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## Partnerships Are a Key Part of Addressing Current Legislative Issues

The State's budget and other fiscal problems once again dominate discussions at the Capitol. This Spring Session, these debates and budget negotiations are also raising serious challenges for local governments. Sweeps of dedicated funds, grant suspensions, and diversions of other local revenues to use for the State's general operations are three important examples. Other proposals would tie the hands of locally elected officials through a state-imposed property tax freeze while some would eliminate local control and services by completely dissolving units of local government through consolidation.

Although Illinois park districts, forest preserves, and other conservation and recreation agencies have a proud history of success that has resulted in a high level of citizen satisfaction, we cannot simply rest on our laurels during these challenging times. What happens in Springfield directly impacts your agency and its citizens. Therefore, it is important that we let our voices be heard by reminding lawmakers that the essential services that are provided by park districts and other local conservation and recreation agencies improve the quality of life for Illinois citizens and help State government meet some of its fiscal challenges.

As we share our story, it is important to communicate a key part of our formula for success. In addition to ensuring the efficient delivery of core services, **partnerships** are also a key part of our advocacy efforts when it comes to some of our most pressing legislative issues.

Here are three examples.

### Capital Construction Grants Are Win-Win Partnerships that Provide a Great Investment Return

In recent months, IAPD has worked tirelessly to preserve and protect grant funding for park districts, forest preserves and other conservation and recreation agencies through programs like OSLAD, PARC and the Public Museum Capital Grant Program. As this issue goes to press, we continue our efforts to have the suspension lifted so the grant funding can be released.

The OSLAD grant program has been one of the State's most successful programs for more than 25 years because it is a true partnership that produces great investment returns for the State. OSLAD does not rely on the State's general revenue fund and instead has its own dedicated funding source through a portion of the real estate transfer tax. That dedicated grant funding also requires at least a 50% match by a park district or forest preserve, which guarantees the State an immediate 100% return on its investment. Although this local match means the State gets double the short-term payoff in terms of job creation and other economic activity through the purchase of building supplies and materials, the State's investment continues to pay dividends well into the future.

In fact, this partnership produces many long-term benefits. Grant-funded facilities are used to deliver essential programs and services that help the State tackle the root of many of its budget problems. For example, these facilities are used to provide after-school and summer school programs for working families. Law enforcement overwhelmingly agrees that these programs have a greater impact in reducing youth crime and violence than hiring more police officers. Long term, these programs help reduce the demand for costly correctional facilities. Additionally, convenient and affordable access to fitness facilities promotes health and wellness, thereby reducing Medicaid and other physical and mental health care expenses that are major cost drivers in the State budget.

Of course, these are just a few examples. Our local parks also mitigate costs associated with stormwater management, particularly in urban areas, and contribute to improved air and water quality. According to a recent study, every \$1 invested in land conservation returns \$4 in natural goods and services like these.<sup>i</sup>

While the State receives all of these benefits from a very modest investment of dedicated matching funds, the OSLAD and PARC programs differ from other State-funded programs in one extremely important respect. Once the matching funds are initially provided, the State does not have to bear the future burden or cost of maintaining the facilities, providing the services or paying the required personnel costs.

To summarize, by making a modest investment of dedicated funds, the State is able to leverage local matching funds, create jobs and grow the economy up front while reducing the demand on other State programs and services that require general revenue funding down the road.

Matching grant capital construction programs like OSLAD and PARC are truly win-win partnerships between the State and local park districts.

### Intergovernmental Partnerships Are the Key to Efficiency in Delivering Services

As the State works to address its own budget issues, some have once again attempted to shift attention away from these problems by targeting instead those local governments that provide essential services to communities throughout Illinois. These proponents of local government consolidation always seem to start with the false premise that simply reducing the total number of units of government will save taxpayers money.

Local government consolidation has been studied many times throughout the years. Other states have found no clear relationship between spending per person and the total number of local governments or number of persons per local government.<sup>ii</sup> In fact, according to national research, consolidation does not guarantee cost savings or more efficient operations.<sup>iii</sup>

While government should always deliver services as efficiently as possible, of great concern with local government consolidation proposals is that they almost never guarantee taxpayers that the quality and level of their services will not be diminished as a result. Experience suggests that bigger bureaucracy is typically not more efficient when it comes to delivering core services. So, where there is no duplication, any cost “savings” that are projected from consolidation would very likely come from eliminating services altogether or by reducing quality.

Unfortunately, history suggests that parks, recreation and conservation are often the first things that bigger bureaucratic governments cut during economic downturns or when faced with other fiscal challenges. In fact, one need look no further than what has happened to State funding for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources during the past decade to see what happens when times get tough for multi-purpose governments. Municipal park and recreation departments have experienced much of the same. Such shortsighted budget decisions end up costing taxpayers more in future years to address the consequences of the failure to fund these essential services that ultimately save taxpayer money in other areas over the long-term (see above).

