



Connecting Gateway Communities to Pennsylvania's Parks and Forests – Reasoning and Process

Visitors are seeking recreational pursuits, both active and passive in record numbers, and people are choosing to live and invest in those communities that offer these amenities. Thus, navigable rivers, hiking and biking trails, forests and parks offer new opportunities for nearby communities. And these communities in turn can offer new support to parks and forests.

This program relies on processes that have proven successful in community development for many years and is meant to be replicated in other communities located near Pennsylvania's state parks or forests.

The overarching goal of the Gateway Communities Program is to educate communities on how visitors to the nearby parks and forests can encourage sustainable economic growth in their communities as well as attract additional investment and raise the quality of life of residents. As these communities become aware of the economic engine represented by the neighboring park or forest, they become invested in its long term growth and protection. Both community and park benefit and mutual goals are realized.

Communities as Visitor Destinations

A destination is a place where people are willing to travel to experience the resources because:

- The resource is recognized as being special
- Prospective visitors believe the local communities welcome them
- The local community embraces and welcomes the visitor market
- Local businesses understand the needs of the user groups (customers)

- Communities acknowledge the value of their local outdoor recreational resources and actively engage in planning for their protection and sustainability
- Communities are interested in creating events and programs to draw visitors into the local communities and into the nearby amenity/attraction
- The connections between gateway communities and the park or forest are integrated and designed to make travel easy, safe, alluring and interesting.

Not all communities are created equal. Community evaluations are made to understand strengths and weaknesses of each community and to prioritize where to invest time and energy first. Next, action teams work to create the right community character, access, infrastructure, services, amenities and facilities for targeted users and business mix. This will require both short- and long-term strategies.

Short-term strategies deal with signage, minor infrastructure, facilities, store fronts, community readiness, “going green” strategies, small events, and a regional place-based visitor attraction plan with prioritized initiatives. Longer term strategies deal with major infrastructure, business development and attraction, branding and major events. The goal is to create momentum in the short term with a clear vision for the future. This helps tourism and business development, engages the community leaders and attracts the interest of sponsors and funders.

Visitor Attraction Strategy for Communities

A visitor attraction strategy for Gateway Communities must not only encourage business growth but also strengthen the understanding of community residents, businesses and leaders as to how the neighboring park contributes to that growth. In that manner the community will more clearly recognize the need to support the park as a key recreational asset for their own residents as well for visitors.

Regular research is conducted on visitor demographics and service needs throughout this program. This research helps the Gateway Communities to serve as visitor destinations in their own right while adding value to the park experience.

Process

An initial presentation to municipal and civic leadership introduces the concepts, goals and vision of Gateway Communities and outlines the process and the steps needed to launch the program. The initial presentation meeting is open to all and provides background on the program, including a review of the economic impacts of outdoor recreational opportunities. Public involvement is encouraged and the processes to follow outlined in detail.

It is important that this initial contact include community leaders as well as municipal officials. The initial community contacts form the basis of the Community Action Team and act as a steering committee throughout this process. This Action Team strengthens the planning

process by identifying issues of local importance, assists in community outreach and policy recommendations. In the implementation phase of the program, after communities have determined their needs and prioritized projects to address those needs, the Action Team assists in identifying potential funding sources to implement the program.

During this introductory presentation, a diagnostic assessment for measuring the probability of success as a Gateway Community is distributed and the date and location for a comprehensive Needs Assessment is selected.

The Needs Assessments is a survey to assist in producing a record and listing of the gaps in service and connections with park and forest visitors. The process takes approximately 3-4 hours and actively engages community leaders, residents, park, trail and river users, municipal officials, business owners/operators, and experts in the fields of architecture, land use planning and economic development.

The Needs Assessment process directs community goals, objectives and strategies based on the analysis that follows the activity. Those having participated in the Needs Assessment follow the activity with a group debriefing and discussion of findings. Priority projects are determined and volunteer committees begin to take shape based on project interest.

The Needs Assessment reviews access issues related to the park connections to the community; design, services and context of the Business District; visitor amenities; marketing and sustainable, historic and environmentally conscious attitudes and programs in the community as well as community and business capacity for growth. The Assessment will also review the existing commitment in the community to support the nearby park and ascertain the level of existing engagement.

Following the Needs Assessment, the Gateway Community will receive a comprehensive report with recommendations for implementation and next steps.

This document becomes the Action Plan. The Action Plan guides the community in the successful implementation of the projects needed to successfully grow a community's economy based on outdoor recreation and to more effectively connect community to nearby park. The Action Plan will prioritize goals and propose strategies to obtain them. It will include projected timeframes, estimated budget costs and the parties responsible for completing the projects. It will also include possible financing sources to support the priority projects and other available tools.

A Vision for the Future

Gateway Communities will eventually become a statewide effort and opportunities for leveraging resources and collaborative marketing are enhanced through a much broader approach. Private foundations, corporate funders and public agencies urge regional and statewide approaches to project work and community development.

Individual Action Team members may also eventually serve as part of a larger regional Gateway Coalition that works regionally and even statewide to address issues related to the Commonwealth's parks and forests. Through collaboration, Gateway Communities are in a better position to develop regional funding for state wide park projects and aggressively assist in the marketing and sustainability of Pennsylvania Parks and Forests.

Another successful engagement strategy for a statewide program is to include all community gateway participants in periodic Parks and Forests summits to address key issues/challenges such as Conservation, Environmental Concerns, Visitor Packaging; Marketing; Signage and Branding.

The end result of the Gateway Communities program will be engaged communities with a working structure of better connecting community members with the neighboring park for its support and as ambassadors and advocates. The future of the resource becomes increasingly important to the community.