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Current Challenges, Funding, and Popularity Trends in Local Parks and Recreation Areas

Responses to a Survey of Park Directors

Margaret Walls, Juha Siikamäki, Sarah Darley,
Jeff Ferris, and Joe Maher

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Current Challenges, Funding, and Popularity Trends in Local Parks and Recreation Areas: Responses to a Survey of Park Directors

Margaret Walls, Juha Siikamäki, Sarah Darley, Jeff Ferris, and Joe Maher*

Most outdoor recreation opportunities in the U.S. begin at a local neighborhood park. These parks, along with numerous nature centers, hiking trails, recreation facilities, and playing fields are provided and maintained by local governments. As part of a broader research study of conservation, recreation, and open space and in support of the bi-partisan review commission, the Outdoor Resources Review Group, Resources for the Future conducted a survey of city and county parks and recreation department directors in the fall of 2008. A structured mail-survey was sent electronically to 89 individuals identified by the National Recreation and Parks Association and the City Parks Alliance as city and county parks and recreation department directors. Forty-six out of 89 surveys were completed and returned, for a 52 percent response rate.

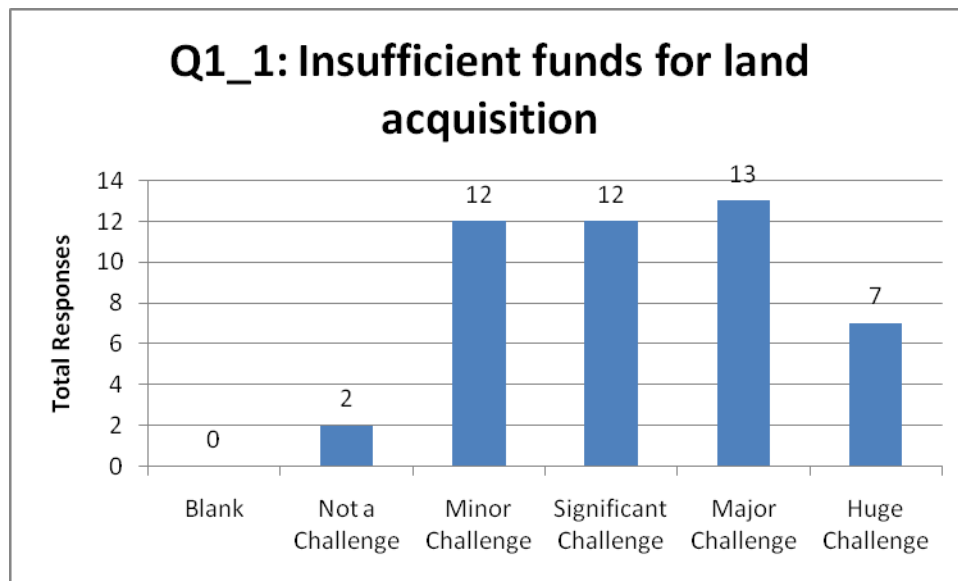
The survey included a wide range of questions regarding current issues and challenges facing local governments and the parks and recreation areas they provide. For example, we asked for budget information and sources of funding, including information on volunteers, park “friends” groups and conservancies; and financing referenda. We also inquired about the perceived popularity trends of a variety of local recreational activities, and asked about the primary challenges that the communities are facing. The survey instrument developed and used for this research is included in Appendix A.

The purpose of this document is to summarize responses to the survey. In the following, we present the key summary statistics of responses for each question. Our summary covers the entire survey and proceeds systematically, question by question, from the beginning of the survey to the end of it. The survey instrument in the Appendix provides a helpful context for examining the results. This report includes only summary statistics, and it does not comprise any further analyses or interpretation of the results. However, the survey responses, along with

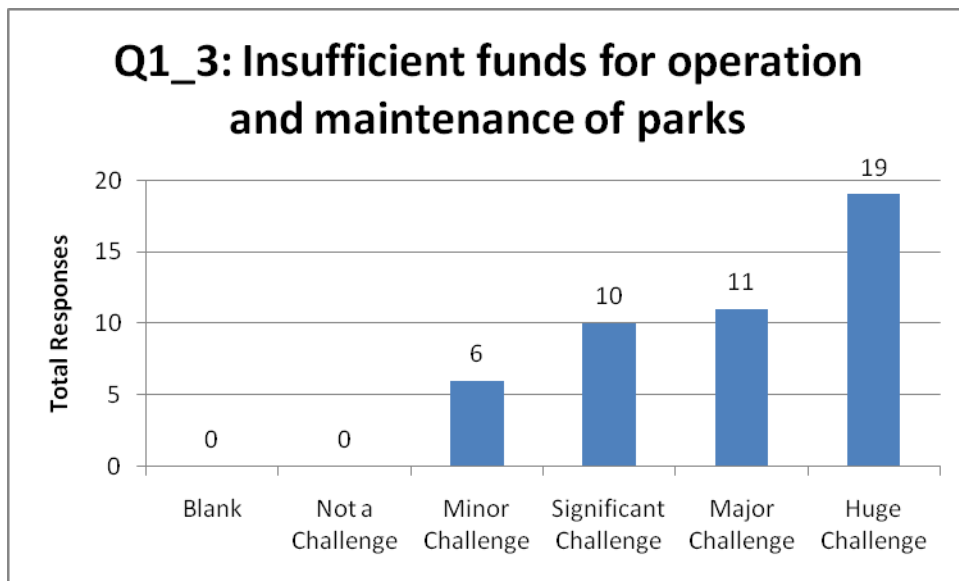
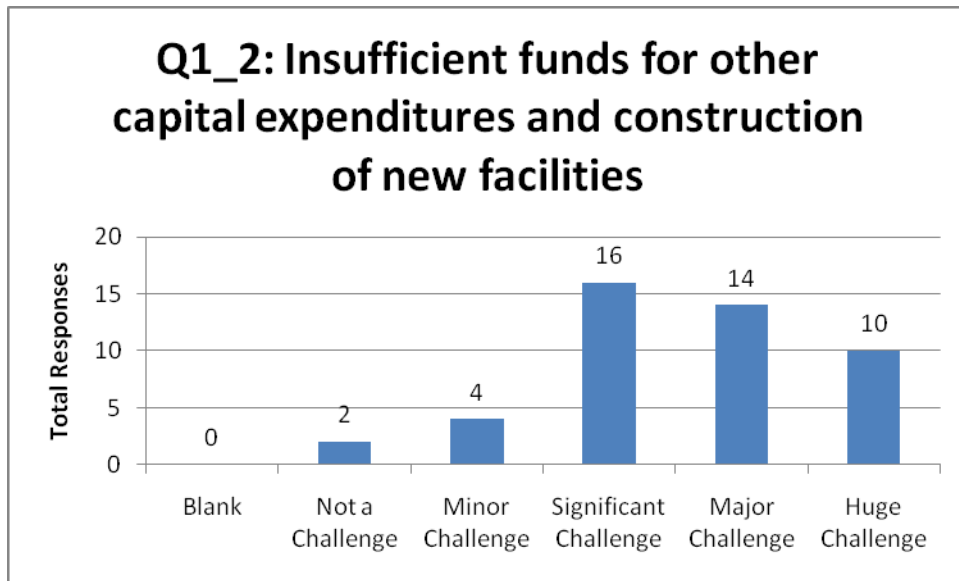
* The authors are, respectively, Senior Fellow, Fellow, Research Associate, Research Assistant, and Research Assistant at Resources for the Future. This backgrounder is one in a series of backgrounders for the Outdoor Resources Review Group (see www.rff.org/orrg).

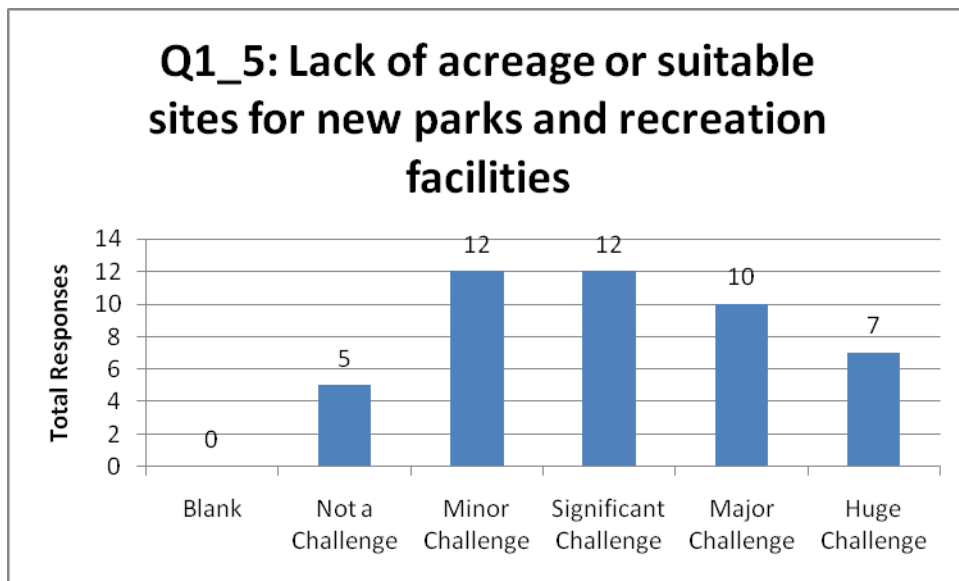
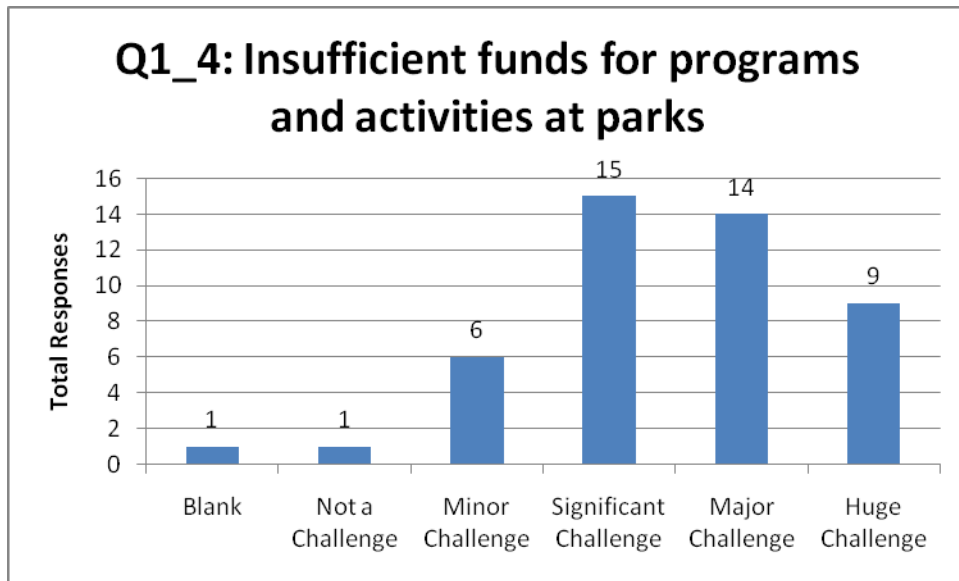
additional information and analysis, will contribute to broader research studies being conducted as part of the Outdoor Resources Review Group efforts.¹

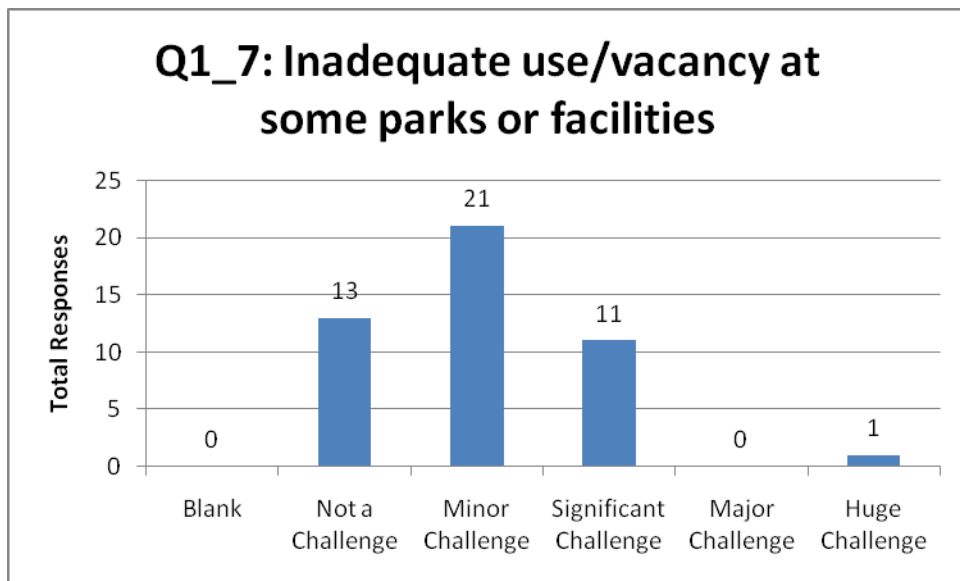
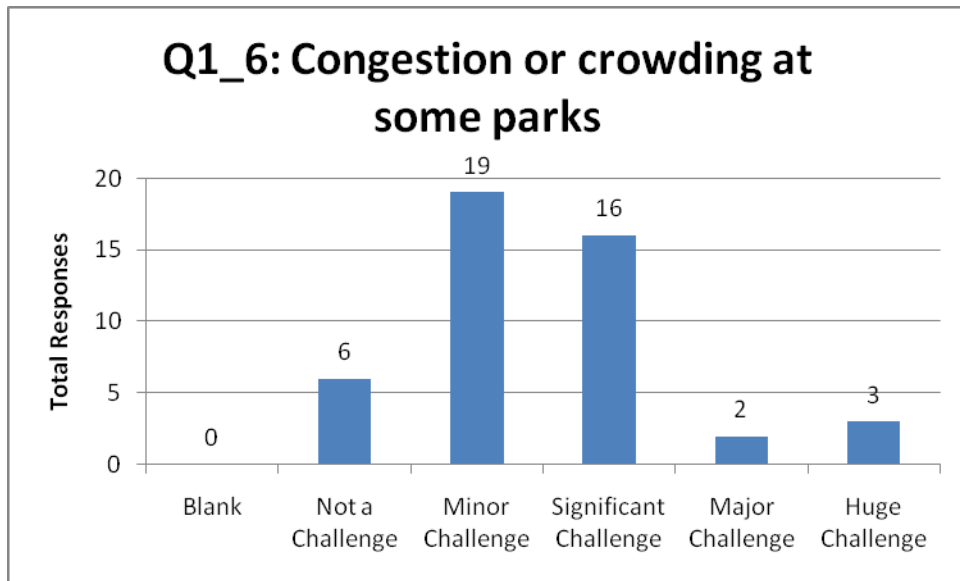
Question 1: What are the biggest challenges that you are currently facing?

