

illinois

Volume 48, Number 5 | September/October 2017



PARKS AND RECREATION

The magazine of the Illinois Association of Park Districts and the Illinois Park and Recreation Association



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CONDUIT BETWEEN

Development & Leadership

By George Bridges Jr., Commissioner & Board President, Waukegan Park District

Meeting after meeting, vote after vote, five community members must meet twice a month to fill the role of governance for the Waukegan Park District and the community they serve. As one of these members, delivery of programs and services that support health, fitness, and recreation are the result of these decisions that have been 100 years in the making and always guided by our mission. (We are celebrating our Centennial Anniversary this year as the district began on December 26th, 1916).

Being a first term commissioner was an exciting and soul quenching position that is made easier because of the day one support of the executive director, superintendents, and other professional staff. This was coupled with the exceptional backing and support of the Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD); an association that advances the Waukegan Parks organization, our citizens, board members, and professional staff, all within our continued ability to provide outstanding park and recreational opportunities, while preserving natural resources and improving the quality of life for our community and the many communities of Illinois.

Board Development

What makes serving the community so enjoyable is the environment of professionalism and the atmosphere of family. From as long ago as I can remember, I was a part of the Waukegan Park District by playing in the parks and being enrolled in the many programs. Prior to joining this award winning team, I met with the administrative personnel to learn the procedures on becoming a commissioner. Since that day, instruction on the process to complete the filing requirements and have my name placed on the voter's ballot and the additional steps to represent and serve the district ensued.

After a successful campaign, there was an immediate hands-on approach by the park district staff and existing board members to be thoroughly educated on the policies and procedures of our district; this was a step-by-step process that ran in conjunction with a comprehensive and valuable training course for new park district board members hosted by the IAPD.

The formation of a strong board begins with each board member's foundation. Education, committees, attending hosted programs, and community involvement is the recipe for a great board that meets the current and future needs of the community.

Education. Winning an election does not give you the knowledge to provide the best park district to your constituents. Policies, laws, and regulations are constantly being revised and implemented and being abreast of these

changes is a major role of a board member. The IAPD and National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) provide several continuing education courses and vital education opportunities for board members, board attorneys, and staff. Many of our board members attend continuing education together with park staff to remain current on all aspects of parks and recreation.

Committees. Advisory committees are one of the best ways that our constituents can voice their ideas, suggestions, and gratitude for the great things the staff are doing in the community. I have personally served on the Recreation Advisory Board and the Special Recreation Advisory Board and many great improvements or desired programs originate from these committee meetings, and are often placed on the agenda for discussion with staff.

Community Involvement. This differs from the advisory committees which are a select population of staff and volunteers, because having regular meetings with the public we serve is very important. I love being on a board that often requests public forums when deciding on major projects and organizational changes to allow input to ensure we execute sound decisions. The Waukegan Park District feels as though we not only serve, but are a part of the community, so we must also have participation and partnering in events the community desires and feels are important.



It is our duty that each member knows the vision and purpose of the district and is encouraged in all we do.

Programming. Attending programs and events hosted by the district reinforces to the staff that board members appreciate what they do day in & day out. Monitoring operations gives citizens, senior staff, and the board feedback that the decisions we make are beneficial to the community. Board members are the sounding board of the citizens; as stated by the IAPD, and should visit the facilities, concerts, camps, senior activities, amongst other programs. The inspiration of confidence and community support is vital and even though things don't always go as the board or staff would like some events/programs to go, attending these events allows board members a way to explain why and assist staff with the feedback for change.

It is a board member's civic responsibility to use sound judgement to see the big picture of their park district. This can only be accomplished with a keen ability to listen to their constituency and set a strategic direction with attainable goals to meet the end users' needs. The cohesive relationship that is fostered by the Waukegan Park District's board and staff allows for a living mission and values statement that makes a well-rounded serving board member.

Leadership

The Waukegan Park District Board members have an addition-by-subtraction philosophy. This philosophy is that board members "set legislation, policy and steward the finances, but we don't interject our governance into the day-to-day operations and activities. From the executive director through the interns, there is complete transparency and fostered encouragement of each member to make the district the very best. Leadership works throughout this family; and is not a title given, but continues with the Executive Director's (Jay Lerner) commitment of importance placed on all park district staff.

First it begins with the passion for serving our citizens. Each board and staff member desires to serve the community and provide for community needs that align with our mission. This passion is truly a secret commodity of the Waukegan Park District because each member loves what they do and longs to improve on the processes that make the Waukegan Park District more efficient, innovative, and effective.

Secondly, education is a multipronged concept of showing dedication to self-improvement and professional development, while also bringing innovative ideas to the organization. This is done by the staff's continued pursuit of certifications, continuing education, Associate/Bachelor degrees, and other specialized/higher education. The Waukegan Park District relies on the existing staff's ability to develop future leaders by nurturing the interest in parks and recreation.

Thirdly, the Waukegan Park District has senior staff that applies passion and education to successfully fulfill our mission. It is our duty that each member knows the vision and purpose of the district and is encouraged in all we do. The Executive Director and each superintendent are held accountable, while holding their subordinates accountable to the assigned objectives. Communication, trust, integrity, and dedication are the ties that bind us and board/staff members understand there may be missteps, but we come together to ultimately get it right.

Finally, we are a top down organization. This means that we expect everyone to want better and this has resulted in us becoming a Gold Medal winning organization that has leadership in all facets of the organization. Leaders are not only supervisors, but in this organization, everyone has a voice and input that are not shelved, but placed into action.

In closing, the Waukegan Park District has implemented an outstanding program of developing board members and staff with a direct insertion of leadership throughout the organization. Determining effectiveness and efficiency of operations are constantly being evaluated and rely on community involvement, education, governance, and accountability. But we would not meet our goals if it wasn't for the board and staff's focus on moving the agency forward and their most valuable commodity: their passion in delivering the very best in health, fitness, and recreation. This passion is the conduit that makes the Waukegan Park District and the City of Waukegan a great place to live, work, play, and visit and I am delighted to be a part of this family.