Executive Summary

- Our goal was to identify ways in which the Sunbury park system can better serve the specific needs of the community.
- We collected information in two ways, an inventory of Sunbury parks and a survey of community members.
- There are three types of parks in Sunbury, classified by their assets, what age groups most utilize them and the type of activities they offer.
- Certain populations are not within an ideal distance of the types of parks they would utilize and would benefit from the creation of new parks.
- Sunbury would profit from the establishment of pocket parks, increased park connectivity and greater volunteer involvement.

Introduction

The number and range of parks in Sunbury represent a great asset for community development. This form of development is defined as development of policies and activities based on the capacity, skills and assets of communities and neighborhoods (Kretzmann, McKnight 1993). Parks and open spaces offer various environmental benefits including water filtration, carbon sequestration, and protecting critical habitat. Although some parks cater directly to various forms of exercise and promote physical health, there are also mental health benefits. Nature is often seen as a place to escape city stresses and provide a place for tranquility and mental relaxation. The aesthetic value of parks also contributes to the overall desirability of an area, and provides economic benefits to nearby businesses and residents in the form of increased foot traffic and higher property values, respectively.

Parks provide social and community building benefits, as they serve as “third places;” places aside from home and work where people can socialize and interact with one another. This is perhaps one of the more important functions of parks, especially in a small community such as Sunbury. The plethora of sports parks and facilities encourage strong bonds between team members, and multi-use parks foster inter-generational bonds. Not only would adding more parks and improving the existing parks increase the overall aesthetics of the city, it would also strengthen the Sunbury community. A strong
community with a local focus creates a place where people want to live in and to which they are likely to return.

Goals

Our one main, overarching goal for this project was to suggest ways in which the Sunbury park system can better serve the specific needs of the community. We chose our project based on input from Kristin McLaughlin and the Mayor Persing, who each expressed a deep interest in gauging Sunbury residents’ opinions and suggestions for city parks, and in looking at ways in which general issues such as overall connectivity and accessibility could be improved.

In term of the process, our goals were to gather this information in two main ways; a detailed inventory of each park/recreational space in Sunbury, and a survey, conducted with Sunbury residents. With the inventory, our goal was to visit each of the 9 main Sunbury parks and recreational facilities. We took photographs, detailed notes, and recorded observations in order to generate a list of specific assets provided by each park, such as amenities and equipment, as well as specific needs of each park—ranging from water fountains to increased accessibility. Subsequently, we conducted our survey.

A successful survey was one of our main goals in the process, because it was extremely important to us that our recommendations stem not solely from what we believed needed to be fixed or improved, but rather from how residents themselves felt about city parks, and what improvements would work to better serve the specific needs and interests of community members.

In order to adequately analyze parks in Sunbury, we classified the parks into three groups based on their assets, what age groups most utilized them and for what activities. The groups were playgrounds, sports fields/facilities and general recreation parks. Playgrounds were most heavily utilized by young children and their parents, but often had ample open space where older children could play ball or other pick-up sports. Sports were formal areas for sports-themed recreation (although some were open to the public for informal sports) and are primarily used by older children in Sunbury. The last type of park that we called general recreation parks, which are used for walking, sitting, socializing and general leisure activities. While these types of parks cater to all age groups, the people who we observed (and figured) use them most are adults and the elderly population.

Our ultimate goal was to then present these suggestions and all information we gathered in the form of a parks and greenspace opportunity plan. We got the idea for this sort of “Opportunity Map” when we were conducting initial research on our topic. Cleveland, Ohio, has recently been extremely successful in revitalizing their park system, and one of the ways they did this was by generating a “Greenspace Opportunity Map,” which took into account such issues as benefits of parks and greenspace to city stakeholders, areas lacking parks, and what locations are most suitable for parks and greenspace. In order to generate this plan, the city of Cleveland
surveyed local citizens and city officials, looked at parks to be improved, and looked for areas where new parks could be implemented. While doing this, things that were taken into consideration were time it would take for a project to be completed and cost of a project—the goal was to determine which projects would be most time and cost efficient, while having the greatest benefit to the city. Public perception of the park system and improvements were also main concerns.