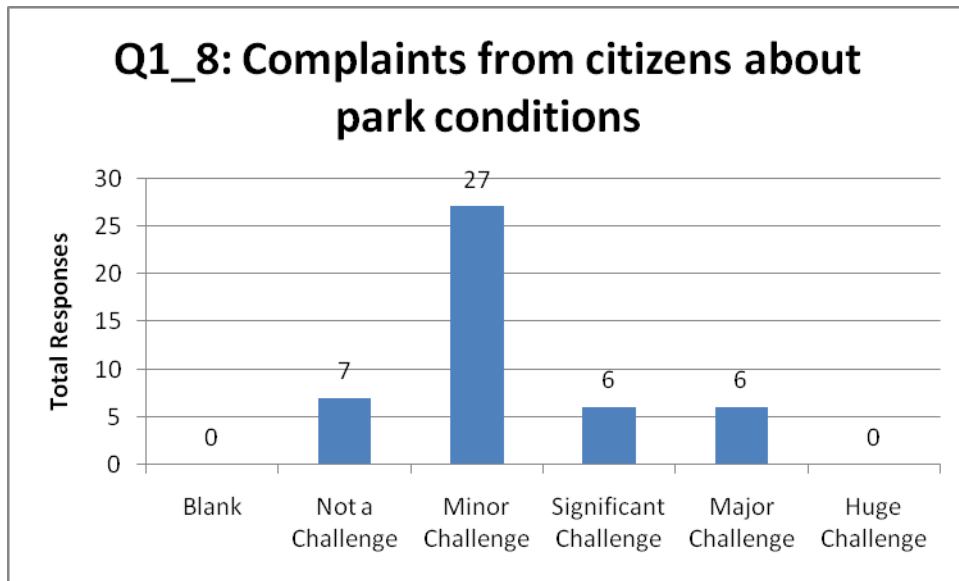


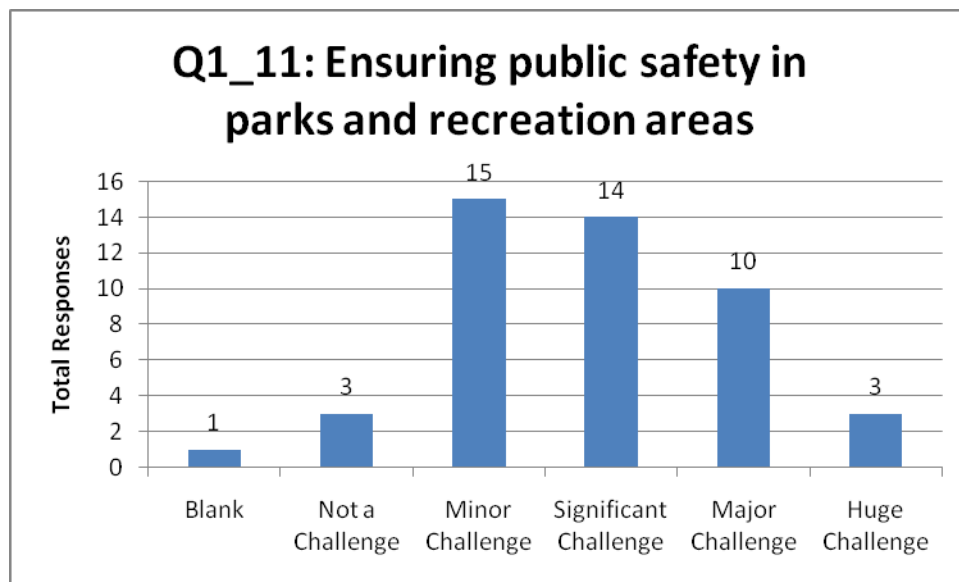
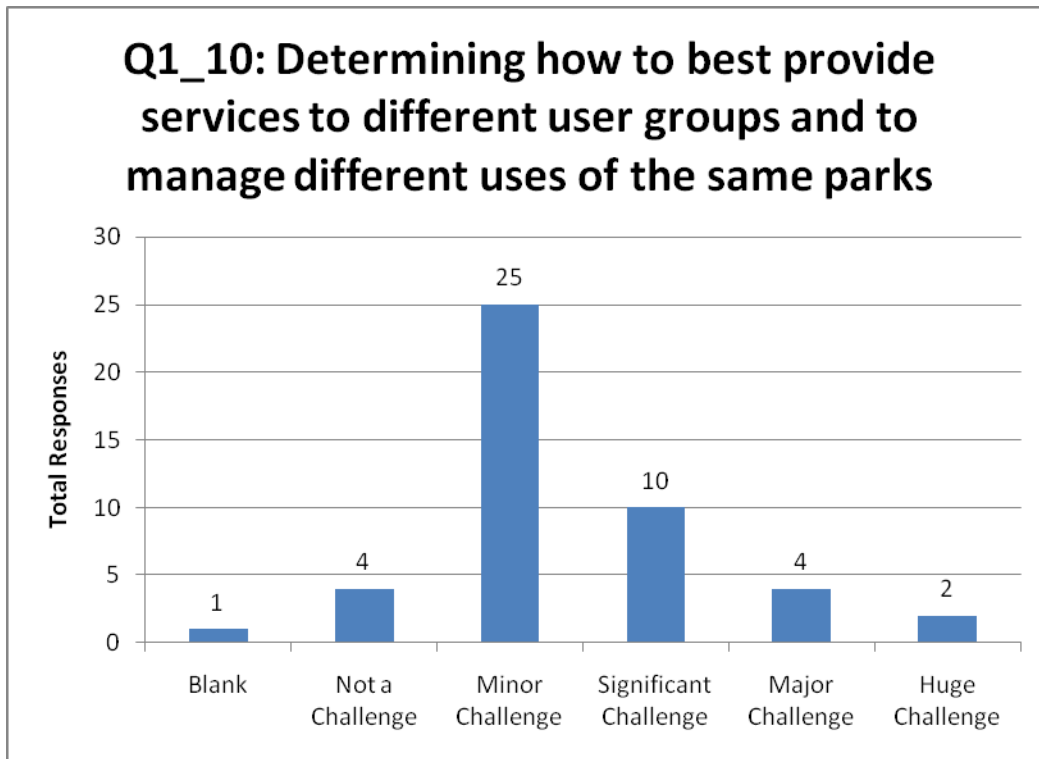
¹ Most of the studies will be available on our website: www.rff.org/org. We conducted a similar survey of state park directors; for a report on those results see Margaret Walls, Juha Siikamäki, Sarah Darley, Jeff Ferris, and Joe Maher, “Current Challenges, Funding, and Popularity Trends in State Parks: Responses to a Survey of Park Directors,” Resources for the Future Background, March 2009. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the National Recreation and Parks Association and the City Parks Alliance in providing contact information for purposes of distributing the survey. We also appreciate the helpful comments we received on a draft version of the survey at the Urban Park Directors’ Meeting at the NRPA Congress in Baltimore, Maryland, in October 2008, as well as suggestions from the following park directors: Sue Black from Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Mark McHenry from Kansas City, Missouri; and Mark Young from Columbus, Ohio. We include a list of survey respondents as Appendix B of this document.

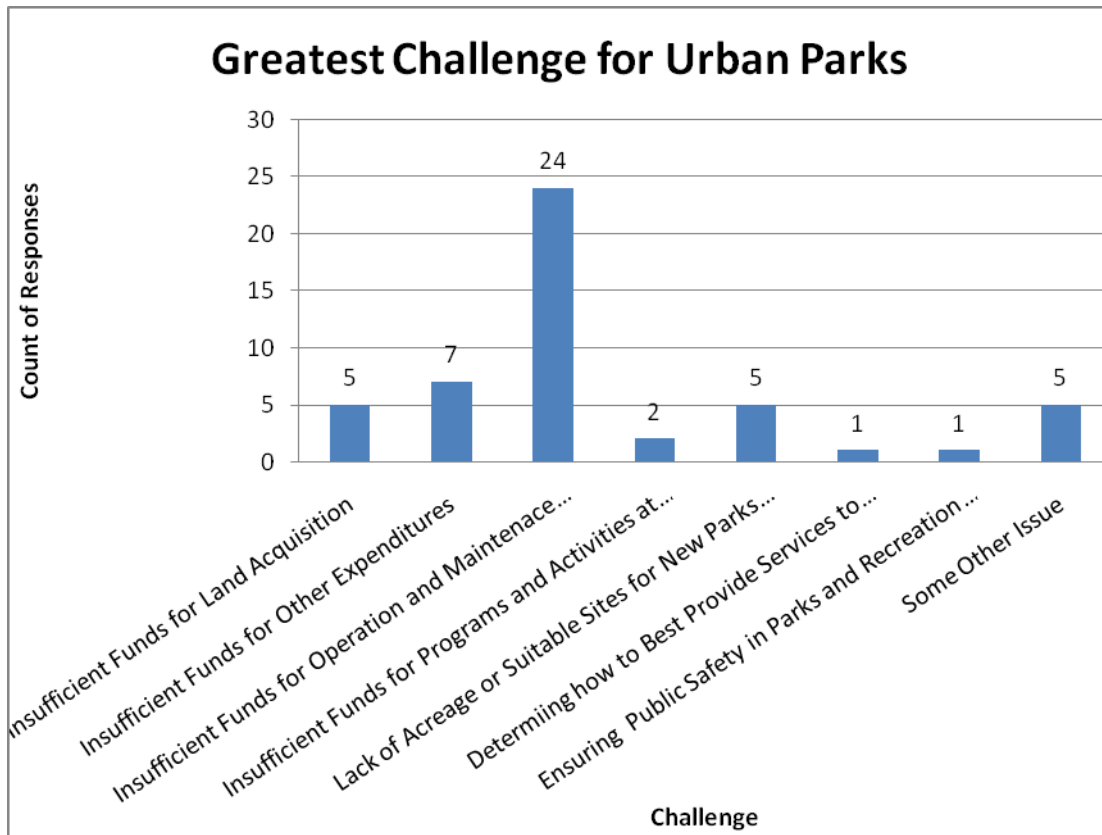








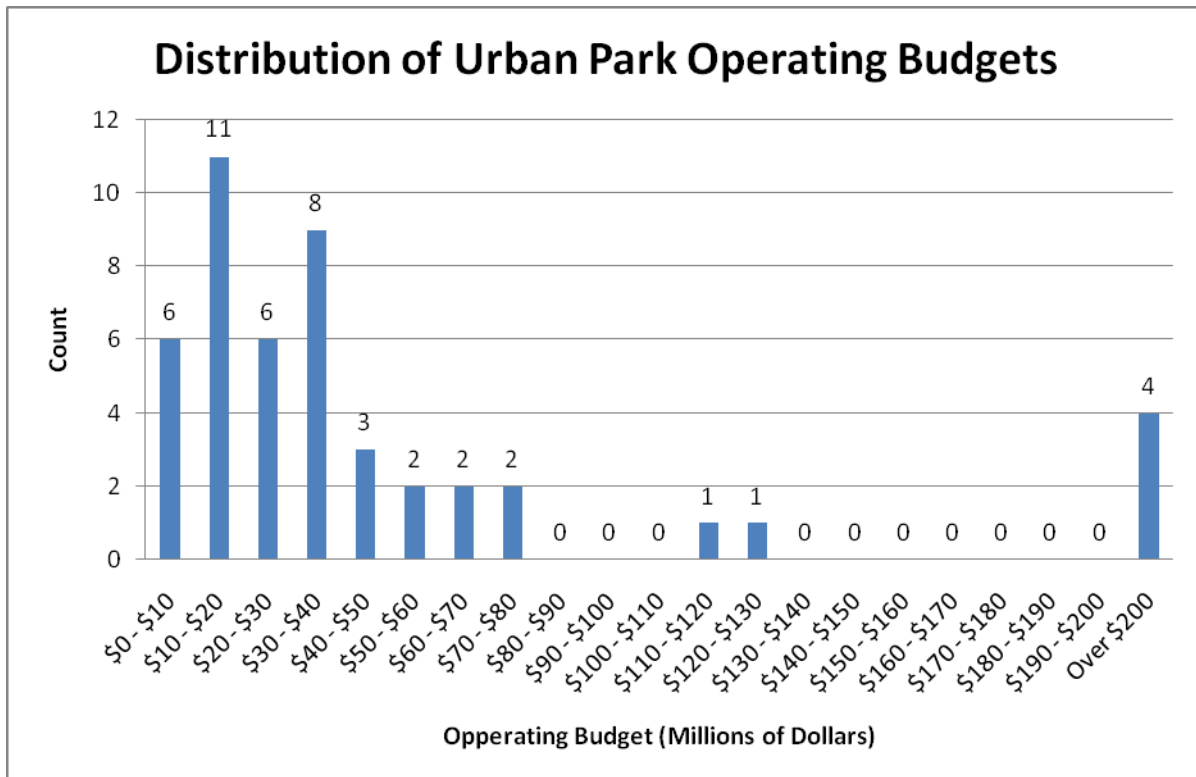




Question 2: What was your total operating budget for the most recent fiscal year?

