

Park District chief explains challenges

By Jay Sandine

Posted Sep 20, 2019 at 10:00 AM; Updated Sep 20, 2019 at 2:47 PM

What people don't understand, people don't value. What people don't value, people don't protect. What people don't protect, people lose.

The Rockford Park District improves the quality of life for citizens by providing a vibrant park system that increases property values, stimulates economic development, decreases juvenile crime, and improves our communities' health. A vibrant and relevant park system also protects the environment, employs hundreds of area teens, and brings our diverse community together in unity through the common love of play.

The "doom and gloom" way of saying it is, if we continue to cut services at the Rockford Park District, will your property values increase or decrease? Will youth crime get better or worse? Will families want to live in Rockford, and will businesses want to move to Rockford? These are all important questions we need to think about when it comes to our ability to provide quality of life services to the children and families who depend on us. We must as a community fully understand the role parks and recreation plays in all of our lives.

The fact remains, without a substantial new revenue stream or a decrease in our footprint, we will no longer be able to provide the current level of services that the community has enjoyed for many years.

A few important facts to consider:

1. How we are funded: Unlike other government entities, your park district operates mainly on two revenue streams — your property taxes, and the fees that we charge for services. We do not receive sales tax, motor fuel tax, hotel tax, utility tax, etc. When we hold the line on property taxes, which we have for the last five years, we have no other revenue stream to offset the expense increases each year.

2. Minimum wage impact: The minimum wage law beginning Jan. 1 will negatively impact the Park District budget by \$2 million over the next five years. We have

just under 1,000 team members in this pay category, with no state funding or other revenue to help offset this cost increase. We believe we are the largest local organization that will experience this major financial impact.

3. Sports tournaments do not benefit the district financially: The district's Mercyhealth Sportscore complexes and UW Health Sports Factory operations are subsidized by \$500,000 per year combined. It costs a lot of money to maintain these facilities at tournament quality level, and the fees that we charge must be competitive to attract tournaments and events to choose our community over others throughout the country. The Park District is responsible for bringing in the majority of these tournaments, which generate in excess of \$15 million in economic impact annually, but we do not receive one cent of that revenue.

4. Six Flags Great America partnership is a break-even deal: Through our new partnership with Six Flags Great America, the funds we receive offset the debt we still owe on Magic Waters Waterpark over the next 16 years. This debt is due to bonds taken out over the years to build new attractions at the water park. It's a break-even deal for the District, and we are happy to see a private sector organization taking the park to the next level for our families. No property tax dollars will ever need to go to Magic Waters Waterpark again.

5. Fewer golfers playing means less revenue: Golf rounds are down approximately 180,000 rounds per year from when Aldeen Golf Club first came on line in 1993. What used to be a \$1.5 million annual profit for the district is now a \$500,000 a year subsidy. This dramatic trend is prevalent in the golf industry all over the country.

6. Land sale limitations: By state law through the Illinois Park Code, we can only sell 2.99 acres of land. Selling anything over three acres would require a referendum on the ballot.

7. Team member reductions while expanding: Our dedicated team members are the best in the parks and recreation industry, and are the envy of park districts across the country. We have cut internally to make budgets for the past 10 years, and are down 12% full-time team members from 2009, even including the new facility expansions during that time. Any further reductions internally will result in reductions of service externally.

8. Hard Rock Casino Rockford support: We know it was controversial for some that we stepped out in support of Hard Rock Casino Rockford. Quite honestly, it was an easy decision for us. The community challenged us through their feedback in 2018 to aggressively find non-property tax revenues and mutually beneficial partnerships to minimize future reduction of services. Hard Rock Casino is well known for its philanthropy in the communities in which they invest. They contacted the Park District after hearing from multiple people how your Park District impacts the community, and they chose to invest in our children in our neighborhoods, as well as key areas in southwest Rockford. We hope the City Council recommends Hard Rock Casino Rockford as the first and only casino sent to the Illinois Gaming Board. We are desperate for the new property tax revenues and the Hard Rock's charitable giving — our kids in the neighborhoods are depending on it.

We are repositioning the Rockford Park District to meet the recreational needs of this generation, and get to a sustainable financial position. We will make our decisions based on your feedback from our 2018 community engagement. This is your park district. Thank you for your continued support and involvement. It's truly an honor to Help You Enjoy Life! We ask that you get involved to continue the gold medal legacy of the park system that was citizen-created in 1909.

Jay Sandine is executive director of the Rockford Park District