To generate our Parks Opportunity Plan we wanted to synthesize the information we obtained through both our inventory and our survey, particularly focusing on assets and needs. Additionally, we wanted to show much of this data visually, using ArcGIS. Our goal was to show certain census information, particularly age of community members, and park type, in order to determine areas that may be lacking a specific type of park for a specific age group or type of family. From there, our final goal was to acknowledge either city owned or private property that is not currently used, which could potentially be turned into parks or green space in the future to fill in any gaps that were made visible throughout the project.

**Park Assets**

**Playgrounds (Yellow in Figure 1)**

**Oppenheimer Pleasure Grounds**

Located on North Second Street, Oppenheimer Grounds offer a large, multi-use playground for kids. Built in the 1920s the grounds are fenced and contain basketball courts, swings, extensive playgrounds and a water park, added in 1999. The playground equipment appears in great condition and the ground is made out of recycled tires that provide a soft, child-friendly ground surface. The grounds also have bathroom facilities, drinking fountains and shaded picnic tables. The fence that surrounds the grounds provides a sense of safety and protects the equipment and prevents vandalism. Oppenheimer grounds benefit from their location in a residential area in the Northwest of the city, and is the largest playground in Sunbury.

**Kiwanis Playground**

Located in the southern portion of Sunbury, the Kiwanis Playground is situated behind the Sunbury Community hospital. The playground includes equipment including swings, a volleyball court and net, basketball courts and plenty of open space for informal pick-up sports such as soccer, catch and Frisbee. There are supervised summer hours as well as bathroom facilities and a vending machine. To address safety and vandalism concerns surveillance cameras were installed. There was also a volunteer response to paint over graffiti, a wonderful initiative by the community to address this issue. Kiwanis is also the only playground in the Hill Neighborhood and the only park.

**Fort Discovery Playground (part of David L. Persing Rec. Area)**

This all wooden playground was constructed by volunteer workers. It has several slides, swings and wooden bridges and is the most utilized playground in Sunbury. It is fenced in and
has wood chips as ground cover. The park is surrounded by many benches and trees, is close to amenities such as bathrooms and drinking fountains and the equipment appears in excellent condition.

*Rice Playground*

This park has playground equipment including a swing set, slide, jungle gym, and basketball courts. There is a pavilion with several picnic tables underneath of it. Additionally there is plenty of open space for pick-up sports. Local organizations, such as the fire company, host events at this park; an Easter celebration was taking place when we visited on a Saturday afternoon. The park is fenced in, and has supervised summer hours.

*Fire Company Good Will Playground*

Located at the intersection of 6th Street and Line Street, this park has a pavilion with tables and benches, and a brand new swing set. There is some additional playground equipment meant for the use of young children and plenty of open grassy space with room for informal sports. The playground is currently undergoing improvements, is fully fenced in and will be open for use this summer.

*Keller Street playground*

Keller Street playground is located in Southeast Sunbury. It is fully fenced and offers equipment such as slides, a climbing gym, a swing set, a basketball court and a small grass field. It also has a drinking fountain, a small building and shaded picnic benches. It is a good resource for children and parents in the area as well as a place that older children could play pick-up games.

*Sports Fields* (Pink in Figure 1)

*David L. Persing Recreation Area*

This recreational facility is the largest in Sunbury and has a community pool, ice skating rink, skate park, tennis courts, seven baseball fields of varying sizes, and two basketball courts. Parking is available in four different locations surrounding the recreation area. Formal sports utilize the recreation area, including baseball and hockey teams. However there are also areas for informal sports such as impromptu tennis games and as well as open space for Frisbee or catch. The fields are well maintained. The baseball fields have chain-link fencing, bleachers, electronic scoreboards, and well-built dugouts. The fields are located near the community center, which has a food bar, tables, benches and bathrooms. There are six tennis courts in the community park, where lessons are offered in the summer. The tennis courts also have good lighting so that residents can play at night.
The skate park is mostly utilized by the teenagers providing them with recreational options. The park has half pipes, grinding rails and ramps and is free to the public and is a well-utilized community resource. The community pool is open to the public, with a waterpark and swimming pool. The waterpark is a great place for kids to go in the summer, and the pool can be used for recreation as well as exercise for older children, adults and the elderly.

Shikellamy High school

The fields by the high school are the only formal sports fields in the southern region of the city. They are a great asset for students and sports teams and are kept in great condition.