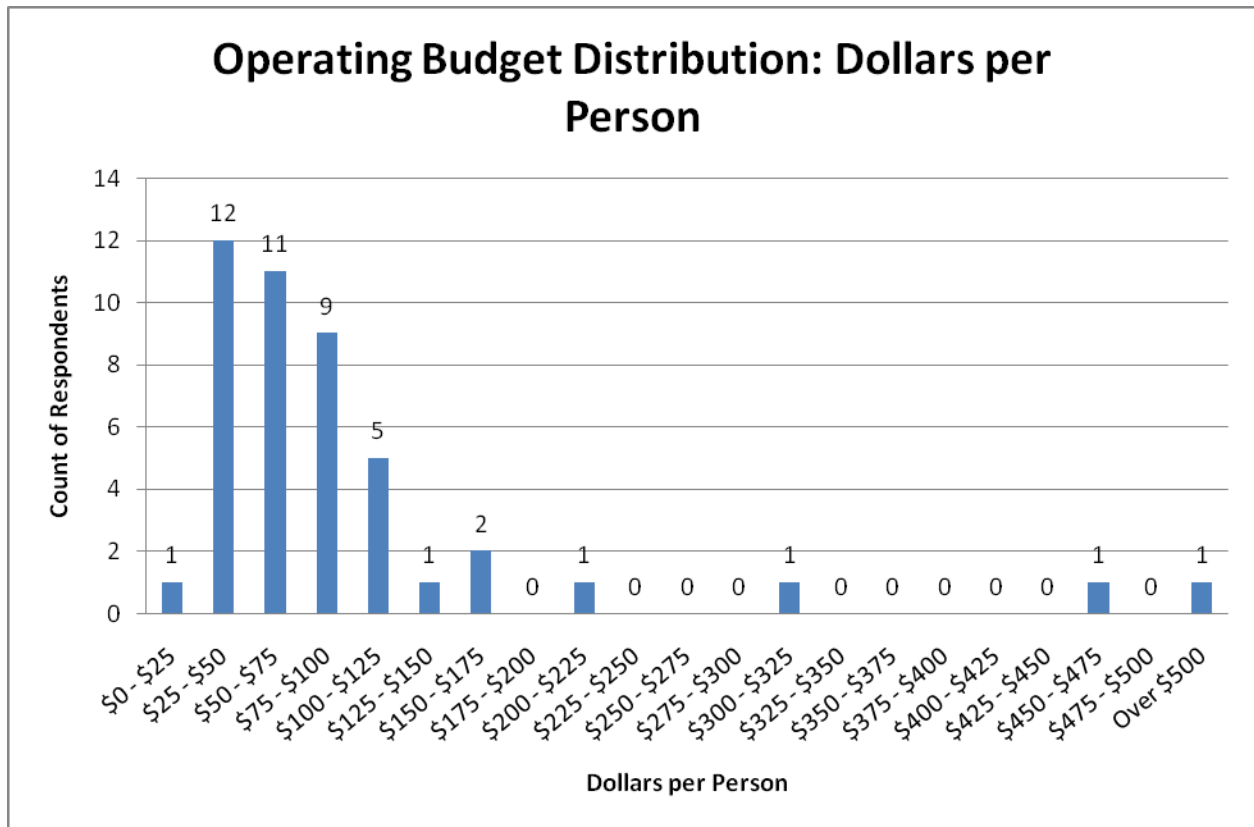
Operating Budget Summary Statistics

Mean	\$ 65,375,944
Median	\$ 29,028,853
Standard Deviation	\$ 119,807,258
Range	\$ 687,000,000
Minimum	\$ 3,000,000
Maximum	\$ 690,000,000
Count	46



Operating Budget Distribution: Dollars per Person

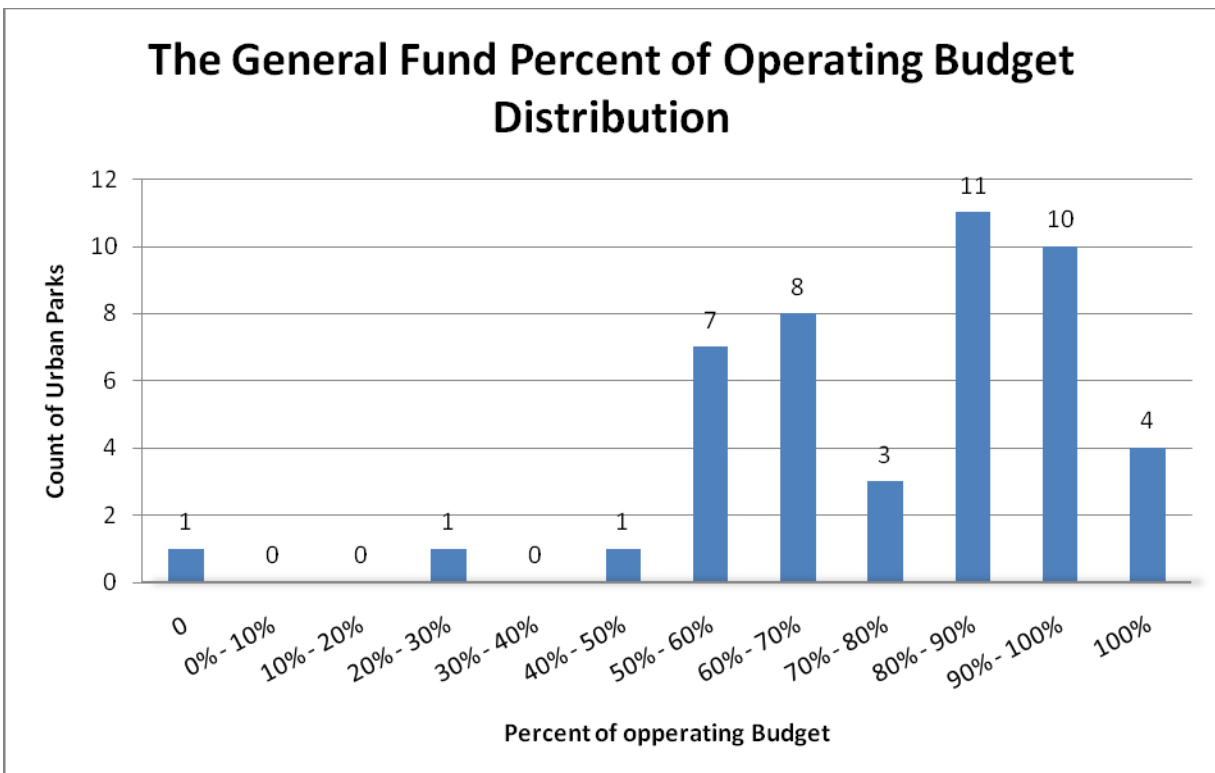
Mean	\$105.83
Median	\$67.23
Standard Deviation	\$137.06
Range	\$828.48
Minimum	\$15.45
Maximum	\$843.93
Count	45



Question 3: What percentage (approximately) of your operating budget comes from the following sources (please try to have the percentages add to 100):

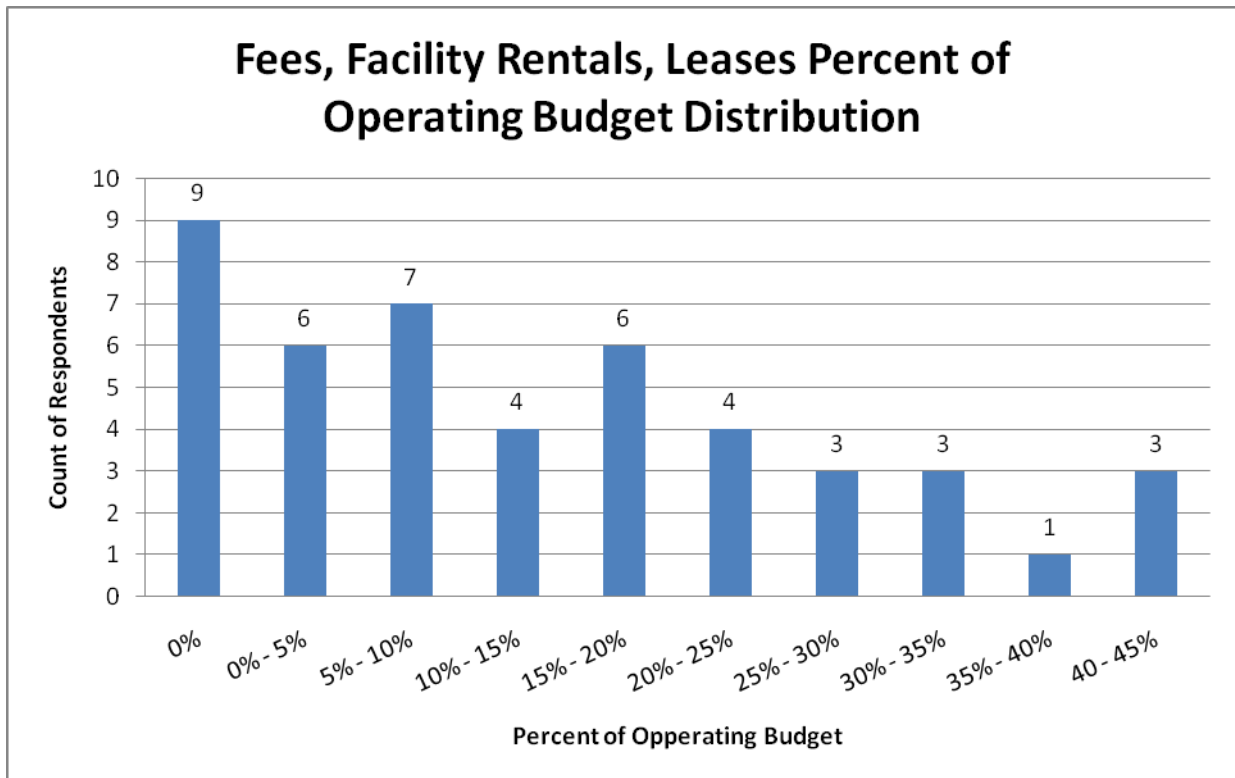
The General Fund

Mean	76%
Median	80.5%
Standard Deviation	20.9%
Range	100%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	100%
Count	46



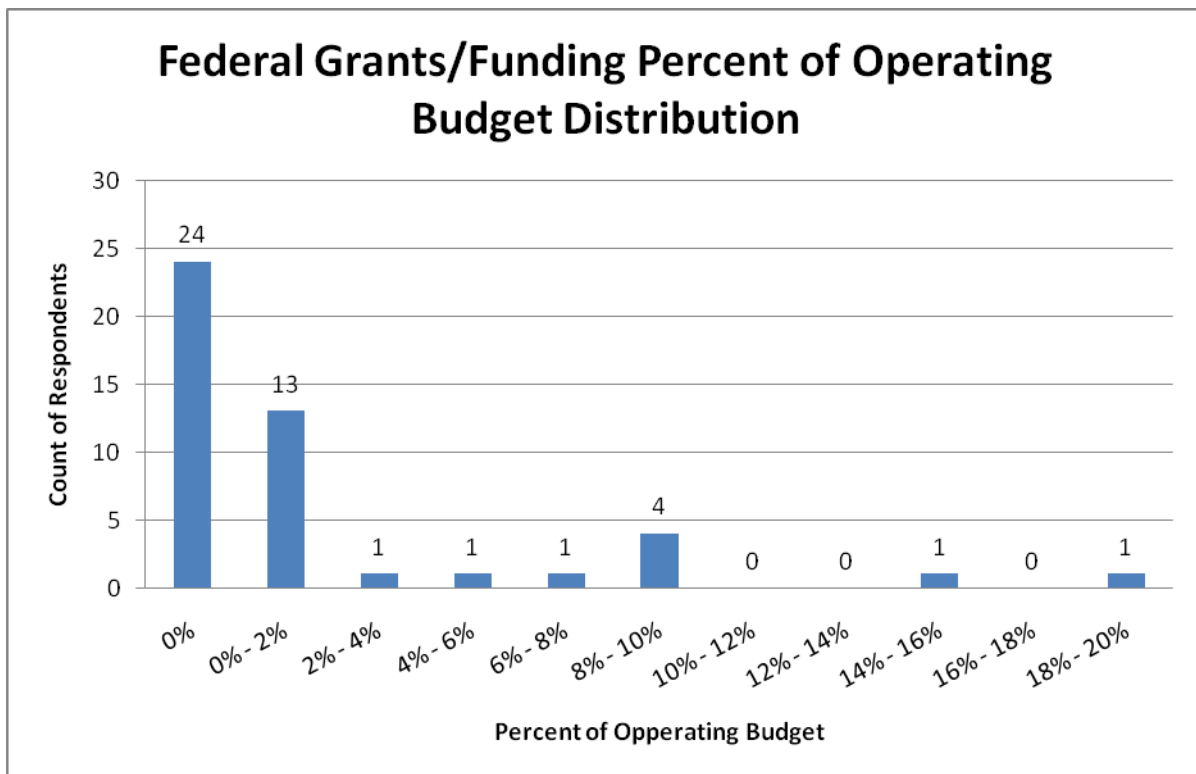
Fees, Facility Rentals, Leases

Mean	14.52%
Median	10.50%
Standard Deviation	13.42%
Range	44.96%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	44.96%
Count	46



