PUBLIC ATTITUDES ABOUT FINANCING MUNICIPAL RECREATION

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Abstract.—Communities constantly seek creative financing for public services like recreation. Property tax remains central for financing, but user fees, grants, sales taxes, sponsorship, and bond issues have increased. This paper examines preferences for alternative funding mechanisms in a survey of Hartford, VT residents. Public support for municipal facilities and programs varied with use, age, income and employment. Residents opposed additional taxes, favoring grants, sponsorships, and user fees instead. But a substantial block of "swing" voters determine proposal success or failure.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Although municipal resources provide crucial public recreation services, financing them has always been difficult. With mid-twentieth century prosperity, neighborhood parks and recreation facilities became integral community resources. But that prosperity began fading in the 1970s with pressures from inflation, increases in costs for liability insurance and municipal employees' benefits, globalization, technological development, and immigration (More, 1999). Middle class anger crystallized in the property tax revolt, necessitating new ways of funding municipal services and creating a more entrepreneurial approach to park and recreation management (Crompton, 1999). While property taxes remain critical, today's managers make greater use of local sales taxes, foundation grants, corporate sponsorships and user fees to fund daily operations (Crompton, 1999). Major capital improvements are often funded through special bond issues. This case study examines public preferences for alternative strategies for funding public recreation in Hartford, VT.

1.1 Setting and Background

Hartford, a small city on the Connecticut River in eastern Vermont, is an amalgam of five villages ranging in prosperity from an old mill town on the river to a high-end destination resort village that attracts second-home buyers and tourists. In 2000, Hartford's population was 10,367 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The community was 52.7 percent female, 97 percent white, and two-thirds of residents (66.6 percent) lived in owner-occupied dwellings. The median age was 40, the median household income was $42,990 (1999 dollars), 67.8 percent of those over age 16 were employed, and 5 percent of families and 8 percent of individuals fell below the poverty line. Relative to the entire U.S. population, Hartford's population tends to be older, more female, more Caucasian, and more affluent than many other U.S. communities.

The Hartford Parks and Recreation Department manages 12 municipal parks and other facilities, and runs recreation programs throughout the year. The department has an annual operating budget of $670,676 and 6.5 employees including a professional director. In 2005, the town proposed a $1.7 million municipal bond issue to finance repairs and expansion of a municipal arena attached to the existing high school. The arena, originally built in 1975, provides winter skating opportunities, summer programs, and is used throughout the year by the school district. The building needed exterior repairs, electrical system upgrades, suitable bathroom and shower facilities for sports events, and upgrades to comply with federal accessibility requirements. The Parks and Recreation Department also sought to increase capacity for team sports and other events.

Voters ultimately rejected the bond issue by more than a 2-to-1 margin, and the community's Recreation Board wanted to learn why. Consequently, this study sought more information about Hartford residents' attitudes about the bond issue, about their existing recreation use patterns, their desires for future development, and their attitudes about alternative funding mechanisms.

2.0 METHODS

The Hartford Parks and Recreation Department designed and implemented a resident survey in April, 2006. The questionnaire contained 29 questions on four pages following Dillman's (1978) procedures. Initial questions concerned residents' use of, and satisfaction with, municipal parks and facilities during 2005. The second section inquired about desires for new programs and facilities and the third section asked about program registration problems. The fourth section focused on the bond vote, residents' willingness to support a new bond vote, and possible alternative funding strategies. Standard socio-economic and demographic characteristics made up the final section.

The questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of 710 Hartford residents from the town's grand list. However, to increase the response, questionnaires also were distributed through the elementary schools and community offices, ultimately creating a purposive sample. A total of 263 completed and usable surveys were collected. Survey respondents in general tended to be slightly older and definitely better educated than Hartford's general population (as described by the 2000 U.S. Census data). The questionnaire also asked how respondents had voted on the previous bond issue (which had been defeated by a 2-to-1 margin). Survey respondents had been more supportive of the bond than the general population, possibly indicating more favorable attitudes toward local parks and recreation. Thus, the results should be treated cautiously, as the results may not represent the views of Hartford residents in general.

