Pittsburgh Community Perspectives on the Design of the New Environmental Center at Frick Park

For more than 15 years, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy and the City of Pittsburgh have been engaged in a public-private partnership aimed at restoring the city’s four largest parks: Frick, Highland, Riverview, and Schenley. Together, these parks comprise approximately 1,800 acres of greenspace. As part of this partnership, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy has been committed to conducting research to assess residents’ satisfaction with, beliefs about, and use of the parks—all with the aim of better serving Pittsburgh’s communities.

In 2011, the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy focused its research on the design and development of a new building for the Environmental Center at Frick Park, paying special attention to underserved communities and children within the vicinity of the park who have not historically participated in environmental education programming at the center (see Figure 1). The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy asked the RAND Corporation to conduct focus groups and interviews with neighborhood community groups to obtain public input into the design of the new Environmental Center building. A total of 81 local residents provided input on park use and barriers to use.

Key Findings
Study participants living near Frick Park expressed a strong interest in environmental education, but they want to feel welcome to participate. Ninety-five percent of people interviewed at the Forbes and Braddock playground within Frick Park indicated that they and their children are interested in environmental education. Among interviewees at all locations, 59 percent said that environmental education was a top priority, 31 percent said it was somewhat important, and 10 percent said that it was not a priority.

The generally high level of interest in environmental education suggests that, if barriers can be addressed, participation in Environmental Center activities and involvement at Frick Park could increase. However, as suggested by some of the barriers listed in the table, many participants in the interviews and focus groups indicated that local residents do not feel entirely welcome

Key findings:
- Residents living near Frick Park expressed a strong interest in environmental education, but they want to feel welcome to participate.
- Barriers to use of the Environmental Center at Frick Park and Frick Park more generally include lack of awareness; issues related to distance, transportation, and parking; lack of alignment with interests; feelings of discomfort; and safety concerns.
- Recommendations include collaboration with community organizations, culturally sensitive advertising, neighborhood-based (rather than center-based) environmental education activities, and variable scheduling.

This research highlight summarizes RAND Health research reported in the following publication:
in Frick Park or at the center. Further, some community members suggested that Frick Park and the center may not be appealing or interesting to youth or adults in underserved communities close to Frick Park, such as Homewood. This lack of appeal may occur because residents have not been exposed to environmental issues and education or because they have competing priorities or interests.

**The key barrier to use of the Environmental Center at Frick Park and to program and event participation was general lack of awareness of Environmental Center activities and programs.** This is a chronic problem suffered by parks around the nation, whose budgets for outreach and marketing have historically been limited.\(^1\) Participants in the community focus groups indicated that they would be interested in a wide range of Environmental Center activities for youth and adults, including camps, nature walks, educational programs, arts and crafts, gardening, composting, and yoga.

The study found relatively low levels of park use and awareness of the Environmental Center among underserved populations living near Frick Park. Community focus group participants in Homewood and Wilkinsburg reported low use of Frick Park (a few times per year). A list of the barriers to use of Frick Park and the Environmental Center reported by focus group participants is provided in the table. Distance, transportation, and parking were the top barriers to using Frick Park in general.

**Promotional efforts that are culturally mindful will be necessary to increase attendance at local parks.** Advertising budgets for parks pale in comparison with mass media

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Barriers to Use of Frick Park and the Environmental Center at Frick Park

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Key Issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of awareness</td>
<td>• Residents lack awareness of the Environmental Center and its activities and events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of alignment with interests</td>
<td>• Park and Environmental Center activities do not match residents’ interests.</td>
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<td>• Park features do not appeal to high school students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issues related to distance, transportation, and parking</td>
<td>• The park and the Environmental Center are not within walking distance.</td>
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<td>• Which bus routes go to the park is unclear.</td>
<td>• Parking is difficult.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scheduling difficulties and lack of child care</td>
<td>• Work schedules affect residents’ ability to attend Environmental Center events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Residents are unable to attend Environmental Center events due to lack of child care.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety concerns</td>
<td>• Lighting is inadequate.</td>
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<td>• There are trail safety issues.</td>
<td>• There are unleashed dogs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings of discomfort</td>
<td>• There is a need for greater cultural sensitivity.</td>
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<td>• Community members do not see others “like themselves” in the park.</td>
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</table>

Budgets, and, considering the inconvenience of distance and travel to parks for many, attracting new users is a significant challenge that any organization with limited resources will find difficult to overcome. Yet, as shown in Figure 2, interviewees reported learning about activities at Frick Park through a variety of means, and they also described what they considered to be the best means of hearing about and marketing park activities. Importantly, half of the participants interviewed reported that they do not hear about activities at all. The figure also suggests that some preferred communication means—many of which are low cost—may be underused. Participants in the interviews also suggested other means of reaching community residents, including use of community organizations and centers, local businesses, print media, and flyers/posters.