Federal Grants/Funding

Mean	2.30%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	4.55%
Range	20%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	20%
Count	46



State Grants/Funding

Mean	1.65%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	6.38%
Range	42%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	42%
Count	46

Another Local Government

Mean	0.24%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	1%
Range	5%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	5%
Count	46

Private Grants/Funding

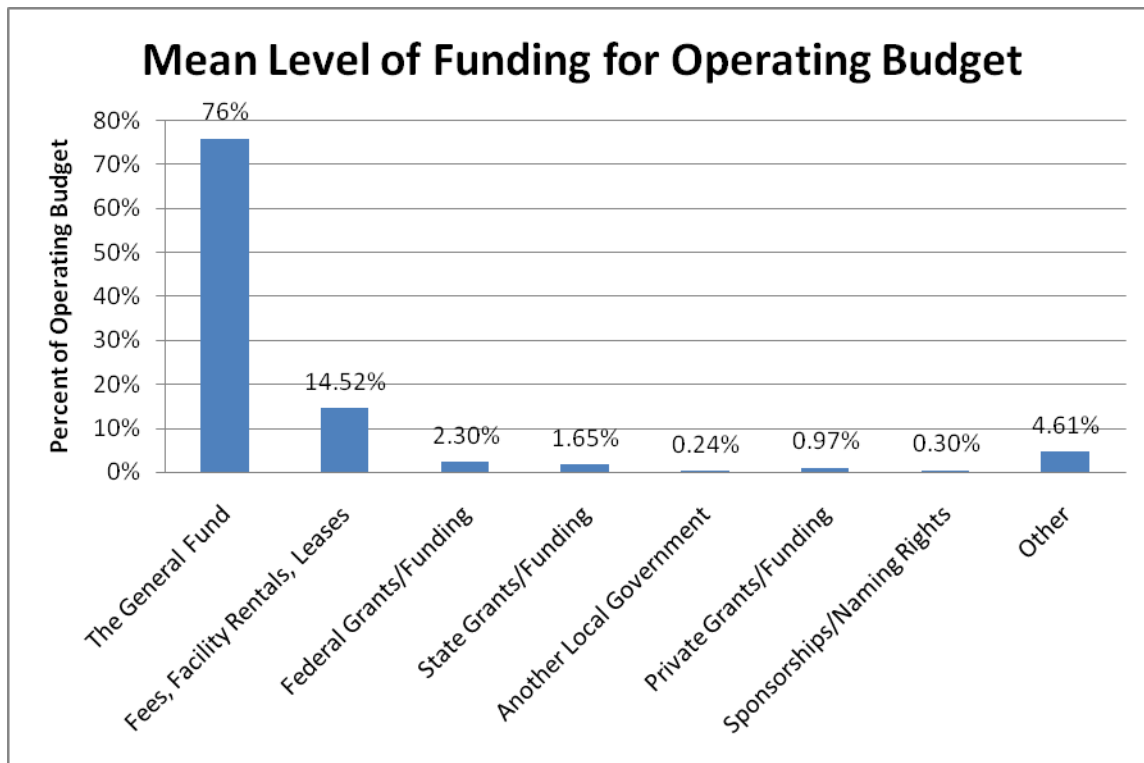
Mean	0.97%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	2.50%
Range	12.94%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	12.94%
Count	46

Sponsorships/Naming Rights

Mean	0.30%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	1.05%
Range	6.67%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	6.67%
Count	46

Other

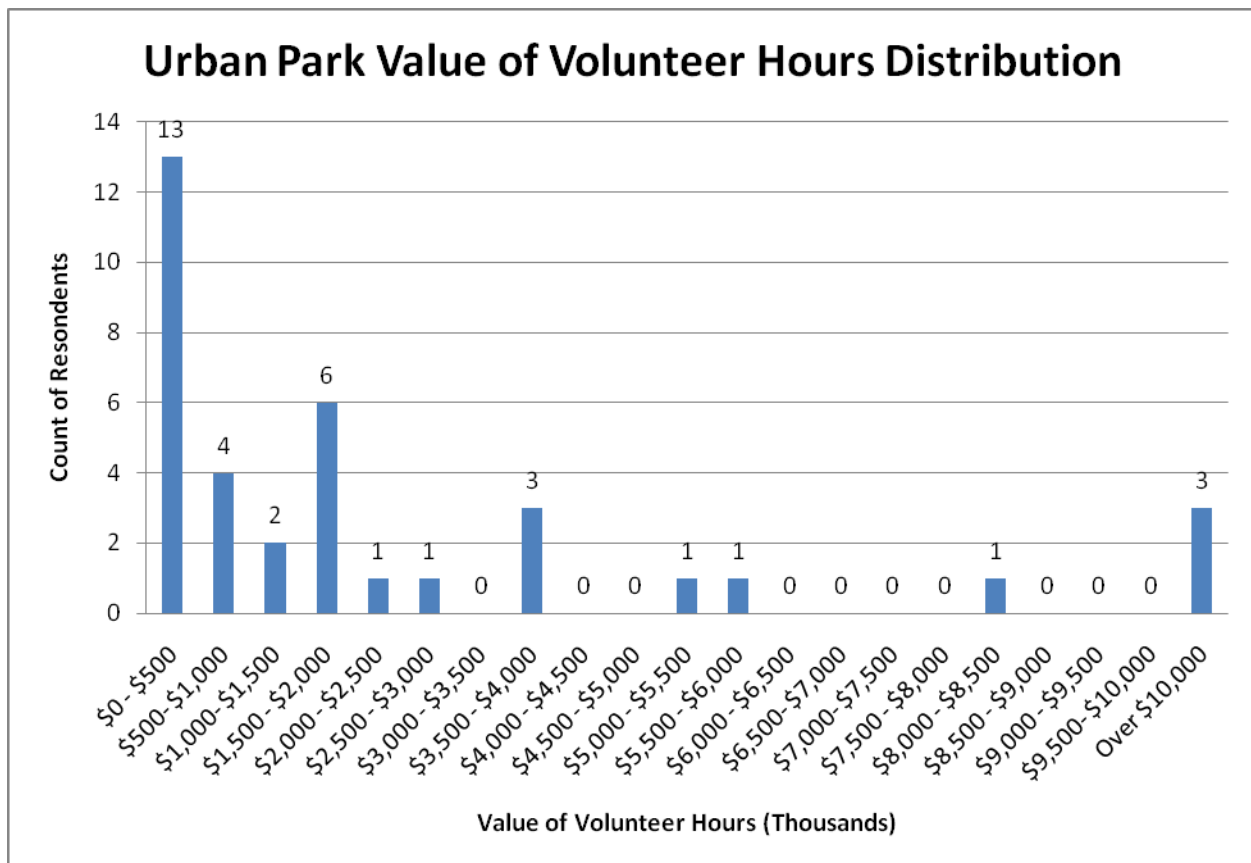
Mean	4.61%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	12.74%
Range	73.70%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	73.70%
Count	46



Question 4: In the most recent fiscal year, approximately what was the value of volunteer hours (@ \$18.50/hour) spent on park and recreation programs and operations in your community?

Urban Park Value of Volunteer Hours

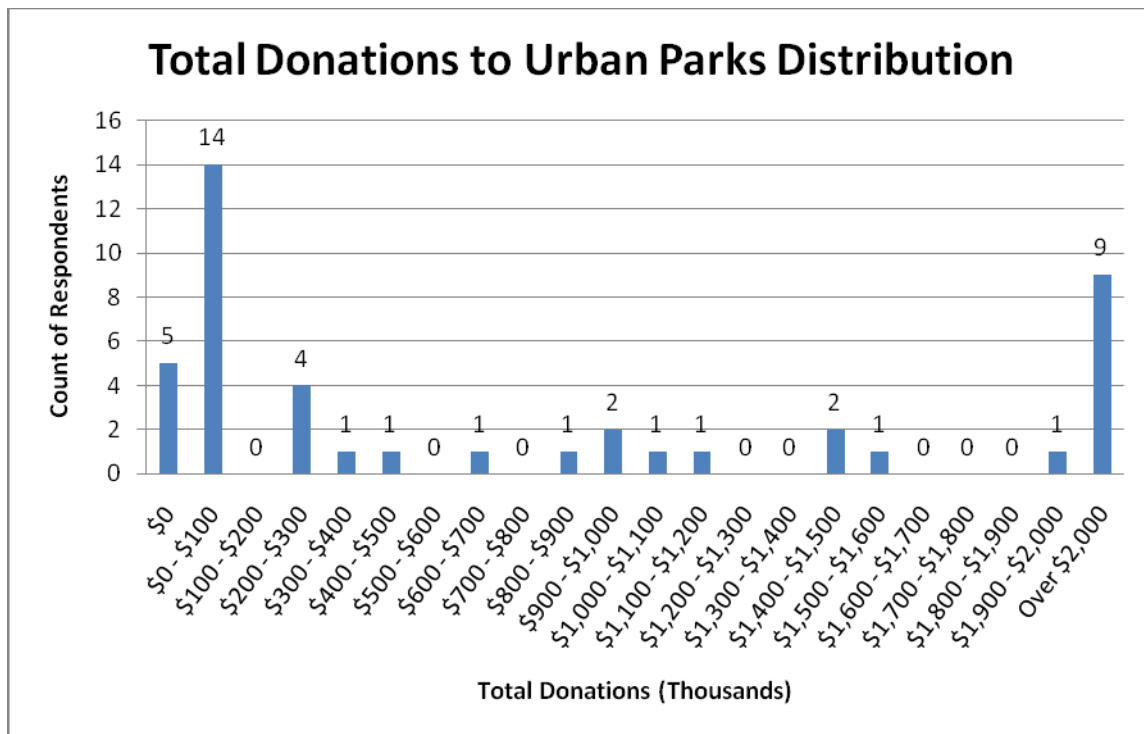
Mean	\$46,856,935
Median	\$1,250,000
Standard Deviation	\$227,315,601
Range	\$1,350,498,150
Minimum	\$1,850
Maximum	\$1,350,500,000
Count	36



Question 5: In the most recent fiscal year, approximately how much money was generated by park foundations, conservancies, “friends” groups, or other private donors (wills, gifts, special fundraisers) to support parks and recreation in your city?