3.0 RESULTS

Results are presented with regard to facility use, satisfaction, and preferences, and financing new facilities and programs. Columns and rows in tables may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

3.1 Facility Use

The Hartford Park and Recreation Department currently manages 12 sites including pools, athletic fields, and conservation areas. The survey asked how frequently respondents had used (visited) each site in the preceding 12 months. Each respondent's answers were summed to create a variable representing people's total recreation site use for analysis. Total annual sites visits per respondent ranged from 0 (10.3 percent of the sample) to 90 (0.4 percent of the sample). Chi-square analysis found that use varied significantly with both age ($p<0.01$) and employment status ($p<0.05$). Age groups ranged from 18 to 25 years to 65+ years. Use declined steadily with age: 92 percent of the respondents age 35 years and younger made moderate or heavy use of public facilities; this declined to 54 percent of people 65 years and older (Table 1). Use was lowest for retired or semi-retired individuals. Use did not vary significantly by income,

Table 1.—Total public facility use by age categories

	Total Use[a] of Facilities and Parks		
Age (n)	Low Use %	Moderate Use %	High Use %
< 35 years old[b] (26)	7.7	23.1	69.2
35 to 44 years old (74)	2.7	29.7	67.6
45 to 54 years old (49)	22.4	30.6	46.9
55 to 64 years old (36)	30.6	33.3	36.1
65 years or older (37)	45.9	32.4	21.6

Chi square(8) = 42.922, $p < .001$
Somers' d = -.345, $p = .000$
[a]Low Use = 0 to 2 visits in the last 12 months; Moderate = 3 to 10 visits; High = >11 visits
[b]Combines two age categories, 18 to 25 years and 25 to 34 years

although people with incomes above $75,000 used public facilities less than people in the middle or lower income brackets.

Lack of time was most frequently cited constraint (29 percent) against more frequent use of municipal facilities. Unfamiliarity/lack of knowledge was mentioned as a constraint by 25 percent, while 18 percent were uninterested, and 10 percent said the facilities were too far from their homes. Other potential constraints – hours of operation, fees, security, etc. – had only small effects on usage.

Respondents were very satisfied with facility maintenance: 84 percent rated maintenance as good or excellent, while less than 1 percent said that maintenance was poor. The respondents were also satisfied with the existing facilities (Table 2). Facilities receiving the highest satisfaction ratings were parks (83 percent of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied), outdoor recreation facilities (74 percent), playgrounds (70 percent), trails (66 percent), bandstands (61 percent), and multiple use areas (55 percent). Lowest satisfaction was expressed with indoor recreation (29 percent), and tennis (40 percent).

3.2 Program and Facility Preferences

Recreation programming by the Park and Recreation Department supplements the physical facilities. When asked about their programming preferences, 37 percent of respondents wanted more fitness programs, 36 percent wanted more after school programs, and 32 percent wanted more nature programs (Table 3). Least interest was expressed for pick-up games (11 percent), computer education (13 percent) and cultural programs (16 percent).

Among preferences for future facility development, an indoor pool was most preferred (39 percent); least preferred were a new senior center (7 percent), and a replacement for the current municipal arena (8 percent).

3.3 Financing New Facilities and Programs

Some financing techniques are controversial among survey respondents. As shown in Table 4, to finance future community recreation development, respondents strongly preferred fund-raising initiatives (53 percent) and grants (51 percent). User fees were favored by 32 percent. The least popular finance methods were property tax increases (13 percent) and bond initiatives (22 percent). However, 16 percent were unsure about financing alternatives, suggesting a block of swing voters who may respond more enthusiastically to proposal specifics.

Taxes also proved unpopular to finance new construction (Table 5). Far more residents preferred fund raising (55 percent), pay-per-use (46 percent), or real estate development fees (38 percent). Again, public support may depend on proposal specifics.