After analyzing responses from local Pittsburgh residents, researchers concluded that people preferred a “push” mechanism for learning about activities rather than a “pull” mechanism; that is, they want to hear about activities more directly and want to receive targeted information rather than having to seek out information on their own. This conclusion suggests that a variety of outreach strategies may be needed to reach local audiences.

**Recommendations**

Facilitating the use of and engagement in Pittsburgh parks (and specifically Frick Park and the Environmental Center there) requires addressing both the real and the perceived social and physical challenges that park supporters, current park users, and potential park users face. Researchers developed the following recommendations to address the key barriers reported by participants in the focus groups and interviews. When possible, these recommendations incorporate suggestions made by community members. The findings and recommendations from the study are based on a small sample size, and further research with a larger sample would help validate the findings and recommendations.

**Lack of Awareness**

To address the lack of awareness about Environmental Center programs and activities, researchers recommend improving and increasing outreach to community members through a variety of means:

- Provide maps and directions to the Environmental Center and its programs within Frick Park, particularly for playground areas (i.e., Forbes and Braddock playground, Blue Slide playground).
• Collaborate with community organizations (e.g., churches, community groups, schools) and community advocates who are already familiar with the Environmental Center.
• Engage in outreach to schools and other organizations working with children.
• Use culturally sensitive advertising posted in strategic places frequented by community residents (e.g., churches, bus stops, hair salons, day care facilities, grocery stores).
• Use targeted social media messages to reach youth and other specific community groups.

Lack of Alignment with Interests
To ensure that the Environmental Center provides a range of activities that are aligned with the interests of local residents, researchers suggest that the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy
• Invite local community-based organizations to hold special events in Pittsburgh’s large parks.
• Consider employing creative marketing programs that tie the use of park resources with other benefits, including “frequent user” incentives.
• Consider partnering with other organizations working with youth (e.g., Frick Art and Historical Center, the YMCA Lighthouse program, local schools) to introduce youth to the Environmental Center and its activities.
• Invite local residents to program activities and to special events at the Environmental Center, Frick Park more generally, and other large parks that honor historical figures important to conservation and the outdoors, particularly those of significance to minority communities (e.g., George Washington Carver, Nobel Prize–winning environmentalist Wangari Maathai).

Issues Related to Distance, Transportation, and Parking
To increase participation and engagement among residents with limited access to Frick Park, researchers recommend the following approaches:
• Provide clear directions to the Environmental Center and related information (including bus routes, travel times, and parking availability) on posters, flyers, and mailings, and post strategically located signage within and near the park.
• Bring Environmental Center activities (e.g., nature walks, cultivation of native plants, events) to community parks and other community locations in underserved communities and schools.
• Provide transportation to key programs and activities (or partner with community organizations to do so).

Scheduling Difficulties and Lack of Child Care
To address residents’ variable work schedules and childcare needs, researchers recommend the following:
• Hold Environmental Center and park events at various times (i.e., morning, afternoon, and evening) on weekdays and weekends.
• Integrate and coordinate Environmental Center programming with schools and churches to reach youth who may be unable to attend if they must rely on parental transportation.
• Consider offering adult and children’s programs concurrently.

Safety Concerns and Feelings of Discomfort
Addressing safety concerns and residents’ feelings of discomfort could improve the reputation and appeal of the new Environmental Center building. Researchers recommend that the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy
• Emphasize safety in the design and construction of the new Environmental Center building, especially regarding exterior lighting.
• Consider offering and advertising guided walks on the trails.
• Engage youth advocates to publicize Environmental Center activities and programs and hire residents of underserved areas to staff Environmental Center activities (e.g., camps).
• Use authentic depictions of diverse groups of people in advertising and marketing materials to highlight the diversity of community residents engaged with the Environmental Center.
• Bring Environmental Center activities and programs to schools and other community organizations to expand the current view of the center.
• Waive or subsidize program fees for individuals or children from low-income households.

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