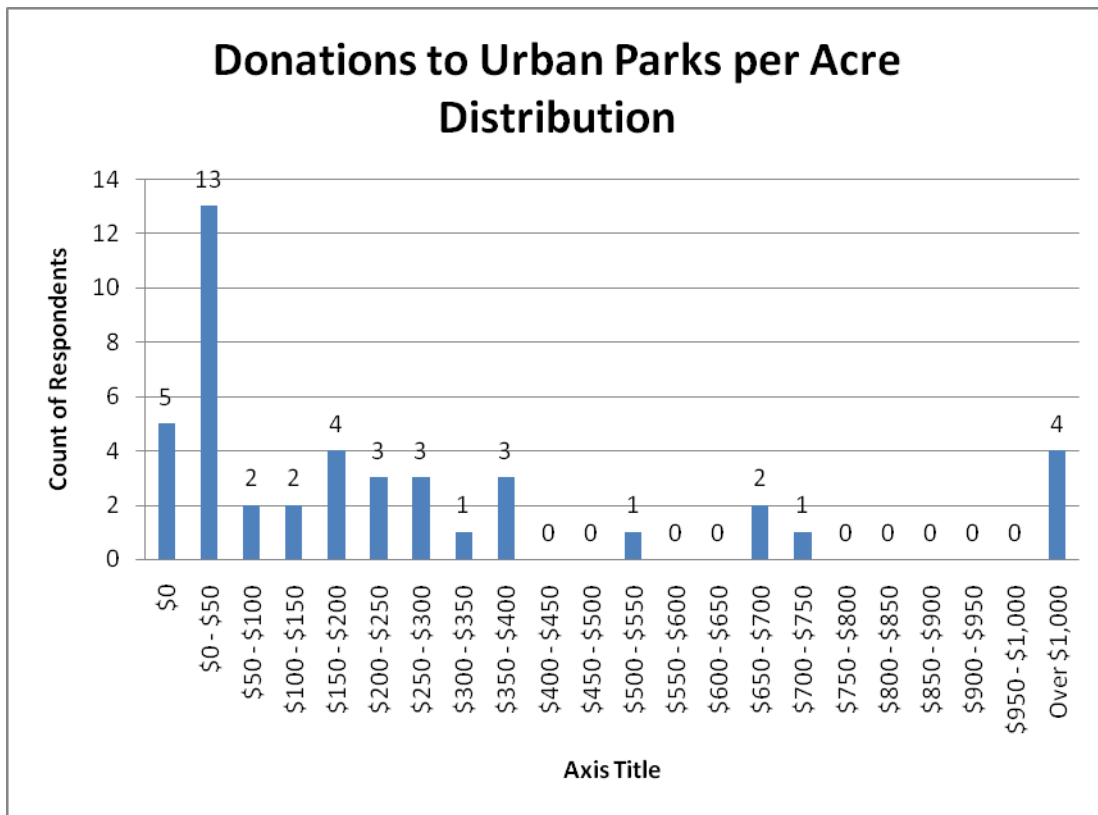
Total Donations to Urban Parks

Mean	\$3,240,217
Median	\$275,000
Standard Deviation	\$12,946,097
Range	\$85,868,877
Minimum	\$0
Maximum	\$85,868,877
Count	44



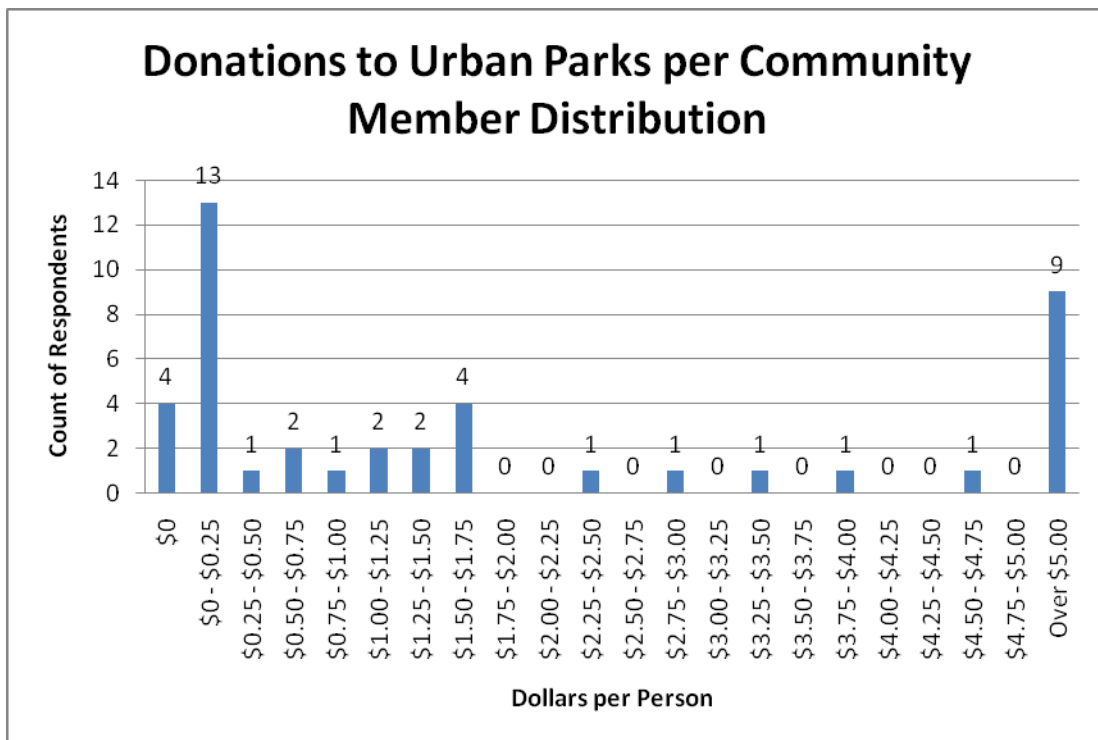
Donations to Urban Parks per Acre

Mean	\$333.24
Median	\$156.85
Standard Deviation	\$579.99
Range	\$2,962.83
Minimum	\$0
Maximum	\$2,962.83
Count	44



Donations to Urban Parks per Community Member

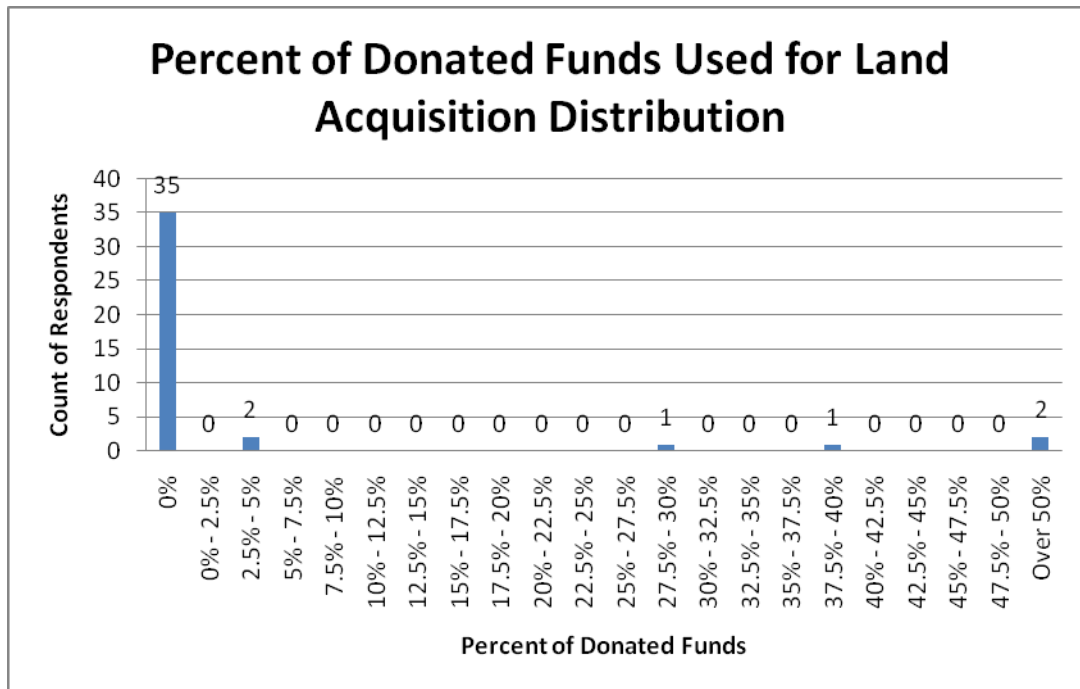
Mean	\$2.75
Median	\$1.05
Standard Deviation	\$4.20
Range	\$20.35
Minimum	\$0
Maximum	\$20.35
Count	43



Question 6: To the best of your knowledge, approximately what percentage of this money was used for:

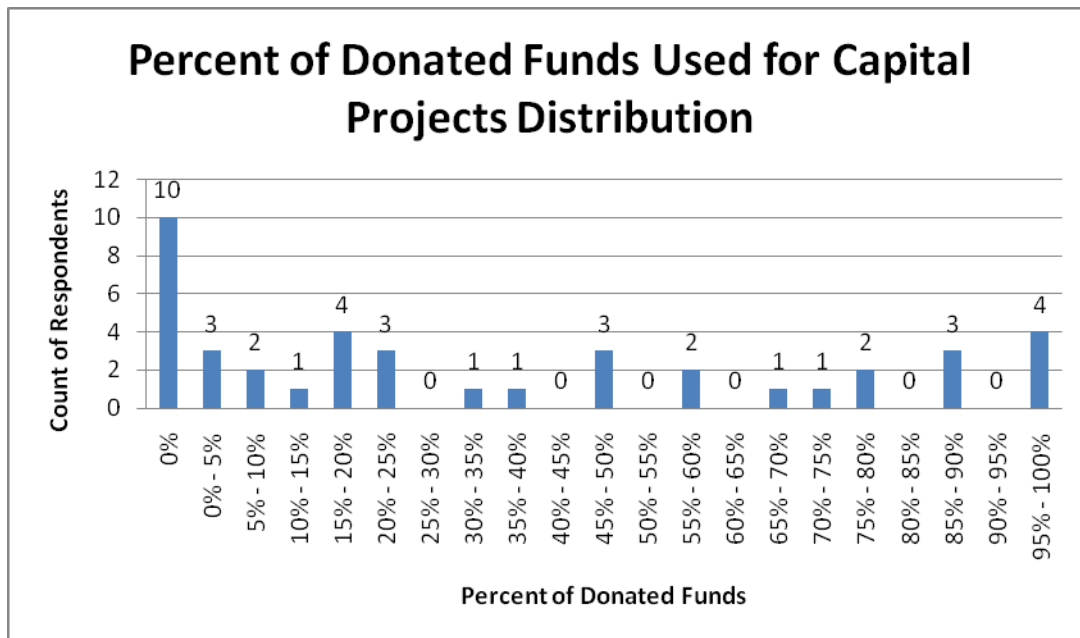
Percent of Donated Funds Used for Land Acquisition

Mean	5.66%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	17.97%
Range	78.22%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	78.22%
Count	41



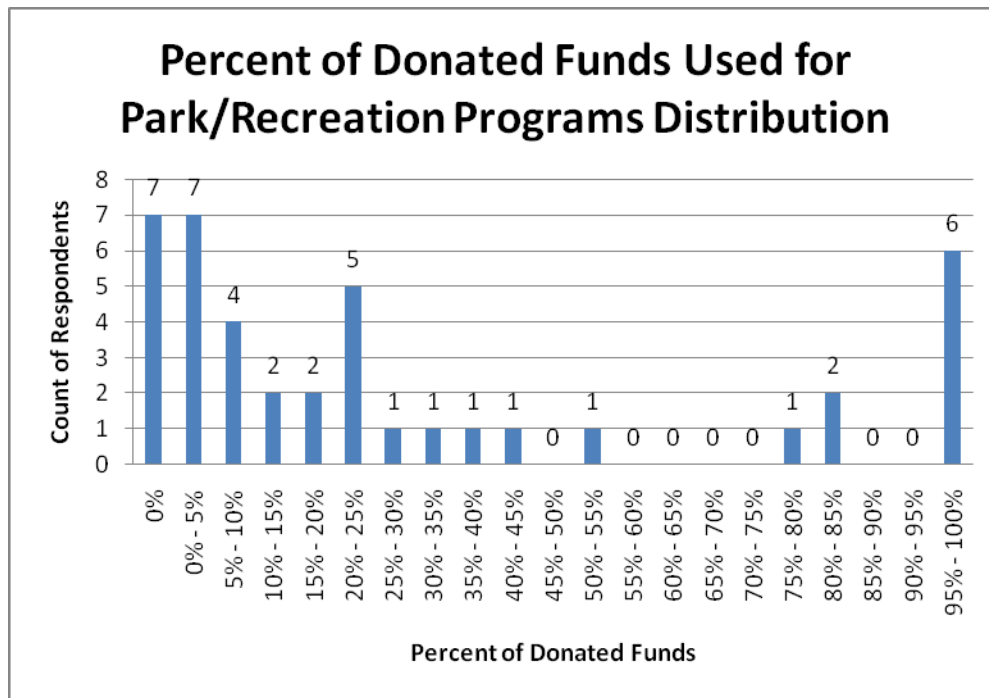
Percent of Donated Funds Used for Capital Projects

Mean	36.32%
Median	25%
Standard Deviation	36.38%
Range	100%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	100%
Count	41



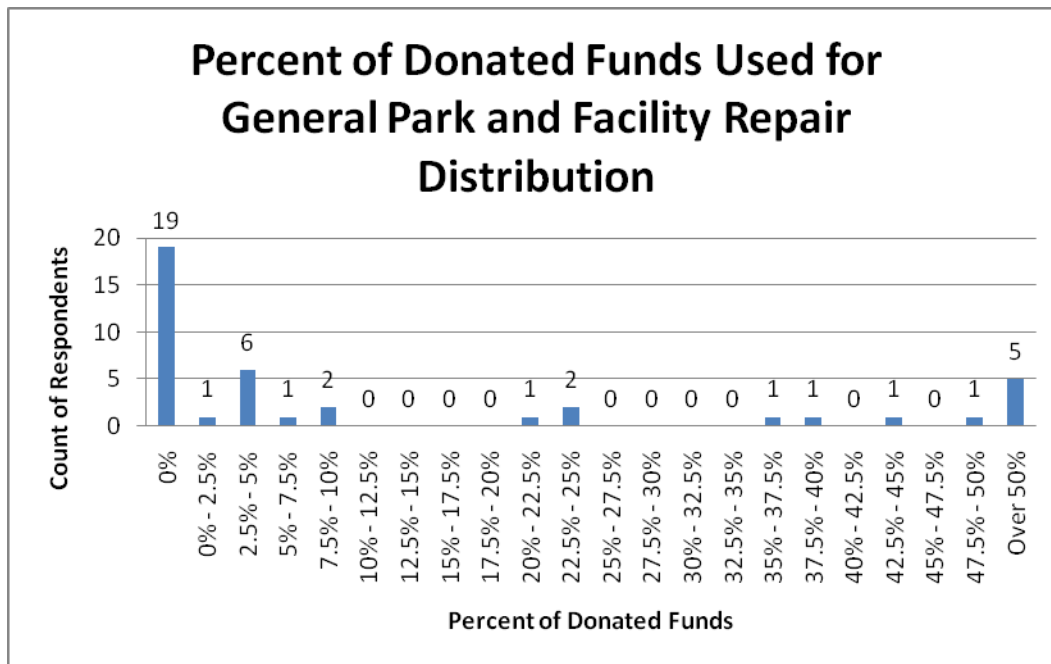
Percent of Donated Funds Used for Park/Recreation Programs