Table 2.—Satisfaction with town recreation facilities

Facilities	N	Not sure (%)	Very dissatisfied (%)	Dissatisfied (%)	Satisfied (%)	Very satisfied (%)
Indoor recreation facilities	215	33.0	12.1	25.6	26.5	2.8
Outdoor recreation facilities	216	19.4	1.9	4.6	59.3	14.8
Parks	218	15.1	0.5	1.8	61.0	21.6
Trails	217	30.4	0.0	4.1	53.5	12.0
Multi-use athletic fields	210	33.3	3.3	8.1	48.1	7.1
Baseball/softball diamonds	207	42.5	1.0	8.7	43.5	4.3
Tennis courts	210	43.8	2.4	13.8	36.7	3.3
Playgrounds	213	21.1	1.4	7.0	57.3	13.1
Boating/fishing access	214	42.5	2.3	7.0	44.4	3.7
Bandstand/live music venues	217	30.0	0.9	7.8	50.2	11.1

Table 3.—Percent of respondents expressing preferences for future programs

	N=263
Fitness & wellness programs	37.3%
After school programs	36.5%
Nature & outdoor programs	32.3%
Summer programs	25.5%
Teen programs	25.1%
Art & craft programs	22.8%
Adventure programs	20.2%
Cultural programs	16.0%
Senior programs	15.6%
Computer & technology programs	13.3%
Individual & team sports	10.6%
Less-structured “pick-up” games	10.6%
None of these	7.5%
Other	4.9%

Among survey respondents, 28 percent had supported the 2004 bond proposal to fund the new arena, 24 percent had opposed it, and 48 percent had not voted. Those who had voted “no” expressed greatest concern about taxes (16 percent) and project cost (14 percent). Most (95 percent) indicated that they had received sufficient information to make a decision at the time. Asked if they would support a new bond issue to fund the arena, 43 percent of respondents indicated support, 12 percent opposed, but 34 percent were unsure. Again, the large percentage of “unsure” responses suggests swing voters who focus on project details. Using chi-square, we found response to the reintroduction of the bond varied significantly with age ($p<0.05$) and employment ($p<0.05$); the youngest age group was most supportive and the retired or semi-retired showed greatest opposition.

Respondents overwhelmingly opposed additional taxes to fund programs and facilities: only 5 percent of respondents favored a local option sales tax and just 12 percent favored paying through property taxes. More preferred financing options included fund raising (55 percent), pay-per-use fees at public facilities (46 percent) and real estate development fees (38 percent). Most respondents (81 percent) believed that current facility use fees were average; 14 percent thought they were too low and 4 percent thought they were too high.

Table 4.—Percent of respondents expressing preferences for ways to finance improvement/development of existing/new facilities

Financing Strategy	N=263
Fund raising	53.2%
Grants	50.6%
Increased use fees	32.3%
Bond vote	22.4%
Not sure	16.3%
Tax increase	12.9%

Table 5.—Respondents’ preferences for how Hartford should pay for construction of new recreation facilities

Funding Strategy	N=263
Fund raising	55.1%
Pay-per-use fees	46.0%
Real estate development fees	37.6%
New property taxes	12.5%
Local option sales tax	5.3%

Resistance to tax increases may be a general response while reactions to a specific proposal or specific dollar amounts may depend on project particulars. For example, nearly half the respondents indicated they would be willing to pay (WTP) \$1 to \$50 more in property taxes to support parks and recreation programs, while 20 percent supported an increase of between \$50 and \$100. But tax resistance is strong: 32 percent said they would not pay any more taxes. Support for additional taxes increased significantly with use ($p<0.01$) (Table 6). Income was the best indicator of WTP. Analysis of variance indicated that middle income people were most WTP while upper income people were the least (Table 7). Lower income people may lack the capacity to absorb more taxes, while upper income people are less dependent on public facilities and programs. Willingness to pay also varied significantly with age ($p<0.01$). Those least WTP were in the 65+ age bracket, while those most willing were in the 35-44 age range.

Table 6.—Percent willing to pay additional taxes for increased recreational opportunities by total use frequency

Additional Tax for Recreation	Total Use[a] of Facilities and Parks Low use (n=70) %	Moderate use (n=71) %	High use (n=68) %
None	52.9	18.3	28.8
$1 to $5	14.3	9.9	10.6
$6 to $15	7.1	12.7	18.2
$16 to $25	5.7	16.9	13.6
$26 to $50	10.0	18.3	3.0
$51 to $75	5.7	4.2	9.1
$76 to $100	1.4	11.3	13.6
>$100	2.9	8.5	3.0

Chi square(14) = 39.517, p < .001
Somers' d = .170, p = .01
[a]Low Use = 0 to 2 visits in previous 12 months; Moderate = 3 to 10 visits; High = >11 visits

Table 7.—Percent willing to pay additional taxes for increased recreational opportunities in Hartford by income

