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For public parks and recreation, heeding the call of the inner-city wild is crucial in delivering healthy, livable communities.

By Michael Edwards

A young 20-something couple from Colorado Springs, Colo., expecting their first child, is looking to move back East to relocate themselves and their business. They are basing a large part of their decision on the outdoor amenities, such as hiking and biking trails, that would be available to their new family.

They are delighted to learn that Pittsburgh offers more than a dozen parks with great mountain biking and hiking—many of which are within easy walking distance of restaurants, retail, an arts district, and job opportunities.

According to experts and researchers, this hypothetical situation represents a phenomenon that is occurring in countless cities across the country, as more and more people return to the nation’s urban centers, seeking to achieve a more balanced work-live-play existence.

Amy Roberts, director of government affairs for NRPA partner the Outdoor Industry Association, a trade association representing manufacturers, distributors, and retailers in the outdoor recreation business, says, “In America today, 159 million people over the age of 16 participate in outdoor activities. These activities are characterized by a sense of wellness, promotion of social interaction, and outdoor connection.”

Outdoor recreation, says Roberts, is a $730 billion annual industry in this country, surpassing sectors such as publishing and mining, and even exceeding spectator sports.

Parks, recreation, and open space have always been a fundamental, though oftentimes overlooked, part of community-building. Used in the past by developers and politicians, urban parks from Frederick Law Olmsted’s high-profile Central Park in New York City to the small, beautiful Manito Park in Spokane Wash., have added value to surrounding property and generated millions for city tax coffers.

Not surprisingly, according to Roberts, the baby boomer generation (those ages 42-60) and the millennial generation (ages 27 and younger) are the majority segments driving this new outdoor lifestyle trend. From a community-building perspective, these active people are more affluent than other groups, and are leading the trend back to urban living across America.

For public park and recreation professionals, the challenge lies in making a compelling case that investing in parks and open space, and incorporating the new outdoor lifestyle as a critical part of community-building, is a viable economic development strategy.

Getting Out

Embracing the outdoor lifestyle, according to Roberts, is not “exclusively about escape to the backcountry.” The needs and desires of people are changing, and many individuals have realigned their priorities.

Today, the active outdoor lifestyle has gone mainstream, characterized by quality time with family and friends on weekends and after work hours. Thanks to the ever-increasing time and energy demands of family and jobs, convenience and accessibility to outdoor activities is critical.

The opportunity for public park and recreation professionals is to provide meaningful outdoor activity in what Roberts calls the “frontcountry,” those active recreation spaces in close proximity to places of living and work. Today, a person can get a sense of accomplishment with a 15-mile
Communities that can deliver accessible and safe trails, unique open space, and interesting park opportunities close to home and office will have a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining residents, visitors, and businesses.

What’s behind this renewed interest in the great outdoors, albeit in the frontcountry format? Primarily, two things: the rise of our techno-centric society, and a response to increasing levels of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes directly linked to inactivity.

In addition, the diminishing availability of green space and Americans’ decreased daily contact with the natural world have stimulated a growing need for high-quality outdoor venues and activities. The demand for outdoor recreation is an opportunity to use public parks and recreation as a powerful economic development tool. On opposite sides of the country, two cities have taken advantage of this opportunity, producing significant positive results.

**Moving Pittsburgh**

Pittsburgh is a city of 334,000 with a market reach of 2.4 million people. Located in western Pennsylvania in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains, the urban landscape has a remarkable topography of rolling hills divided by three rivers, the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio.

A onetime industrial powerhouse, today Pittsburgh’s economy is remarkably diverse with medical, innovation, and education jobs leading the way. Like many cities in this region, however, it longs to shed its outdated national industrial reputation. In addition, it suffers from an affliction common to a number of Rust Belt cities: “brain drain,” an illness that hemorrhages young people from the area in droves.

In 2001 the Riverlife Taskforce, an advocacy group comprising public, private, and corporate leaders, envisioned a plan to reactivate Pittsburgh’s riverfronts. The result was the creation of Three Rivers Park, which links 13 miles of riverfront along the heavily populated, high-use areas of downtown, using both public and private lands.