Line Street Baseball field

This baseball field is the only sports field in the western and central region of the city, adjacent to the Oppenheimer grounds. It is not fully fenced, encouraging the public to use the fields for their personal recreation and informal sports. The fields appears to be well kept and in good condition.

General Recreation Parks (Blue in Figure 1)

Merle Phillips Park (Riverfront Park)

The Riverfront Park is a long and narrow park adjacent to the river. It has benches, nicely paved walking/running paths and lights for evening. It is aesthetically pleasing with plenty of greenery, and has historical signage. It runs along the north/south axis of Sunbury adding to the overall connectivity of the city. The park is currently undergoing renovations to add a gazebo and additional park space on the river side of the wall. The project is estimated to cost over $ 9 million dollars and the city of Sunbury has already secured $6 million in funding.

Cameron Park

This park is very aesthetically pleasing and located in the center of town. As for amenities and structures, it has benches and tables, trash cans, lighting structures, and a gazebo. Additionally, it has a statue, cannon and war monuments to look at, and a large amount of greenery. The central location of the park is also a great aspect because of its proximity to downtown stores. There is plenty of seating areas and tables (complete with checkers boards!) providing a space for social gatherings and leisure. The park hosts special events, such as live music on occasion, holiday parades, and can be rented out for personal events free of charge.
Keithan’s Bluebird Gardens

The Bluebird Gardens are a 1.5 acre tract of land along Sunbury’s riverside. It has exotic trees from around the world, and enormous amounts of other greenery. It has benches, and a gazebo with outlets. It has a small building with restrooms, and the Gardens can be rented out for private events such as weddings and other ceremonies. The park contains a garden house with restroom facilities. There is a large parking lot adjacent to the Gardens, providing the park with easy access to parking. Additionally, the park is maintained by local volunteers.

Park Needs

Playgrounds

Oppenheimer Pleasure Grounds

While the Oppenheimer grounds have long and regular summer hours, the playground is not open for use in the fall and spring. If possible, the grounds could remain open, albeit with limited hours, in the month or so before and after summer to allow local children use of their playground and basketball courts, the only in the area.

Kiwanis Playground

Safety has been a major concern for Kiwanis playground. It is not fully fenced in and vandalism has been a problem in the recent past. Another need of Kiwanis Park is updated equipment. Most of the playground equipment seemed worn, old and in some cases, rusty. Future funds to improve existing parks would serve well to improve the condition of Kiwanis.

Rice Playground

This playground is located in southwestern Sunbury and is adjacent to Weis meatpacking facility. The playground equipment seemed old and somewhat worn and could be improved to increase aesthetics and enjoyment. Additional seating and better grass coverage would improve the appearance and perhaps create a more inviting open space for informal sports.

Fire Company Goodwill playground

This playground could benefit from increased public outreach and advertisement of the new renovations, perhaps on the Sunbury Parks and Recreation website, to encourage use of the park when it re-opens.

Keller Street playground

The Keller Street equipment is in fair condition, however the basketball court hoops were broken and lacked nets. The playground only operates during supervised hours in the summer
and could benefit from increased operating time in the spring and fall months. The Saturday afternoon in March we visited, the park was locked and we witnessed a number of children in the surrounding area playing on the sidewalks and in the streets. This demonstrates the need for an accessible and open playground in the area. There have also been some concerns about vandalism, which could be addressed through increased supervision and/or surveillance cameras.

**Sports Fields**

*David L. Persing Recreation Area and Fort Discovery*

While this recreation area remains one of the city’s best assets there are several needs that deserve attention. First, the recreation area is adjacent to a busy road without sidewalks which limits pedestrian access. While there we saw several older children biking on the shoulder of the road, which raises some safety concerns for those who most utilize the park. Citizens expressed concern about the amount of trash in the playground and the surrounding fields. Some members of the community also noted that some of the playground equipment was either missing or tampered with.

**General Recreation Parks**

*Merle Phillips Park (Riverfront Park)*

As of right now, the park lacks several amenities and has barriers to access. The park also lacks nearby parking areas, and it was suggested that stores close by could designate a few parking spaces for park-users. There is only one crosswalk to the park on a busy road and the lack of nearby parking spaces represents a barrier to access for use of this beautiful park. The absence of water fountains and bathrooms might deter long park visits especially for those with young children. The appearance of the river wall was brought to our attention as a potential area of improvement for the park. Creatively using the wall for a mural or other artwork could transform the aesthetic of the park to be more appealing.