Additional Tax for Recreation	Income[a] <$35,000 (n=37) %	$35,000- $74,999 (n=87) %	$75,000+ (n=45) %
None	59.5	24.1	24.4
$1 to $5	13.5	6.9	10.6
$6 to $15	13.5	18.4	8.9
$16 to $25	2.7	17.3	6.7
$26 to $50	5.4	9.2	15.6
$51 to $75	5.4	10.3	22.2
$76 to $100	0.0	8.0	6.7
>$100	0.0	5.7	0.0

Chi square(14) = 37.109, p < .01
Somers' d = .247, p = .001
[a]Income categories collapsed from <$25,000, $25,000 to $34,999, $35,000 to $49,999, $50,000 to $74,000, $75,000 to $99,999, and $100,000+

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

Our results suggest that support for municipal recreation was greatest among fully employed, early middle-aged, middle income recreation users. Public facilities may be important to these people and their families, especially if they have school-aged children. Retired or semi-retired older respondents were least supportive. But our analyses continually pointed to a block of swing voters in late middle age or early retirement who can determine bond issue outcomes. People between the ages of 45 and 60 may make limited use of public facilities, but are often those who hold the bulk of political power in a community (Howard and Crompton, 1984). Their concerns differ from those of other community members. They are typically at peak earning power, but their children are grown or in college, so they no longer need many of the municipal sports facilities or children's programs. They may be saving for retirement, paying for college, or traveling frequently for pleasure. In some cases, they are sufficiently affluent to have private-sector alternatives. These people form a critical block of voters within a community who can determine the success or failure of a bond issue like the one defeated in Hartford.

It can be difficult for municipal recreation departments to appeal to diverse voters in a community. Since program preferences vary across the life cycle, one approach is to appeal to self-interest, catering to specific needs of particular groups. For example, those aged 34 years or younger in the Hartford survey were most interested in fitness, summer, adventure, and after-school programs; they were least interested in senior, computer, and teen programs and in team sports and pick-up games. This pattern is consistent with what we would expect from young singles or people with very young children. For people in the 35 to 44 year age bracket, preferences shifted to fitness, summer, adventure, and after school programs; they were least interested in team sports, cultural and senior programs. The 45- to 54-year-olds preferred fitness, after school, nature, and teen programs but saw the least need for team sports, cultural and senior programs. They wanted to keep their older teenagers busy. In the 55 to 64 year age bracket, use frequency declined compared to the 45- to-54-year-olds suggesting that those older people who are moderately committed to public facilities begin dropping out. Respondents in this age range were most interested in nature and fitness programs, least interested in team sports and arts and crafts, and they were generally opposed to adding new programs. They are "empty nesters" concerned about finances as they pay for college or save for retirement and personal travel, and they may have access to private recreation alternatives. Finally, those over 65 were the most likely to want no new programs. They were interested in senior and nature programs, but also expressed interest in after-school and teen programming. They may desire to keep children occupied in supervised activities, or they may be grandparents seeking an alternative to caring for grandchildren while parents are at work. The 65+ group had the least interest in team sports, adventure programs, and summer programs.

Fitness was a primary community concern for people of all ages. People wanted fitness programs, an indoor pool, and walking/hiking trails, all of which reflect a desire for adult fitness which may be a crucial health concern of late middle-aged Americans. Similarly, the approval of buying land for recreation could be interpreted as a desire for greater walking/fitness opportunities. Older residents may find a bond issue supporting such activities more appealing than one emphasizing youth sports. Hartford's bond issue may have failed because its association with team sports programs had a narrow constituency in the larger community.

Appeals to community may be effective with swing voters, too. Crompton (1999) suggests that municipal recreation departments should "reposition" to change goals and community perceptions by aligning with a few critical community goals like economic development. Local parks, recreation facilities, and programs can attract both footloose industries seeking relocation and retirees; coordinating department goals with the economic development agency could benefit both agencies.

In sum, funding depends upon making local parks and recreation salient to a larger block of voters; this may be especially challenging in places where competing public programs (e.g. after-school activities) or private facilities (e.g. health clubs) are available. In the northeast, community populations are aging. While many continue to use public facilities well into retirement, interest shifts with age. Successful funding requires careful tailoring to meet community expectations.

5.0 CITATIONS

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