Three Rivers Park, says Lisa Schroeder, executive director of the Riverlife Taskforce, was designed to “reintroduce Pittsburghers to their riverfront through trails, bridges, green space, water landings, public art, historic artifacts, restaurants, and community events.”

Riverlife has completed a number of significant capital projects, including new pedestrian bridges and trailways, and has improved access to Pittsburgh’s thriving riverfront, making Three Rivers Park a success. The group works closely with key partners, including the city of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, property owners, environmental groups, and various
Providing activities to encourage the use of the city’s waterfront amenities is the job of Venture Outdoors, a local nonprofit organization “dedicated to making the outdoor recreation community a vibrant centerpiece of the Pittsburgh region.” Erik Lingren, the organization’s executive director, says that Venture Outdoors has tapped into the aforementioned outdoor lifestyle.

“Increased awareness of outdoor recreation opportunities focused on the young and active adults,” says Lingren, “will stimulate economic development by retaining youth in the region, improving health and well-being, and providing entrepreneurial opportunities.”

The combination of the Riverlife Taskforce as builder and Venture Outdoors as programmer in Pittsburgh’s new front-country has transformed how Pittsburghers view themselves and, increasingly, how the Pittsburgh region is viewed around the country. Last year, more than 25,000 people participated in Venture Outdoors’ activities, with all regional celebrations occurring along Three Rivers Park.

A major force in the creation of 5,000 new downtown housing units, Three Rivers Park has enhanced office leasing, spurred increased convention center business, aided university recruitment (there are now more than 75,000 students and faculty in the city), and slowed the dreaded brain drain.

Outdoor recreation has allowed Pittsburgh to begin redefining itself, attracting local visitors, supporting tourism, and growing convention and hospitality interest in the city. Furthermore, these new recreation-oriented amenities and programs are a calling card for the CEOs and workforce associated with new business investment in areas such as nanotechnology, robotics, specialty metals, and biotechnology.

In 2006, Pittsburgh was recognized as the Best American City for Outdoor Activities by National Geographic Adventure magazine, which cites the city as “morphing from a stronghold of industry into a place that better reflects the surrounding Allegheny Mountains.” The article goes on to suggest that “Pittsburgh has become a place where residents can be serious about their careers and their outdoors.”

In December 2007, Pittsburgh was highlighted in Backpacker magazine, which encouraged readers to “hike 600-acre Frick Park with 10 miles of groomed trails, paddle 6 miles up the barge-free Allegheny River, or ride a 25-mile circuit of trails throughout the city.”

**Speaking of Spokane**

Spokane, Wash., is a city of 190,000 with a market area of 1.7 million people. Relatively isolated in the eastern part of the state, Spokane is the urban center of a region stretching from Idaho to Montana and into western Canada.

The local economy here is transitioning from resource extraction to technology-based businesses. Thanks to its small size and isolation, Spokane offers unique outdoor recreation access, providing a new opportunity for economic development.
The Spokane River Gorge boasts 400 acres of river access and open space located adjacent to downtown. The community vision for the gorge, led by a nonprofit organization called Friends of the Falls, is an activated river and gorge corridor serving as a regional trailhead and gateway for outdoor recreation in the city and region.

Activities currently occurring in the Spokane River Gorge corridor: bicycling, mountain biking, walking, trail running, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, rafting, kayaking, canoeing, tubing, geo-caching, bird watching, camping, rock climbing, horseback riding, swimming, and fly fishing. Packaged as part of an outdoor playground, this laundry list of activities could be a significant draw to attract regional visitation, enhance land value, reposition Spokane for business investment, and rebrand the community.

The Friends of the Falls, working with the city and Greater Spokane Inc., has a number of direct economic development objectives in pursuing open space, parks, and recreation to increase their community’s economic capacity, including brand identity, entrepreneurial opportunity, tourism and conventions, and business development.

“Spokane intends to capitalize on its proximity to outdoor recreation to attract active people of all ages,” says Rich Hadley, president and CEO of Greater Spokane Inc. “Near nature. Near perfect,” he says, “has proven an effective brand for us to separate ourselves from other communities and attract creative talent to Spokane.”

As a first step, the Friends of the Falls is building a white-water park in close proximity to downtown, a prime example of aligning community open space assets with the outdoor lifestyle to bring the frontcountry to the city.

