

"To advance parks, recreation and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people."



# PARKS & RECREATION

September 2005, Volume 40, Number 9



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# Learning Virtually Everything About Your Park

Cities need to take advantage of the opportunities the Web offers to reach residents.

By Peter Harnik and Aharon Varady

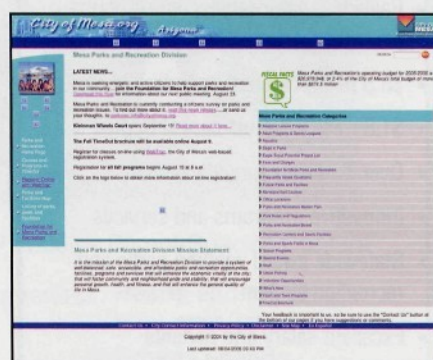
**D**o you need to disseminate information about your park system? Want to advertise where residents can take their dogs off-leash or catch a game of chess during lunch hour? Need help getting people to join a greenway clean-up organization?

Ten years ago, if you were driven by any of these needs you would have simply made a flier, maybe created a bulletin board in your recreation center and hoped to raise your residents' awareness. Today, your first stop is most likely your city park department Web site. But what would your community find there?

If you live in Seattle, Wash., or Cincinnati, Ohio, you would be pleasantly surprised—even amazed. You'd find interactive maps, lists of parks with their addresses and hours of operation, compilations of facilities and events, photos, prices and registration forms. You'd even find written histories of each park. And, if you still couldn't find what you were looking for, the sites even provide a way to directly contact the park director with your questions or suggestions.

In fact, in an analysis of the park agency Web sites of the 75 largest cities, every one of those cities plus Fresno, Calif., and Wichita, Kan., ranked tops for the quantity of information they provided their citizens and the ease in finding it. The study was carried out by the Trust for Public Land's Center for City Park Excellence (CCPE).

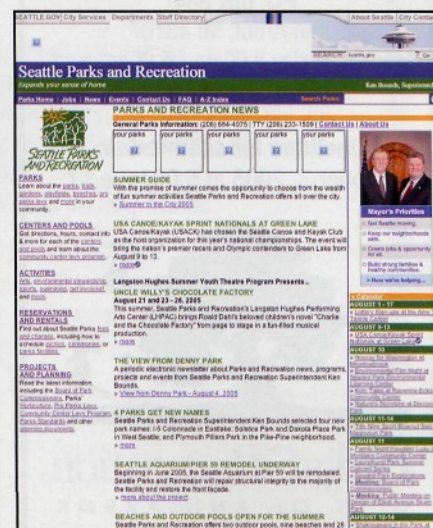
For each park department site, CCPE took note of the resources offered as well as the ease of finding it. The best overall sites provide excellent park maps, descriptions, lists of facilities, and park histories, all in an acces-



SCREENSHOT COURTESY OF MESA, ARIZ.



SCREENSHOT COURTESY OF WICHITA, KAN.



SCREENSHOT COURTESY OF SEATTLE, WASH.



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sible, easy-to-navigate manner. Other high ranking sites include Mesa, Ariz., and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., which missed top ranking only by lacking historical information and written park descriptions.

Cities that present outstanding his-

torical information include Chicago and New York. In Chicago, the history of Abbott Park, for instance, not only includes a small biography of Robert Sengstacke Abbott (1868-1940), for whom the park is named, but also an explanation of why and for which com-

**Table 1. Notable City Park Web Sites**

### Overall Excellence

Seattle	<a href="http://www.seattle.gov/parks">www.seattle.gov/parks</a>
Cincinnati	<a href="http://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/cityparks/pages/-3065">www.cincinnati-oh.gov/cityparks/pages/-3065</a>
Wichita	<a href="http://www.wichitagov.org/CityOffices/Park/Parks.htm">www.wichitagov.org/CityOffices/Park/Parks.htm</a>
Mesa	<a href="http://www.ci.mesa.az.us/parksrec">www.ci.mesa.az.us/parksrec</a>

### Excellent System-Wide Maps

Mesa	<a href="http://www.ci.mesa.az.us/parksrec/Parks_facilities_maps/all_districts_map.asp">www.ci.mesa.az.us/parksrec/Parks_facilities_maps/all_districts_map.asp</a>
Seattle	<a href="http://www.cityofseattle.net/parks/parkspaces/parkmap.htm">www.cityofseattle.net/parks/parkspaces/parkmap.htm</a>

### Excellent Individual Maps

Wichita	<a href="http://www.wichitagov.org/CityOffices/Park/Parks.htm?ID=7">www.wichitagov.org/CityOffices/Park/Parks.htm?ID=7</a>
Cincinnati	<a href="http://dynamic.cinci-parks.org/images/park_medial/162.gif?696">dynamic.cinci-parks.org/images/park_medial/162.gif?696</a>
Bakersfield	<a href="http://www.bakersfieldcity.us/recreation/Parks/campusparkso.htm">www.bakersfieldcity.us/recreation/Parks/campusparkso.htm</a>

