Create one-page impact summaries with visuals
- Develop case studies of successful initiatives
- Collect testimonials from diverse park users
- Produce short videos showcasing programs in action
- Compare your outcomes to benchmark communities

3. COMMUNICATE REGULARLY

- “Regularly” means not just during budget season
- Provide quarterly updates on key metrics
- Share success stories throughout the year
- Highlight how investments have paid off
- Connect outcomes to officials' stated priorities

Consistent and quality communication helps officials see parks as high-return investments rather than cost centers, making it easier for them to champion park funding and support.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

#5 - BUILDING A CONSTITUENCY FOR PARKS

This deserves a lot more attention because it is a so critical but here are some guiding principles

1. IDENTIFYING AND ORGANIZING PARK SUPPORTERS

- Identify and mapping your stakeholders
- Identify types of supporters (funding, political, volunteer)
- Use a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software to track your communications
- Create a variety of opportunities for commitments and involvment.

2. TURNING USERS INTO ADVOCATES

- Educate users about the simple basics about funding or lack thereof.
- Following up with users with specific calls to action
- Provide opportunities for training and feedback
- are all relevant and necessary to help create advocates.

Having someone talk about one of the main reasons they moved to the town being the access to parks and open space, or how their family got in shape because they had better access to a new trail are great testimonials.

3. AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY VOICES

- A variety of community voices talking about the value, the fun, the memories of parks and conservation is impactful on officials.
- Focus on real life voices and faces
- Voices should range from business leaders to parents to kids.
- Topics should vary to include health and economic.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

#6 - THE ART OFTHE PARK TOUR

One of the most powerful advocacy tools available to park professionals is the strategically planned park tour. Seeing facilities firsthand creates lasting impressions that reports and presentations cannot match. To maximize the impact do the following:

1. SET CLEAR OBJECTIVES.

- Decide what specific messages you want to convey and what actions you hope the official will take afterward.

2. CHOOSE SITES STRATEGICALLY

- Are in or impact the official's district
- Demonstrate both successes and challenges
- Illustrate issues relevant to the official's priorities
- Show diverse users and programs in action

3. TIME IT RIGHT

- When programs are active and facilities are being used
- Enough time for meaningful conversation
- Before key decisions are made, not after
- At a time convenient for the official (be flexible)

4. PREPARE THOROUGHLY

- Brief staff who will be present
- Ensure facilities are well-maintained
- Arrange for diverse park users to interact with the official
- Prepare concise handouts with key facts and figures
- Plan your route to maximize impact within time constraints

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

#6 - THE ART OFTHE PARK TOUR (2)

5. INVITE STRATEGICALLY

- The official's key staff members
- Community partners who can validate your message
- Representatives from constituencies the official values
- Local media if appropriate (with the official's permission)

6. CONNECT TO BROADER ISSUES

- "This program serves the at-risk youth population you've been concerned about"
- "The renovations we're proposing would address safety issues your constituents have been reporting"
- "This green infrastructure would help with the flooding problems in part of your district”

7. FOLLOW-UP AFTER THE TOUR

- Prompt Thank you note
- Send a picture from the tour
- Give them an update 3-6 months later
- Put this in your CRM

A well-executed tour can transform an official's understanding of parks from abstract budget burden to essential community assets serving real constituents. This personal connection often translates into stronger advocacy during budget discussions and policy debates.

THE LONG GAME OF PARK ADVOCACY

THIS IS A MARATHON NOT A SPRINT

Building political support for parks is a marathon, not a sprint. The most successful departments approach advocacy with patience and strategic persistence:

1. CELEBRATE INCREMENTAL PROGRESS

- Small budget increases lay groundwork for larger ones
- Pilot programs can grow into permanent services
- Single champions on a council can help convince colleagues
- Today's engaged youth become tomorrow's community leaders

2. INVEST IN RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT BEFORE YOU NEED SUPPORT

- Regular communication with officials about successes and challenges
- Consistent presence at community events and forums
- Ongoing cultivation of diverse advocates and supporters
- Proactive problem-solving that demonstrates collaborative spirit

3. PREPARE FOR LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

- Develop onboarding materials for new officials
- Cultivate champions across partisan lines
- Document commitments and agreements
- Build institutional support that transcends individual relationships

4. LEARN FROM SUCCESSES AND SETBACKS

- Analyze which messages and approaches resonated
- Identify gaps in your support coalition
- Recognize emerging priorities you can align with
- Adapt strategies based on changing political landscapes

THE LONG GAME OF PARK ADVOCACY

AN INTEGRAL PART OF YOUR PROFESSION

5. MAINTAIN FOCUS ON THE ULTIMATE GOAL

- Avoid political drama (nobody likes drama)
- Pick your battles - some hills are worth dying on and most are not;

6 . ELECTED OFFICIALS CHANGE

- Term limits or election shifts, officials change - stay consistent.
- When it does change sometimes that staff stays
- Welcome the new team (no matter politics)

7. MAKE THE INVESTMENT

- Intentional park advocacy takes time
- If you want a strategic and consiistent approach you will have to make budget investments
- Return on your investment - is it worth an investment

By approaching political advocacy as an integral part of your professional responsibility rather than a distraction from it, you transform the relationship between parks and politics. The result is not just better funding and support for your department, but a stronger, healthier, more connected community for everyone you serve.

CONCLUSION

1. Position Parks as Solutions: Reframe positioning parks as political assets. Position parks as solutions to community challenges like public safety, economic development, and health to align with elected officials' priorities.
2. Build authentic relationships: Invest in personal connections with officials and their staff to foster trust, access, and advocacy.
3. Communicate impact effectively: Use data, stories, and consistent updates to demonstrate parks' value and justify investment.
4. Engage strategically: Leverage park tours, visibility opportunities, and turnkey solutions to make supporting parks easy and politically rewarding.
5. Play the long game: Cultivate sustained advocacy through incremental progress, proactive relationship-building, and adaptability to political changes.
6. Focus on community impact: Keep the mission of enhancing wellbeing, equity, and community connection at the heart of all advocacy efforts.

- *I hope you found this guide helpful. During my 25 years working in the urban planning, construction and park development world, I have been able to apply many of these strategies and have many stories to tell.*
- *If you would like to explore these ideas in more depth or have any questions, I would love to hear from you.*

CONTACT ME

AccelParks

MY SUBSTACK LINK

On my substack, I share stories from the field and try to make it very application heavy.

WEBSITE

My website is www.accelparks.com

email: rick.wood@accelparks.com

Lets Get Started:

I am available for 15 minute conversation to learn more about your questions, needs or situation. I can help you develop a daily strategy, a plan for your team or just some thoughts on next steps.