Mean	31.40%
Median	15.50%
Standard Deviation	35.97%
Range	100%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	100%
Count	41



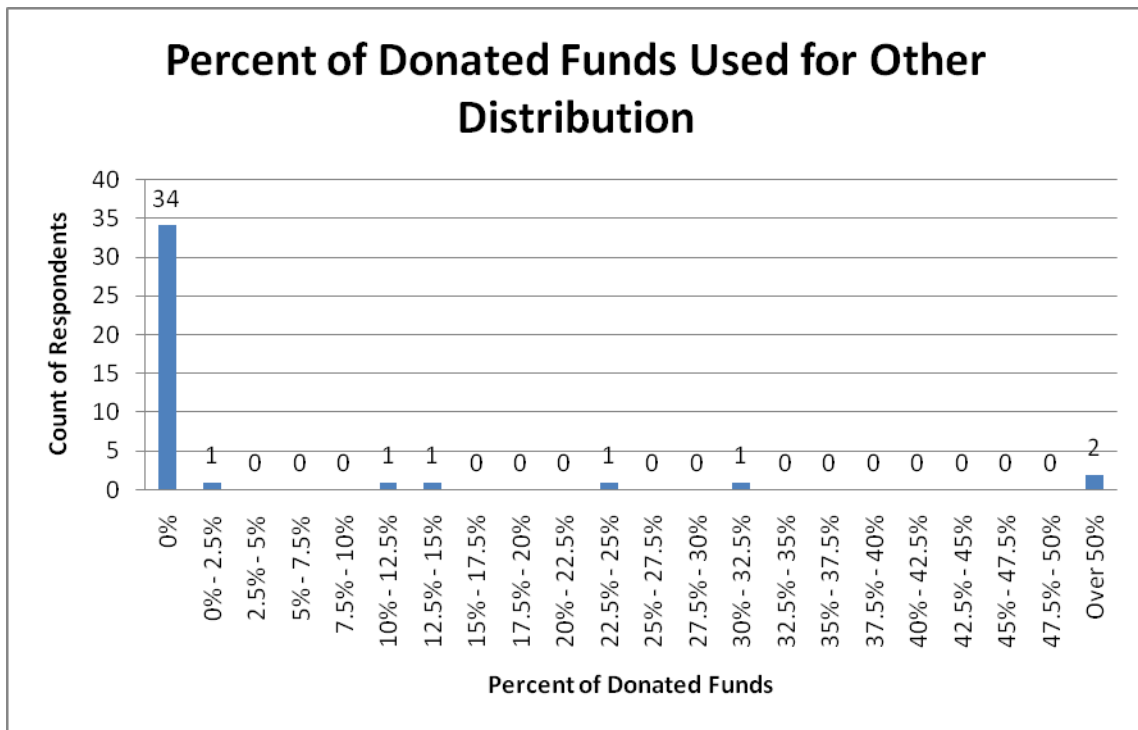
Percent of Donated Funds Used for General Park and Facility Repair

Mean	16.21%
Median	3%
Standard Deviation	26.20%
Range	100%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	100%
Count	41

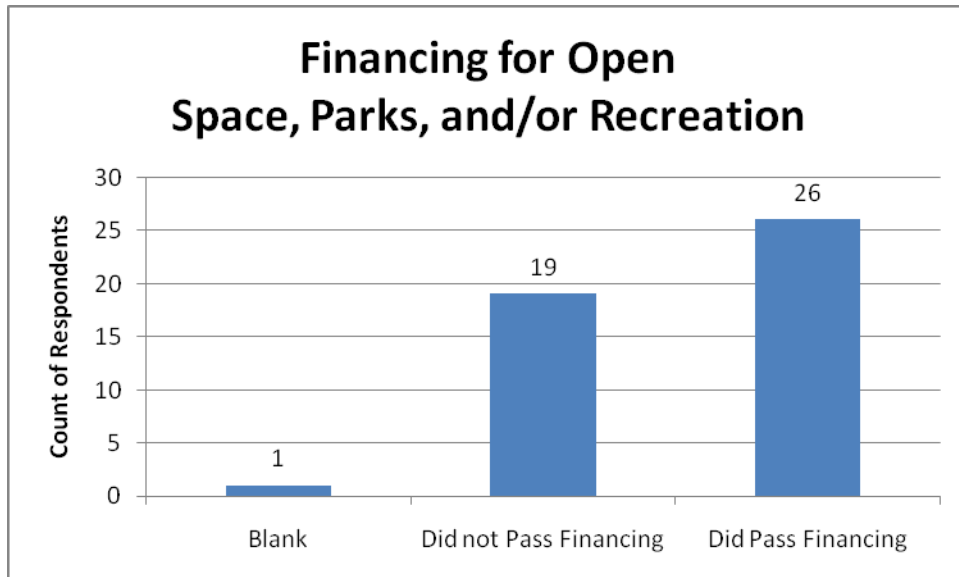


Percent of Donated Funds Used for Other

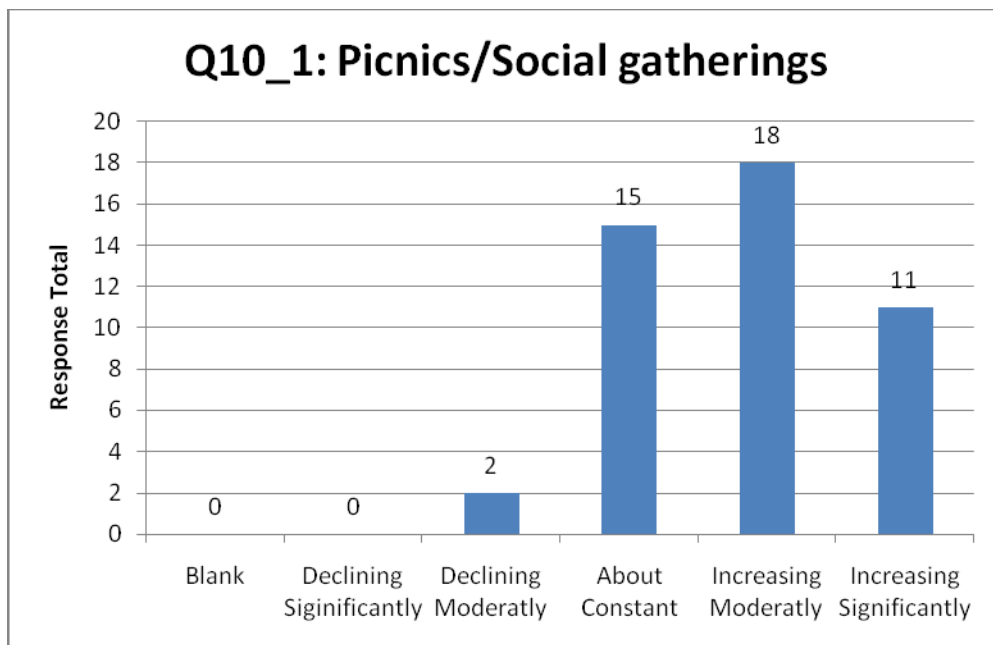
Mean	5.58%
Median	0%
Standard Deviation	16.83%
Range	75%
Minimum	0%
Maximum	75%
Count	41

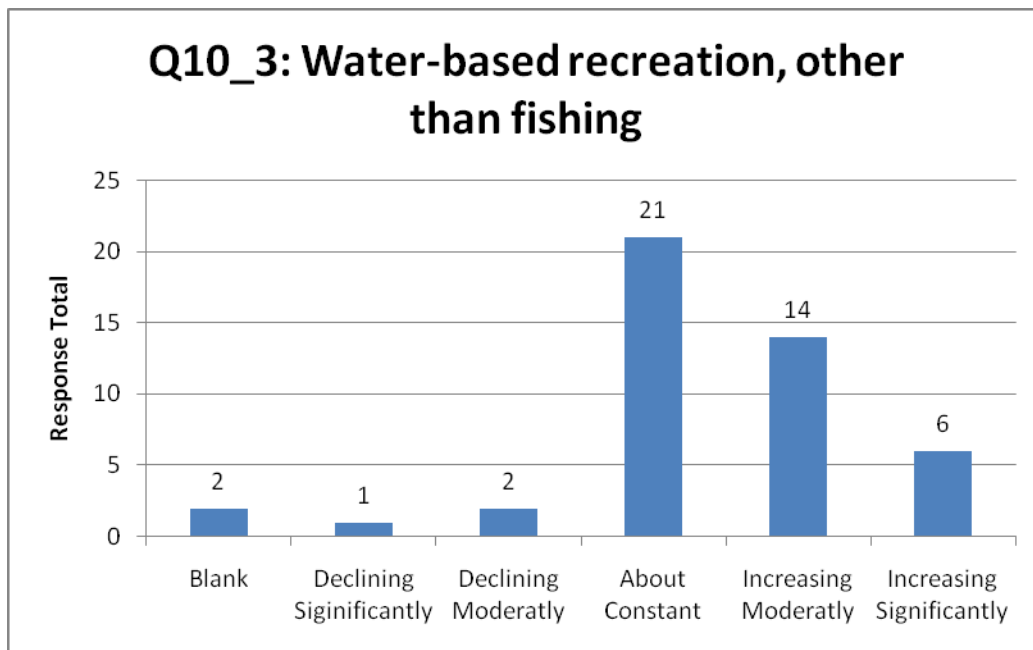
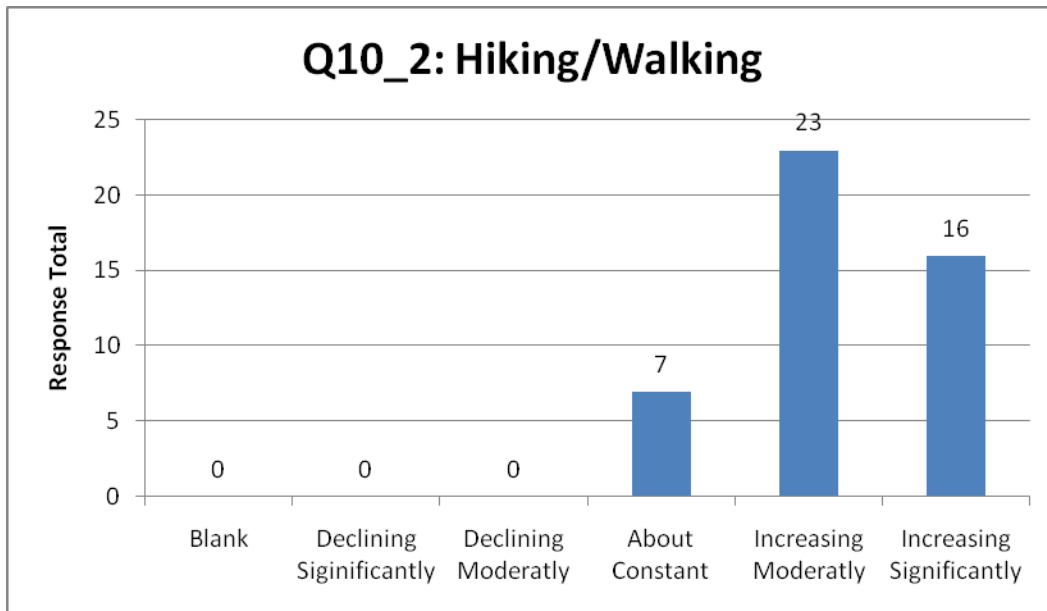