### Excellent Historical Information

Seattle	<a href="http://www.seattle.gov/parks/history/default.htm">www.seattle.gov/parks/history/default.htm</a>
New York	<a href="http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs.html">www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs.html</a>
Chicago	<a href="http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=parks.detail/object_id/0EBEF4AC-AEB4-419A-B63F-F28FC81BBEFA.cfm">www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=parks.detail/object_id/0EBEF4AC-AEB4-419A-B63F-F28FC81BBEFA.cfm</a>
Cincinnati	<a href="http://dynamic.cinci-parks.org/cgi-bin/parks.cgi?park_desc?park_id=59">http://dynamic.cinci-parks.org/cgi-bin/parks.cgi?park_desc?park_id=59</a>

### Vintage Photos

San Francisco	<a href="http://www.sfgov.org">www.sfgov.org</a>
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### Excellent Park Lists (with park feature comparisons)

Fresno	<a href="http://www.fresno.gov/parks-rec/parkview.asp">www.fresno.gov/parks-rec/parkview.asp</a>
Minneapolis	<a href="http://www.minneapolis-parks.org/default.asp?PageID=5&amp;advSearch=parks">www.minneapolis-parks.org/default.asp?PageID=5&amp;advSearch=parks</a>
Jacksonville	<a href="http://www.coj.net/Departments/Parks+and+Recreation/Where+Do+You+Want+To+Play+Today/default.htm">www.coj.net/Departments/Parks+and+Recreation/Where+Do+You+Want+To+Play+Today/default.htm</a>
Chicago	<a href="http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=parks.home.cfm">/www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=parks.home.cfm</a>



munity the park site was acquired. New York is noteworthy for integrating the text of its historical park signage into the Web site. San Francisco's Web site is the only one that goes so far as to display vintage photographs of what its parks looked like in the past. Combined with an honest park description, park histories and historical images help to deepen the appreciation, vision and sense of stewardship communities and residents feel for their nearby parks.

Interactive maps—maps that allow site visitors to click directly on a location and instantly receive a wealth of new information—make the most dramatic difference in the attraction of a site, CCPE found. While most sites offer some version of a park list with addresses, only about 30 percent provide an interactive map. Two particularly successful maps are on the sites of Mesa, Ariz., and Seattle, Wash.

Click on an area of either city and you'll be presented with a birds-eye view of parks on a neighborhood level. Click again on any of these parks and you'll be directed to a page providing a description of the park, a list of amenities and park features, as well as other important information.

The power of an interactive map has tempted some city park departments to rely heavily on their city's GIS (Geographic Information System) to provide Web site content. GIS is the name for a software application that can generate maps combining statistical and geographic data. Once a tool used only by planners and other city professionals, GIS is becoming increasingly popular as a public resource accessible through Web sites.

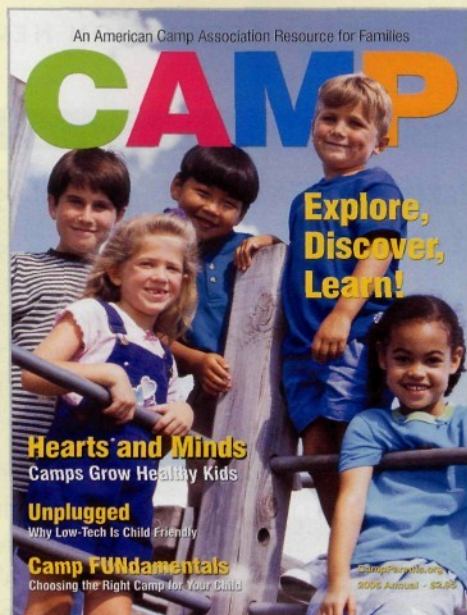
However, successfully implementing GIS into a park Web site requires careful planning and thought. While GIS can efficiently provide residents with up-to-date geographic information, it can also be somewhat difficult to use. It is also only as useful as the information stored in its database. CCPE found that some sites that rely on GIS for a map actually presented less descriptive content than others that use "old-fashioned" maps, photos and lists of features.

One city that does an exemplary job of integrating GIS with its park department site is Tampa, Fla. Tampa uses GIS to produce individual park maps, displaying the park's boundaries and also showing how to get there. (GIS's zoom function is particularly useful, allowing views ranging from aerial to the individual streets around the park.)

Some other cities use commercial map providers like *Mapquest.com*, *Yahoo.com* or *Expedia.com* for individual park maps (which means, of course, that they include advertisements). Others have created individual park maps of their own, which can be more informative, attractive and easier to read; a particularly successful site is that of Wichita, Kan.

A Web experience, of course, can never substitute for an actual park outing. But a well-crafted Web site (along with a broad array of other communication and outreach tools) can go a long way toward connecting residents and visitors with their parks, facilities and programs. Table 1 on page 128 contains some notable city park Web sites and their addresses. ♦

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