

Evaluating Your Agency: An External Perspective

Third-party assessments enable parks and recreation departments to evaluate and enhance services in an efficient and cost-effective manner. These independent reviews find organizational strengths and areas for improvement, aid with funding applications, and ensure compliance with national standards. This overview outlines the significance of such assessments, details their typical components, and provides information on consultants offering high-quality evaluations for less than \$1,500, thereby increasing accessibility for agencies operating under budget constraints.

The Role of Third-Party Assessments

Independent assessments deliver an objective evaluation of a department's programs, facilities, policies, and service delivery. Counties and municipalities use these reviews to gain unbiased insights into their operations. Experienced consultants lead onsite inspections, review documents, and interview staff or stakeholders to produce impartial reports that pinpoint inefficiencies and areas needing improvement.

The typical process has been putting out a massive Request for Proposal (RFP) to create or update your Master Plan, approximately every five years. This comprehensive, long-range planning document is critical for any agency to create a community vision and strategic framework. A basic program assessment focuses narrower on the programming portfolio of the department. It evaluates the range, quality, participation, and effectiveness of offered programs and services at a given time. Program assessments often involve data review, participant surveys, and staff interviews to identify program strengths, gaps in offerings, marketing effectiveness, participation trends, and potential new services based on community needs or funding. This program assessment usually informs immediate operational improvements, resource allocation within programming, and can feed into a broader master plan process.

Independent evaluations are particularly helpful for organizations preparing for accreditation or aligning with industry standards like those from National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). However, even agencies not seeking accreditation benefit from structured feedback from a third-party source, which can help guide master planning, budgeting, and new initiatives.

NRPA: Setting the Bar

NRPA stands as a key professional body dedicated to promoting parks, recreation, and conservation for better quality of life in U.S. communities. Their Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) sets comprehensive standards for

excellence across 67 standards, 37 of which are fundamental and require accredited agencies need to meet at least 80% of the remaining criteria. These standards cover management, safety, administration, community outreach, legal compliance, risk management, maintenance, and more. Accreditation lasts five years and includes self-assessment and peer reviews.

While full accreditation is intensive and has costs associated with it, CAPRA standards can provide a baseline for any agency, along with third-party evaluations.

Affordable Consulting: Assessments Under \$1,500

While comprehensive services can be costly, some regional consultants provide affordable, focused assessments tailored for smaller agencies. These typically cost under \$1,500, depending on the agency's needs. The reviews emphasize value and practical advice, and depending on the scope of work, include the following components:

- **Document Review:** Evaluation of policies, strategic plans, maintenance schedules, risk management approaches, budgeting processes, and program catalogs.
- **Site Visits:** Inspections conducted to assess accessibility, safety standards, cleanliness, and overall facility condition.
- **Stakeholder Interviews:** Discussions with staff members, officials, or community representatives to gather feedback on performance and operations.
- **Benchmarking:** Analysis through comparison with peer organizations or CAPRA standards.
- **Findings and Recommendations:** Detailed reports highlighting organizational strengths and weaknesses, along with suggested areas for improvement.
- **Follow-Up Consultation:** Optional support offered to facilitate the implementation of recommendations or to assist with accreditation preparation.

Choosing a Consultant (or not)

If you partner with other local parks & recreation professionals seeking an external review, you can exchange services and save money. The only cost will be the time spent reviewing each other's programs and facilities. Because there are several challenges involved, it's often simpler to use a regional consultant instead.

When selecting a consultant for a basic assessment, agencies should consider:

- Knowledge of CAPRA/NRPA standards and best practices.
- Leadership experience with similar parks and recreation programs & organizations.
- References and sample earlier work providing assessments.
- Flexibility in approach and timeline.

- Transparent pricing and clear deliverables.

Local or regional consultants, such as retired professionals or small firms, often perform efficient and affordable assessments. Larger companies might also offer starter packages suitable for small departments.

Maximizing Assessment Value

To derive the greatest benefit from a basic third-party review, parks and recreation departments should implement a focused and strategic approach throughout the assessment process. The following practices will help ensure that the assessment delivers actionable insights and supports ongoing improvement:

- **Concentrate on Core Operational Issues:** Direct the evaluation toward essential areas such as facility safety, program impact, and the effective use of resources. This focus ensures that the assessment addresses the most significant aspects of departmental operations.
- **Identify High-Impact Improvements:** Use the review findings to pinpoint changes that will yield the most substantial benefits, allowing departments to prioritize efforts that drive measurable progress.
- **Share Findings Widely:** Communicate the results of the assessment to staff, stakeholders, and the broader community. Transparent sharing of findings helps build support for future investments and demonstrates a commitment to accountability.
- **Integrate Recommendations into Planning:** Incorporate the assessment's recommendations into the agency's annual planning and budgeting processes. This integration ensures that improvements are systematically pursued and adequately resourced.
- **Schedule Regular Follow-Up Assessments:** Plan for subsequent third-party evaluations every few years. These follow-ups enable departments to track progress, measure the effectiveness of implemented changes, and maintain a culture of continuous improvement.

Benefits of Affordable Third-Party Assessments

Affordable third-party assessments serve as a practical starting point for parks and recreation departments aiming to enhance their effectiveness and accountability in managing operational challenges. By utilizing these external evaluations, departments can identify strengths and areas for improvement, ultimately strengthening their service delivery to the community. Implementing a routine of regular third-party evaluations cultivates a culture focused on ongoing progress. This approach not only encourages

transparency and trust among stakeholders but also demonstrates the department's dedication to meeting community needs. Regular assessments reinforce a commitment to upholding industry standards and maintaining high-quality operations.

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