So, in the interest of transparency and to protect taxpayers, each consolidation proposal should contain a careful analysis that measures all claimed savings against the long term financial impact that would result from losses in service and the loss of local control.

Of course, park districts, forest preserves and conservation districts know the real key to efficiency in delivering local services. Through partnerships with neighboring park districts, school districts, other units of government and private organizations, park districts have saved taxpayer dollars by sharing services through facility use arrangements, police protection services, and stormwater management to name just a few of the hundreds of examples. At the same time, locally elected and uncompensated park district commissioners are able to exercise local control over the manner in which services are delivered.

Some also attempt to argue that park and recreation services could easily be delivered by the private sector. However, these proponents ignore another key principle of partnerships: collaboration saves money and reduces cost.

Private sector providers are proprietary and are ultimately driven by profit. This means they must compete with others and protect their business interests rather than operate in the public interest. Consequently, there is a disincentive to collaborate and share best practices with their competitors. Park districts do not compete against each other, which allows their professionals and their volunteer park commissioners to freely share best practices. While private sector providers offer services to only those who can afford them, park districts ensure affordable access to entire communities.

Intergovernmental agreements and public-private partnerships are the key to efficiently delivering essential services.

### Partnerships with our Communities Result in a High Level of Trust and Citizen Satisfaction

For the past several years, local government revenues have been threatened by legislative proposals to freeze local property taxes. While no one likes to pay taxes, the primary problem with a state mandated freeze is that it takes decision-making out of the hands of local officials who were elected by their citizens to make these important fiscal decisions.

Locally elected and uncompensated park commissioners recognize the importance of keeping property taxes as low as possible. For years, they have worked with their professional employees to develop partnerships, programs and other innovative solutions in order to keep property taxes as low as possible. This is likely one of the reasons that research shows that the vast majority of Illinoisans believe that park districts are good stewards of their tax dollars and that most also feel their park district spends their tax dollars wisely with little waste.<sup>iv</sup> A state-imposed property tax freeze would tie the hands of these locally elected officials with which citizens are so highly satisfied.

It is important to recognize that the minimal CPI-adjustment permitted by PTELL only allows local government to cover inflationary increases in expenses such as fuel and labor. This modest amount does not increase net revenues after expenses are paid, so local government would be forced to cut services demanded by residents if the modest CPI-adjustment were eliminated.

While freezing property taxes might sound appealing, it is not good for taxpayers when it ends up costing them more down the road. For example, as my own family knows from firsthand experience, finding summer school and after-school programming to keep kids busy during those times when they are not in school can be difficult and expensive. Park districts provide affordable summer and after-school programming that saves taxpayers dollars versus expensive private sector programs while our public parks and trails also provide places for Illinois families to exercise, recreate and get outdoors at no additional cost.

Although a significant 83% of Illinois families report using a park district facility within the last year,<sup>v</sup> even the small percentage of taxpayers who do not directly use park district services benefit greatly from the relatively small portion of their property tax bill that goes to park districts. As discussed elsewhere in this article, park districts save State and local communities money in terms of reducing Medicaid and other health care costs, and they help reduce crime and local law enforcement expenses. Park districts also help generate local sales tax revenue and create jobs locally through tourism, which helps fund other State and municipal services. They also help attract business and improve property values. In fact, **nine out of ten** Illinoisans believe that parks and open space improve property values.<sup>vi</sup>

For all of these reasons, the strong partnership between park districts and their citizens results in a high level of trust and citizen satisfaction.

### Share Your Experiences

We are likely to face challenges such as local government consolidation, property tax freeze proposals, threats to local revenues and attacks on local control for the foreseeable future. We must play an active role in these discussions. As we tell our story, it is imperative to share our personal experiences. Through partnerships, we can continue to improve the quality of life within our communities and make Illinois an even better place to work and live.

<sup>i</sup> *Illinois Needs Assessment and Return on Investment in Land Conservation*, The Trust for Public Land, January 2015

<sup>ii</sup> *Local Government Consolidation: Assessing the Evidence for Cost Savings and Economic Improvement* by Eric Scorson, Senior Economist. (Michigan 2010)

<sup>iii</sup> *Evaluation Report: Consolidation of Units of Local Government*. Office of the Legislative Auditor of the State of Minnesota (April 2012)

<sup>iv</sup> Statewide Survey of Illinois Residents conducted by Market Probe, Inc., September 2013.

<sup>v</sup> *Id.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Id.*