

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: October 1, 2021

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Guy Smith, Executive Director, Milwaukee County Parks

Subject: Milwaukee County Parks Public Engagement Methods [Response to File #21-554]

File Type: Informational

REQUEST

File 21-554 requested an informational report for the October 2021 committee cycle outlining current the methods and processes that Parks uses for community engagement, soliciting feedback from the public, and keeping the community and policymakers updated on ongoing projects and initiatives. The file also requests feedback regarding the departmental ability to effectively engage audiences.

BACKGROUND

Milwaukee County Parks Department is charged with stewarding over 15,000 acres of land including 157 parks, 11 parkways and over 210 miles of trails. With such a large reach the department is in constant communication with park users, citizens, and members of the general public. Our interactions with the public occur through many lenses; as visitors to our parks, buildings, fields, gardens or pools, as customers to our beer gardens or restaurants, or through impacts to their neighborhood from capital projects.

As a governmental entity Milwaukee County Parks utilizes formal methods of communication regarding activities and initiatives. Formal methods are those outlined in ordinance, Wisconsin statutes or grant agreements through other governmental agencies and include county committee meetings, budget documents and public information meetings. These meetings are usually characterized by a public posting, formal agenda, and option for public participation. Examples of meetings include the Parks, Energy & Environment Committee, Finance Committee, Capital Improvement Committee and Audit Committee. As part of Milwaukee County, Parks submits documents for inclusion in the annual budget as required by statute on July 15th. These documents are available on the Performance, Strategy & Budget webpage of www.county.milwaukee.gov.

In order to reach more people than through institutional practices, Milwaukee County Parks provides communication through digital platforms like our website (www.countyparks.com),

social media, via phone or chat and email. The Milwaukee County Parks webpage offers a vast array of information including park and trail maps, reservation opportunities for picnics, pavilions, and athletic fields; permits for photography, dog parks, boating, disc golf, right of entry and special events. Parks website also includes a calendar of events, live chat help option, [FAQ's database](#), project update page with [GIS capital project tracker](#), [issue reporter](#) and a link to the Milwaukee County Parks [Google Arts & Culture page](#).

Milwaukee County Parks also maintains a robust social media presence on multiple platforms including Facebook, Instagram, NextDoor, Twitter, YouTube, Waze & TikTok. Parks maintains nine Facebook pages with over 93,000 followers and over 300 posts yearly. Parks Instagram account has 13,300 fans, its Twitter account has 11,400 followers, YouTube channel has 276 subscribers and we are currently trying to grow our brand new TikTok presence which has 12 subscribers. Parks also utilizes other platforms to enhance awareness and drive traffic to our amenities. Waze is a GPS navigation app which can offer suggestions to users for nearby attractions. Parks has over 683,000 impressions on the app in 2021. Parks' beer gardens attract users of the Untappd app which allows the department to update our beverage offerings at our facilities and 1,728 "check ins" occurred in 2021. Each of these different platforms reaches a specific and unique audience with opportunity for interaction with the department across the many interests and services provided to citizens. Parks has developed our own mobile app known as the Parks Explorer app to increase engagement with the public - Parks Explorer App - <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/Parks/What-We-Do/Parks-Explorer-App>

The public can reach Milwaukee County Parks staff by email through the contact form on countyparks.com but the department also maintains at least ten subscriber email lists. There are over 114,000 subscribers to Park email lists and over 1 million emails have been sent in 2021. Parks uses a host of tools and programs to assist with the multitude of tasks required to engage in marketing and communications including Bitly (shortens website addresses), Beaconstac (creates QR codes), Cognito (fillable forms), Flickr (photo storage), Issuu (digital publication), SurveyMonkey and many more.

Milwaukee County Parks has begun to solicit annual feedback for user specific services such as golf, traveling beer gardens, public services (rentals) and venues like South Shore Terrace, The Vine and the Whitnall Beer Garden. Parks has conducted a broad-based annual survey since 2020. In 2020 Parks conducted eight surveys that recorded 6,752 responses. The department regularly asks the same questions across different instruments to track changes in opinion over time.

Milwaukee County Parks embarked on a Continuous Improvement project with the assistance of the Office of Performance, Strategy & Budget in 2020 to evaluate and improve public engagement of capital projects. At the beginning of each year the members of the planning division, engagement manager and directors meet to review upcoming projects in the next year and assign an engagement level to each project. Engagement levels are based on the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation (Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, Empower). The assigned level of public participation drives the activities by staff regarding the project. Activities for engagement include signage (coming soon/detours), [project specific webpages](#), in-person or [virtual public information](#)

[meetings](#), [YouTube videos](#), in-person point-in-time interactions or project special events.