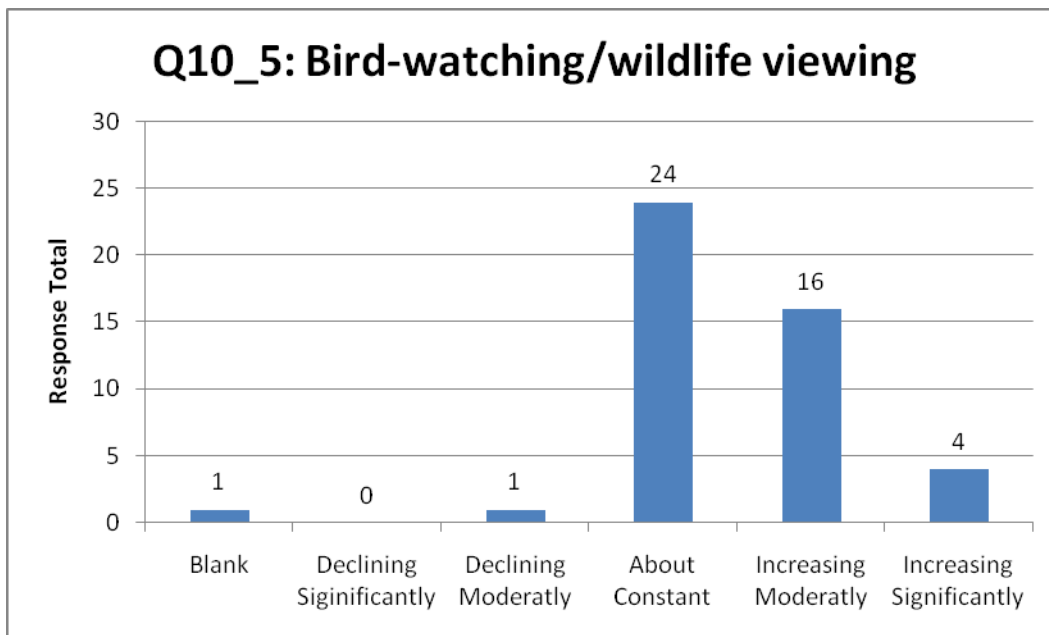
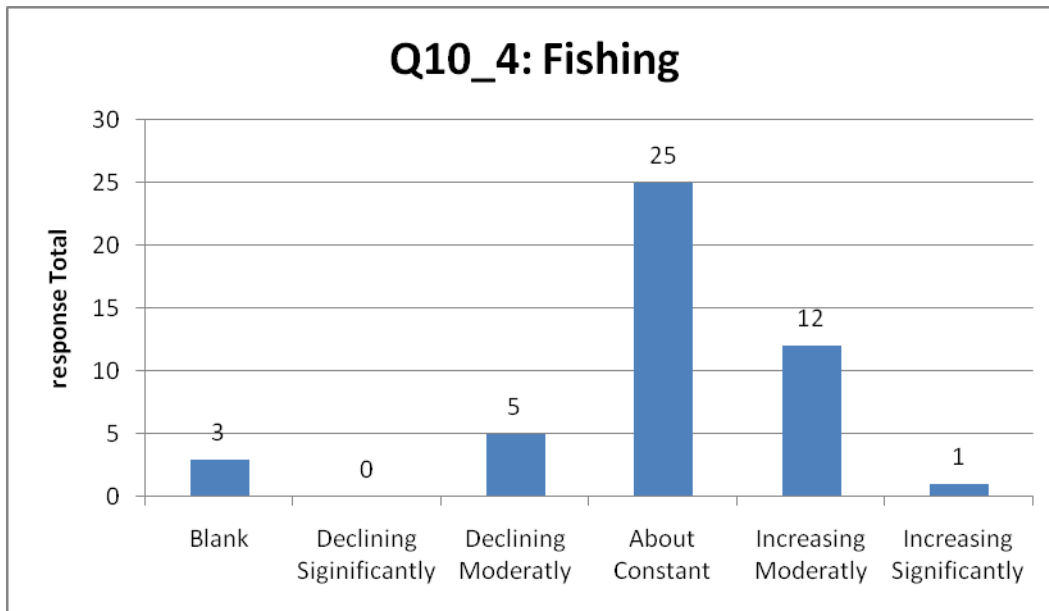
Question 7: Has your community passed a referendum/bond issue in the past 5 years to provide financing for open space, parks, and/or recreation?

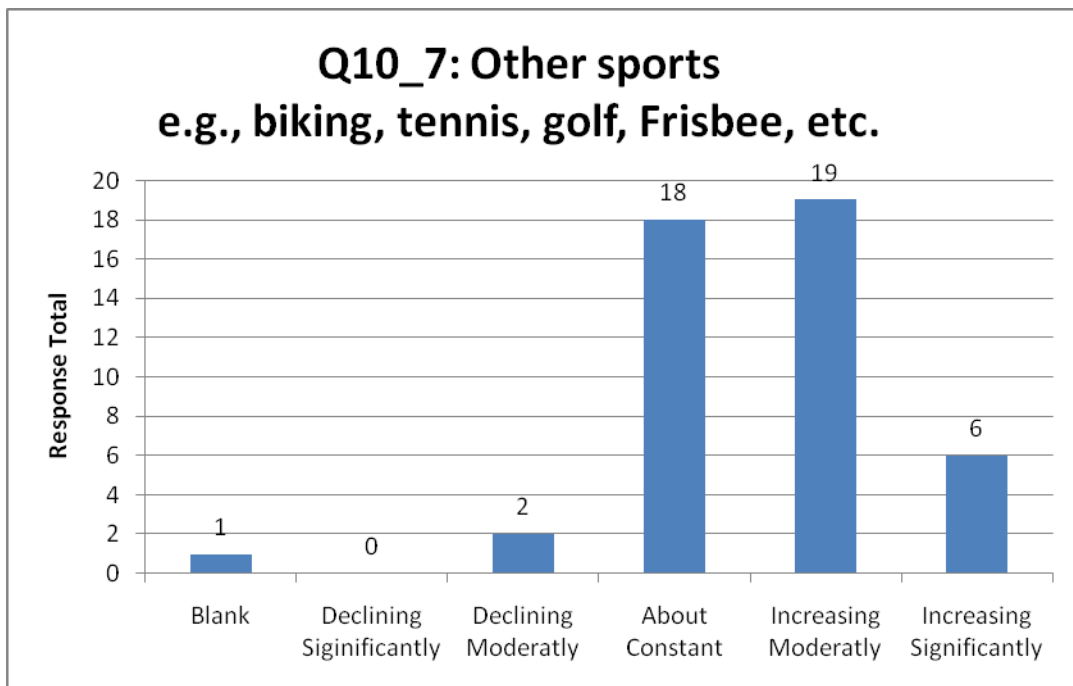
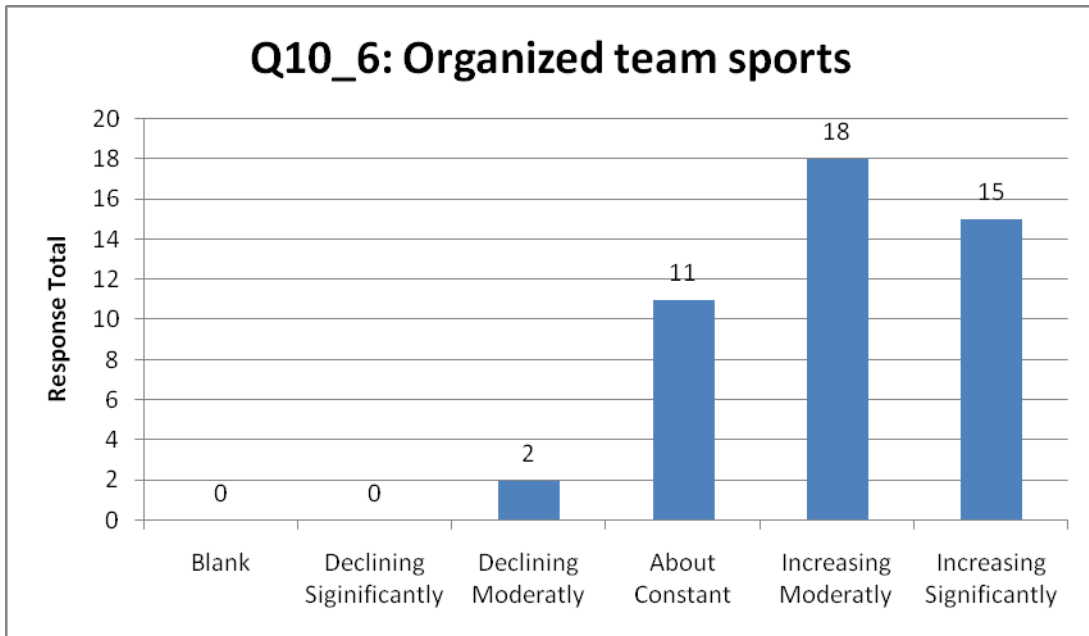


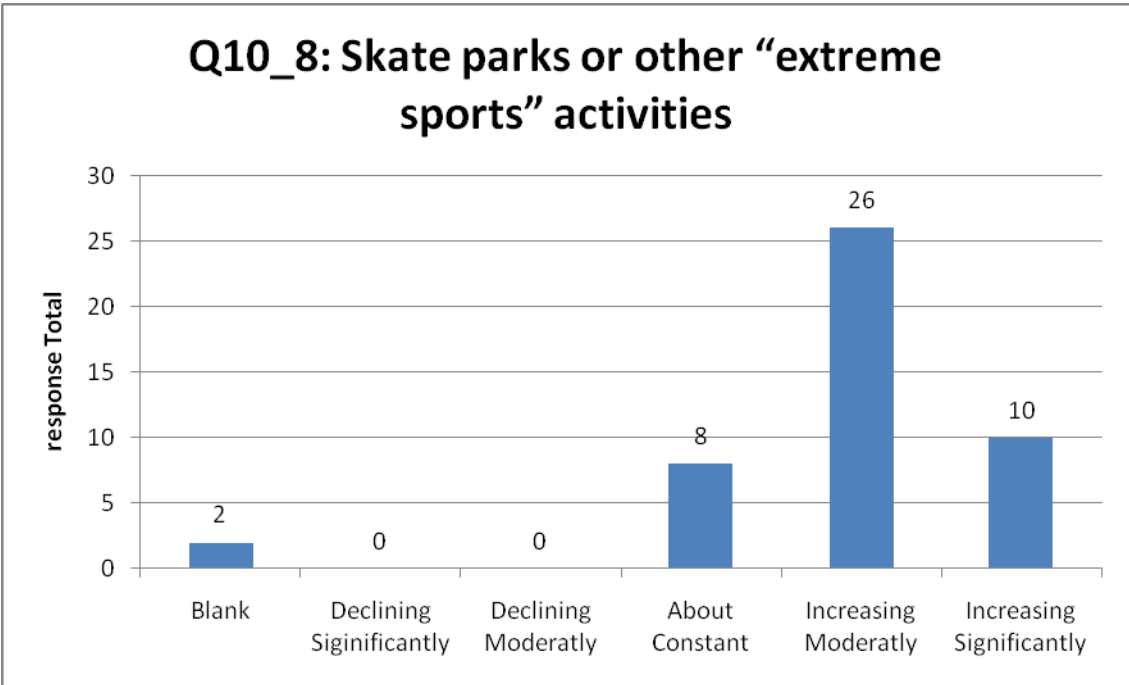
Question 10: In your opinion, what are the overall popularity trends of the following *outdoor* recreation activities in your city’s parks? (You may leave blank or answer ‘NA’ if the activity is not applicable to your parks.)

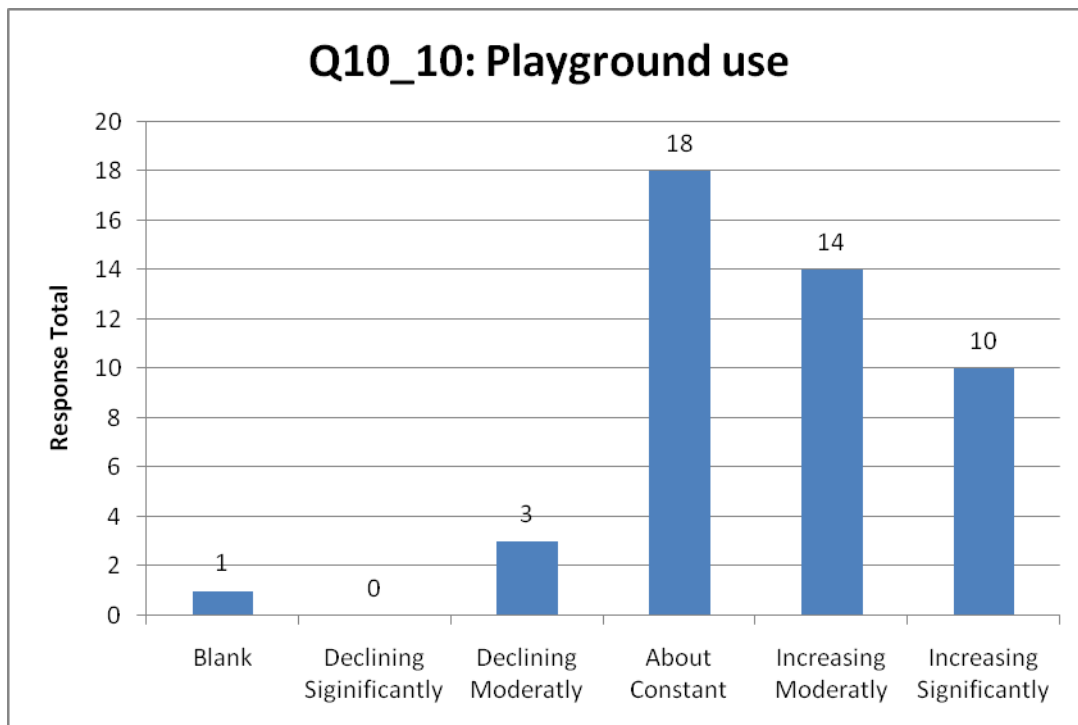
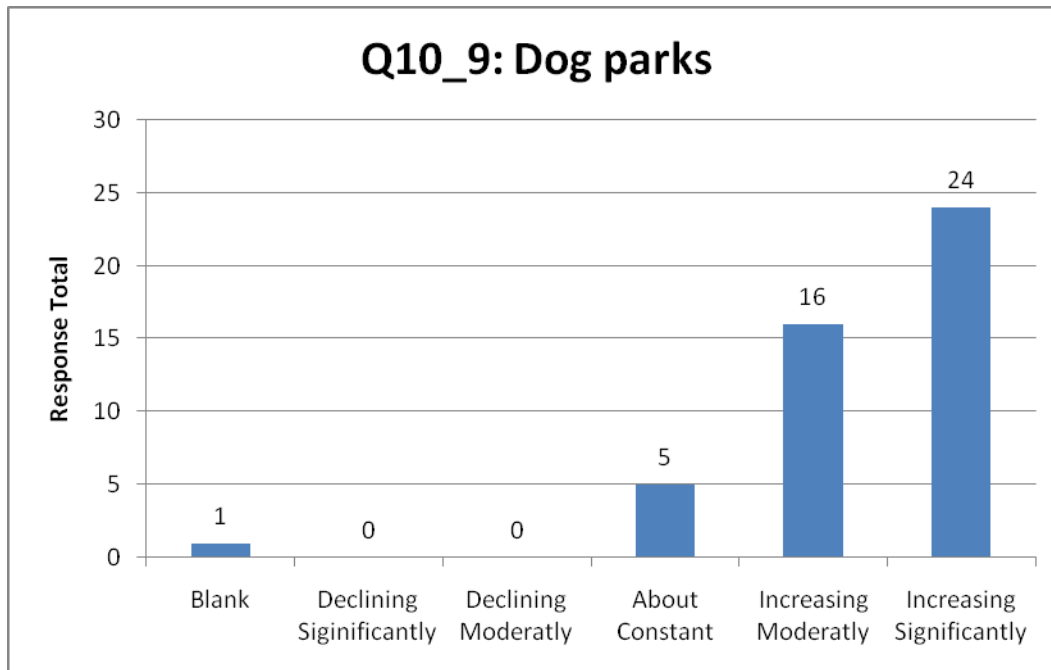