The Spokane Parks and Recreation Department, which is actively involved in the development of this project, will assume responsibility for ongoing operations and maintenance of the whitewater facility.

The park is a low-cost, high-impact project aimed at leveraging unique natural resources and complementing other development.

In 2007, National Geographic Adventure magazine selected Las Vegas—yes, that Las Vegas—as America’s best Adventure Town. The pub says: “With more outdoor recreation within a 200-mile radius than any other major town in the nation, Sin City has got a new slogan: Whoever plays in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” This kind of national exposure gives communities—large and small—an opportunity to rebrand themselves and attract new investment, residents, and tourists.

—M.E.
outdoor investments, including a new trail and nearby pedestrian bridge. Local officials expect it to make a $1.1 million annual economic impact.

**Making Brown Green Again**

Like a majority of cities, Spokane claims several former industrial sites, now abandoned and deteriorated, in and around its downtown core. The site for Kendall Yards, a proposed mixed-use residential and lifestyle center, will be 78 acres of a former railyard located across the river from downtown Spokane. This brownfields reclamation project is located in the city’s poorest neighborhood and has contributed minimal property taxes across the past 20 years.

Alexander Garvin, adjunct professor of urban planning and management at Yale and author of *The American City: What Works, What Doesn’t*, says that more and more cities are discovering the benefits of renovating and reusing these properties that were once used for industrial and manufacturing purposes.

“As people began to move [back to cities], doing loft conversions and the like,” says Garvin, “they wanted to have a place for recreation. It turned out that there were railyards, industrial waterfronts, and all of these areas that were available.”

While the Kendall Yards site is not without significant challenges, it offers one extraordinary opportunity: more than a mile of riverfrontage in the heart of the city. The site size, proximity to downtown, and riverfront location were important considerations in the developer’s decision to take on the project.

Also important, according to project manager Thomas Reese of Black Rock Development, the lead on the Kendall Yards project, “was the developing vision for an activated Spokane River Gorge.” Amenities such as the new Centennial Trail, pedestrian bridge, and proposed whitewater park, says Reese, all add value to the development “by differentiating our product and attracting affluent buyers interested in the outdoor-oriented lifestyle.”

According to Reese, when completed, the site will include 2,600 housing units, 1 million square feet of commercial space, and three miles of trails connecting the new neighborhood to the 37-mile Centennial Trail, which runs all the way to Idaho, a direct connection to the whitewater park and to the 400 acres of Gorge Park.

The site’s location—with tremendous views of the river gorge and downtown—the preservation of green space, and the convenient connection to outdoor recreation all position Kendall Yards for success, says Reese.

In terms of economic development and impact, Kendall Yards will create 500 construction jobs and 2,500 perma-
nent jobs, generate $32 million annually in state taxes and $3 billion in private investment over a 10- to 20-year build-out, increase surrounding property values and generate new property taxes, and grow revenue for the city’s park department.

This degree of economic impact, stimulated partially through investment in public parks and open space, would be impressive in any city. But in Spokane, says Reese, it really is the “silver bullet” project.

Judging from the case studies in Pittsburgh and Spokane, “recreation-oriented development” just might be the new phrase for the aligning of parks, recreation, and open space to drive new investment in communities that have lost their competitive position due to changing markets, shifting employment opportunities, and population trends.

These cities and others have found ways to capitalize on their unique natural amenities, packaging the outdoor experience and aligning it with a new dynamic lifestyle. In Pittsburgh, it has resulted in increased demand for downtown housing. In Spokane, it has attracted a billion dollars in new investment. And in Las Vegas, it has dramatically expanded the reasons to visit beyond gaming.

For public park and recreation professionals, the lesson appears fairly obvious: The opportunity exists to capitalize on unique outdoor assets—including parks, open space, lakes, rivers, mountains, valleys, and trails—with the intent to enhance real estate values and reposition individual communities as more attractive places for residents, tourists, and future investment.

Recreation-oriented development supports tourism, convention activity, and business, downtown, and community growth—integral elements to healthy, livable cities and towns. All that remains is for park and recreation professionals to take their place at the community-building table.