*Cameron Park*

The park has one water fountain, however, it was broken as of a few weeks ago. The park is surrounded on both sides by a reasonably busy road, which presents a safety concern for younger park users. The park could also benefit from increased programming, specifically in the summer months when the weather is nice. One Sunbury citizen, when partaking in the survey, recalled a time years ago when there were free outdoor concerts a few times a week throughout the summer, and suggested that returning to this level of programming would be ideal, and a great way to generate an increased sense of community and get people outdoors.
Keithans Bluebird Gardens

The Gardens are located near a main road, and did not have sidewalk access. It is located on the periphery of the city, and there were no signs on the road leading up to the Gardens. Being such a beautiful park, it could benefit from increased programming, and perhaps from increased advertisement. It did not seem to be an easy location to reach by walking, so perhaps making the road leading to the Gardens more walk or bike-friendly would increase its usage.

Parks and Census Data

Playgrounds

In terms of defining proximity to playgrounds, young children and their parents are the populations who use them most but who are also most restricted from walking long distances. Figure 2 maps the location of the six playgrounds in Sunbury (orange) with a quarter mile buffer around each, parcels of land assessed for under $2000 (yellow) and census tracts where over 30% of the population is under the age of 18. Darker blue sections indicate higher percentages of children.

There is one major region in Sunbury with a high population of children not within a quarter mile of a playground. Southwest of Market Street lacks playgrounds and has a high population of people under 18. Since playgrounds often contain open fields, this presents a need for both younger and older children. However, as the map depicts, there are several land parcels assessed at a relatively low price that could be transformed into parks in the future. Creating more playgrounds that include open fields in the region of Sunbury not within a quarter mile of a playground (as shown by the buffers) would benefit children of all ages.

Figure 3 utilizes census data to show the percentage of female heads of household. The blue areas are census tracts with over 15% of female heads of holdhold and the map depicts their proximity to playgrounds. While not all female heads of household are necessarily single mothers, they are included in this classification, and may make up a majority of this population. This group of the population is even more constrained in terms of ability to travel long distances, so close proximity is especially important. A quarter of a mile buffer is used, this is the maximum convenient distance for a single mother with young children to travel to a park. The regions lacking playgrounds are those mentioned in the Figure 1 description. There is a lot of overlap of areas with high numbers of young people and areas with high numbers of female heads of households.
Sports Fields

Figure 4 depicts locations of the three official sports fields found in Sunbury, with a quarter mile buffer surrounding them. Census tracts show areas with over 30% children under the age of 18, with darker blue regions representing an increased proportion of children. Yellow parcels again show land assessed for under $2,000, indicating regions for potential future parks and open space.

Central Sunbury, specifically the Hill Neighborhood, lacks large formal sports fields, which are found only on the periphery of the city. However, there are space constraints in more densely populated areas such as the center of the city, making it unlikely that there is room for a large, formal ball field. Instead, focus should be given to creating open, grassy areas of land which provide space for informal sports. This caters to the same age population, providing space for young people to partake in recreational activities outside of organized sporting events.

General Recreation Parks

There are three parks in Sunbury geared towards general recreation such as walking, sitting, and general leisure activity. Although this type of space is utilized by everyone, it caters primarily to adults and elderly citizens because it offers options for light activity and leisure. The Southwest portion of the city has an abundance of general recreation spaces, however the rest of the city, much of which also has high populations of elderly citizens, is lacking these types of parks.

In Figure 5, the blue areas on the map reveal blocks where over 30% of the population is over the age of 65. As the yellow parcels show, there are plenty of opportunities to create new “pocket parks” in the areas lacking general recreation spaces which also have a high elderly population. Compared to the other two types of parks, general parks are lacking in more parts of the city. However, they only require limited equipment (only some benches, tables and greenery) to make a satisfactory place to walk, sit or socialize.