The current composition of the Marketing and Communication Division within Milwaukee County Parks includes six full-time positions and a 2021 tax levy support of \$591,000. Salaries and wages account for sixty two percent of the entire division budget. Parks Marketing and Communication oversees marketing and public relations for the park system and its facilities, events, services, and front desk reception. They also manage branding, marketing strategy, promotions, social media, media relations, print and digital marketing, web administration, content development, and graphic design. This is accomplished almost entirely by the full-time staff. The discretionary spend for advertising, printing, signage or third-party services is roughly \$265,000 or 1.3% of the department's budgeted revenue. For context, the U.S. Small Business Association recommends to new businesses with less than \$5 million in revenue that they spend 7-8% of their revenues on marketing. The August 2021 results of the CMO Survey, a non-commercial survey about the field of marketing, reported that the average business to consumer marketing budget was 8.4% of revenue.

The 2016 adopted budget included the creation of a new position titled the Volunteer Coordinator. This position title was later changed to Engagement Manager. This position has had two employees since its creation and is currently vacant. Although not a part of the Marketing and Communications team it is an important component in departmental engagement. The position has managed volunteer interactions both at an individual and a group level, including friends' groups and workforce development initiatives.

Milwaukee County Parks relies heavily on direct revenue to fund essential departmental functions and much of the available capacity for the Marketing and Communications team is invested in revenue producing activities such as beer gardens, restaurants and golf. Experienced staff and improved tools have allowed the Marketing and Communications team to expand their reach to other areas of the department in 2021, however there are over 20 different business lines that require marketing support. Each business line has distinct audiences that require tailored messaging and channels to reach.

Milwaukee County Parks could improve communication and engagement through increased funding for both staffing levels and comprehensive tools. Parks does not have staff to manage media contacts, partner relationships (outside of friend's groups) or overall capacity to attend all neighborhood/association groups, business improvement district, school district, municipal or county meetings necessary to build long-lasting and meaningful connections. Additional funding would also assist with integrated tools for functions pieced together through multiple platforms. For example, engagement for capital projects utilizes components from Cognito forms builder, ARCGIS, HelpScout and both countyparks.com and county.milwaukee.gov. There are now services like Bang the Table that can provide project specific pages that have maps, surveys, meeting videos, timelines, budget progress and community feedback all in one location. Specific products like those from Bang the Table can integrate into Legistar and other tools the county has used for feedback like Balancing Act.

Milwaukee County Parks takes communication seriously and strives to be responsive to all inquiries on every platform. Milwaukee County Parks is open to collaboration with the County

Board of Supervisors to improve perceived deficits or blind spots to communication with the public, policy makers or other partners.

Related File No's:	21-554
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ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the [strategic plan](#):

- 1B: Create and nurture an inclusive culture across County government
- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity
- 2C: Apply a racial equity lens to all decisions
- 3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities

FISCAL EFFECT

This report has no fiscal effect

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

Ian Everett, Marketing & Communications Manager, Milwaukee County Parks

PREPARED BY:

Jeremy Lucas, Director of Administration & Planning, Milwaukee County Parks

APPROVED BY:

Guy Smith, Parks Executive Director *Guy Smith*

ATTACHMENTS:

IAP2 Spectrum of Engagement

cc: Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Manager, Office of the County Clerk
David Crowley, County Executive
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive's Office
Sheldon Wasserman, Parks, Energy & Environment Chair, Supervisor District 3
Steven Shea, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Vice-Chair, Supervisor District 8
Felesia Martin, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Member, Supervisor District 7
Sylvia Ortiz-Velez, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Member, Supervisor District 12
Liz Sumner, Parks, Energy & Environment Committee Member, Supervisor District 1
Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services
Joseph Lamers, Fiscal & Budget Director, DAS
Vince Masterson, Fiscal & Strategic Asset Coordinator, DAS

Pamela Bryant, Capital Finance Manager, Comptroller's Office
Justin Rodriguez, Capital Finance Analyst, Comptroller's Office
Kelsey Evans, Committee Coordinator, Office of the County Clerk
Emily Peterson, Research & Policy Analyst, Office of the Comptroller
Anthony Rux, Budget & Management Analyst, DAS-PSB