

# Neighborhood park renovations enhance visitor behaviors and experiences

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Credit: PSU

(Phys.org) —Renovating public parks enhances visitor behaviors and experiences, according to researchers at Penn State, who surveyed park visitors in Allentown, Pa., about their use of a neighborhood park after it was renovated.

"It may seem obvious that park renovations benefit communities, but funders are increasingly demanding more scientific evidence, beyond anecdotal stories, that demonstrate the impact of park renovations," said Andrew Mowen, associate professor of recreation, park and tourism management. "Such information can help state and local government

agencies assess the value of their financial investments in parks."

The researchers examined visitor perceptions of a major capital renovation that was completed at Allentown's 110-acre Cedar Creek Parkway in 2010. Renovations to this park included building a 25,000-square-foot destination playground, paving the multi-purpose trails, installing new exercise stations, refurbishing the flower garden, upgrading picnic areas and improving stream quality with a riparianbuffer.

The researchers surveyed 256 Cedar Creek Parkway visitors in 2008, prior to the renovation, and 416 Cedar Creek Parkway visitors in 2011, after the renovation. The team also surveyed visitors at a nearby, unrenovated park to use as a comparison.

Survey questions were directed at understanding whether visitors were aware of the park renovations and whether they reported changes in park visitation frequency, length of stay, activity variety, and enjoyment as a result of these renovations. The survey also compared visitor perceptions of park quality across the pre- and post-renovation time period and compared these quality ratings with the comparison park, which received no renovations.

The results will appear in the April 16 issue of the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*.

Study results indicated that most visitors were aware of the recent renovation and could identify at least one or two improvements. A majority of visitors also reported that the renovations caused them to visit more frequently and stay longer, and that their enjoyment increased.

According to Mowen, when comparing pre- to post-time periods, seven

of 13 perceived quality indicators improved significantly at the renovated park—such as park cleanliness, availability of picnic areas, condition of park trails—while there were few changes at the unrenovated comparison park.

In addition to the park surveys, the research team also gauged people's reactions to the park renovation by inviting them to share their opinions in a series of focus-group discussions.

"We wanted to ask residents what the impact of the park renovation has been for themselves, their families and the greater Allentown community," said Ben Hickerson, assistant professor of recreation, park and tourism management. "In these focus groups, the renovations were discussed as a unifying force in the community, helping to bridge differences between people of different backgrounds and abilities."

"This study adds to a growing body of evidence that moves beyond anecdotal claims and demonstrates the positive impacts of park renovations," Mowen said. "In addition to their potential for increasing park use behaviors, these renovations also resulted in experiential changes, such as increased visitor enjoyment and satisfaction. If these improved behaviors and perceptions translate to a more supportive park constituency, there is greater reason to recommend more widespread [park](#) renovation initiatives."

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