Sunbury Opportunities

Pocket Parks

The four maps in the last section depict which regions of the city lack certain types of parks, with critical areas that could greatly benefit from new parks. Although the types of the parks represent different uses, one park design serves various functions. For example, a general recreation park can include enough grassy space to encourage
youth to play soccer or other ball games. Playgrounds could also reserve some space for informal sports that require open fields. Besides being cost-effective, combining the segments of the population that most utilize the park encourages inter-generational connectivity among the community.

While the yellow highlighted parcels on the map represent land with a low assessed value, not all locations are places a new park could be built, as there are several criteria which determine the suitability. First is the condition of the plot of land. If it looks unused, abandoned or contains trash, filling that space with the pleasing aesthetic of a park would greatly benefit the overall look of the street. Secondly, the size of the plot is important in determining what type of park can be built. While formal sports fields need very large plots, fields for informal sports can be smaller while still providing enough space to prevent stray balls and Frisbees from hitting nearby houses. If the plot is much too small for any type of sport, grass, greenery and a few benches and tables could transform the plot into a space for general recreation and leisure. Small plots could also be used for a set of swings or other forms of playground equipment that do not require a lot of room.

Connectivity

Aside from the individual assets and needs of each park, there are also some broader considerations about parks and open space that affect Sunbury and should be taken into account. One of these considerations is the general connectivity of the park system. This concept includes connecting the various parks to one another, which also increases the general connectivity of the city. The Merle Phillips (riverfront) park is a great example of improving connectivity (the pink line in Figure 6), as it connects people along the Susquehanna River and stretches along a large portion of the north-south axis of the city. Another successful local example of improvement to connectivity is the rail trail in Lewisburg, which makes use of an abandoned rail way by turning it into a bike/jogging/walking path.

The levee in Sunbury that stretches from the southeastern portion of the city all the way to the riverfront is a great opportunity to increase the connectivity of the city and its parks. The levee could be utilized as a greenway connecting the city, as it is already an open, grassy area which spans part of the east/west city axis and runs past the to Keller Street Park (the green line in Figure 6). A defined walkway, as well as informational signage concerning the importance and history of the river, and the role of the levee could transform the space into a formal recreational area and encourage environmental consciousness. The riverfront park could also be
expanded further down the river in order to provide direct access to an increased number of Sunbury residents (the yellow path in Figure 6). Connectivity is important because it not only increases people’s access to parks, but also encourages alternative forms of transportation, and increased physical exercise. Lanes being dedicated to bicyclists and pedestrians can make it safer for these types of transportation, additionally increasing Sunbury’s connectivity. Connectivity could not only be improved within the city, but also to areas on the periphery of the city such as many of the sports fields, and Shikellamy state park.

Volunteers

The Sunbury citizens themselves represent an extremely valuable resource for future improvements of the parks and open spaces. Keithan’s Bluebird gardens is maintained by volunteers, a wonderful way to get the community involved in the upkeep of the parks and build social capital between Sunbury residents. The Bluebird gardens could possibly be used as a model for volunteer-upkeep for other parks. Additionally, local organizations such as the Hill Neighborhood Council have volunteered their time for such park maintenance activities as painting over graffiti, and the use of these local community organizational assets could be increased in the future. Other specific projects related to park improvement could also be a way to build social capital; painting a mural on the riverfront wall, for example.

Conclusion

The city of Sunbury, considering its small size, possesses an impressive number of parks, open spaces, and sports facilities. Not only do these parks provide environmental, aesthetic, economic and health benefits, they additionally foster social interaction and strengthen community bonds. Asset-based community development emphasizes the importance of utilizing and building upon existing community assets, and the Sunbury park system provides a strong foundation for this type of growth.

Not only is Sunbury starting out with a great amount of park resources, but the current situation in the city is conducive to expanding upon these resources. There are various parcels which are either currently open lots or will be in the near future, providing many potential park opportunities. Additionally, the city has enthusiastic leadership and dedicated citizens who are committed to park development and likely to see it through in the near future.
Figure 1: Locations of all Sunbury Parks
Figure 2: Playgrounds (.25mi buffer), +30% under 18, new park opportunities
Figure 3: Playgrounds (.25 mi buffer), +15% female head of households, new park opportunities
Figure 4: Sports fields (.25 mi buffer), +30% under 18, new park opportunities
Figure 5: General Recreation parks (.25 mi buffer), +30% over 65, new park opportunities
Figure 6: Sunbury Connectivity