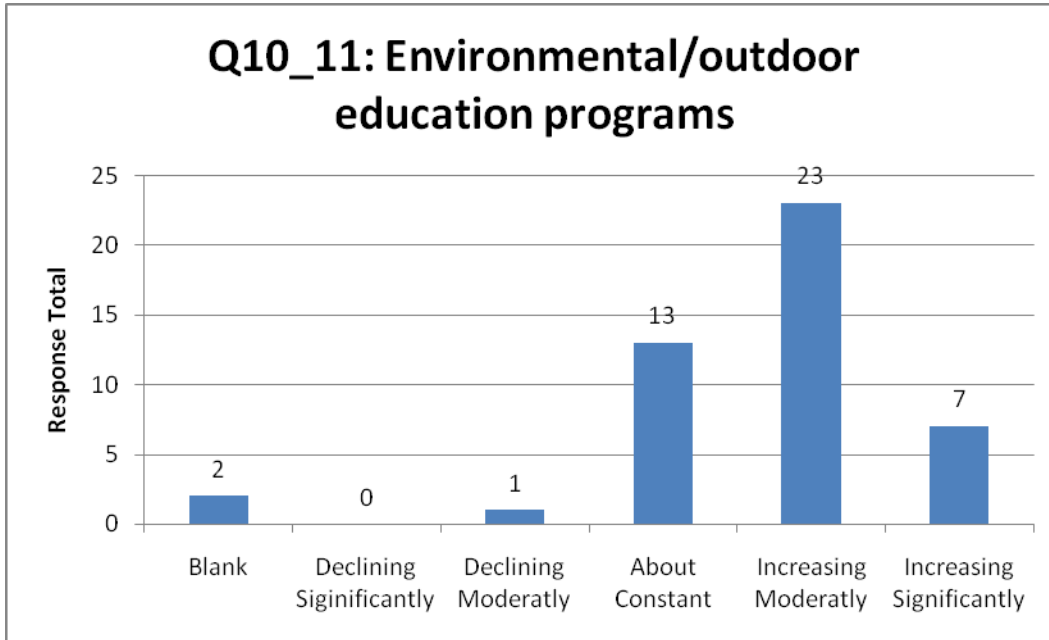


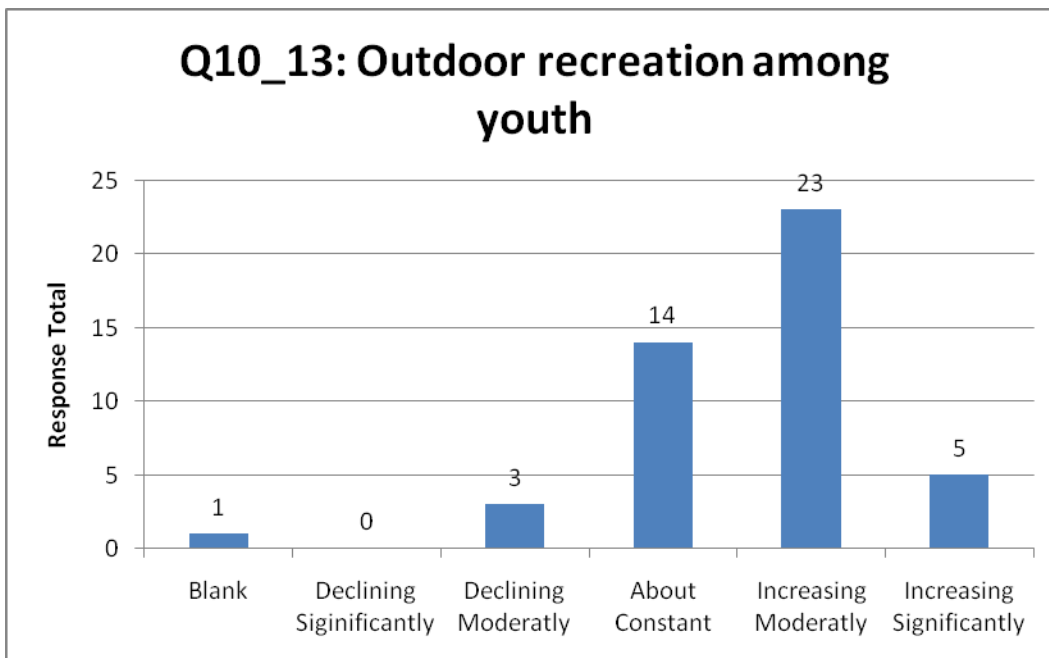
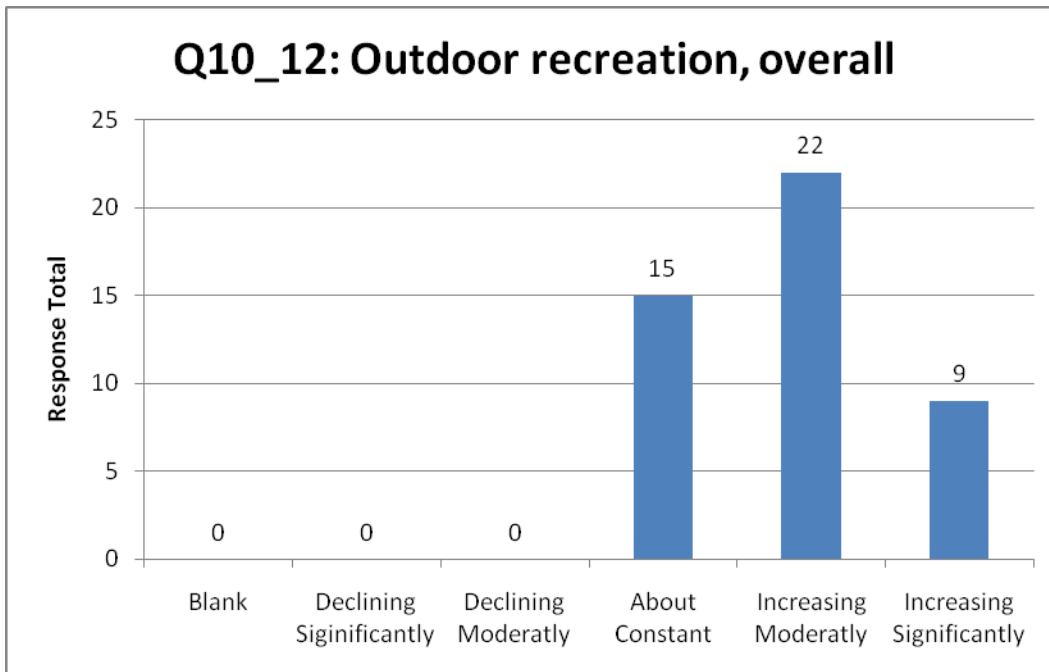




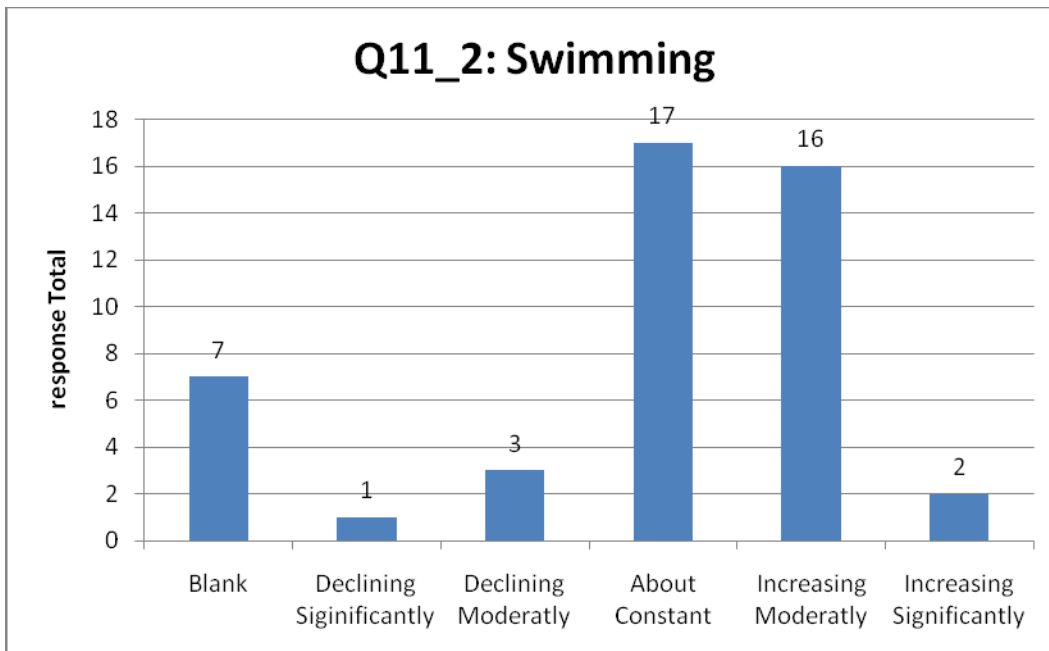
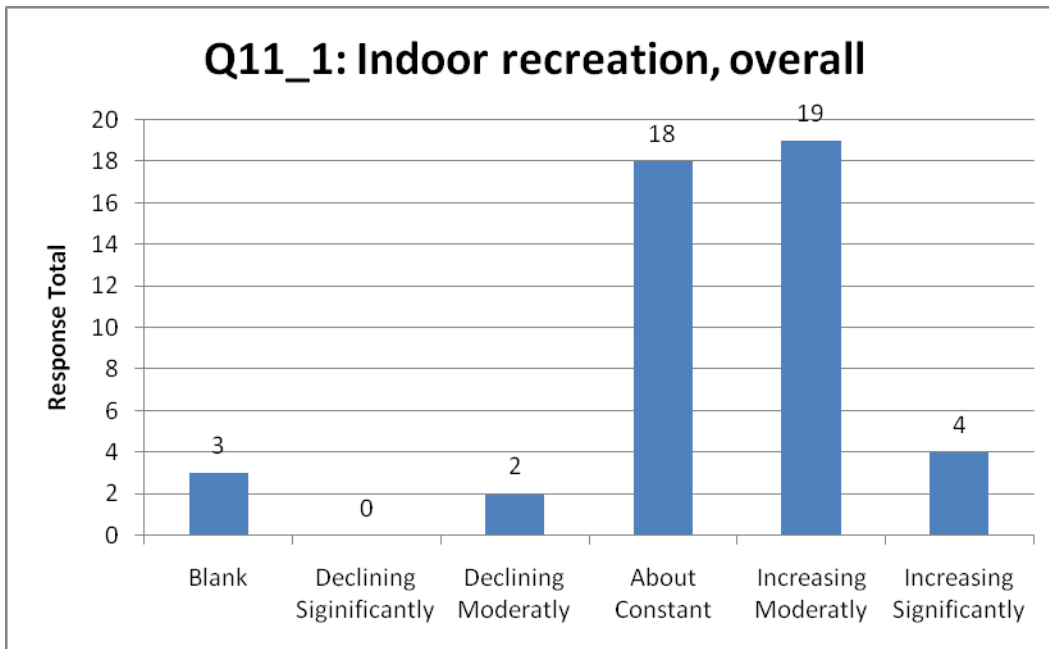


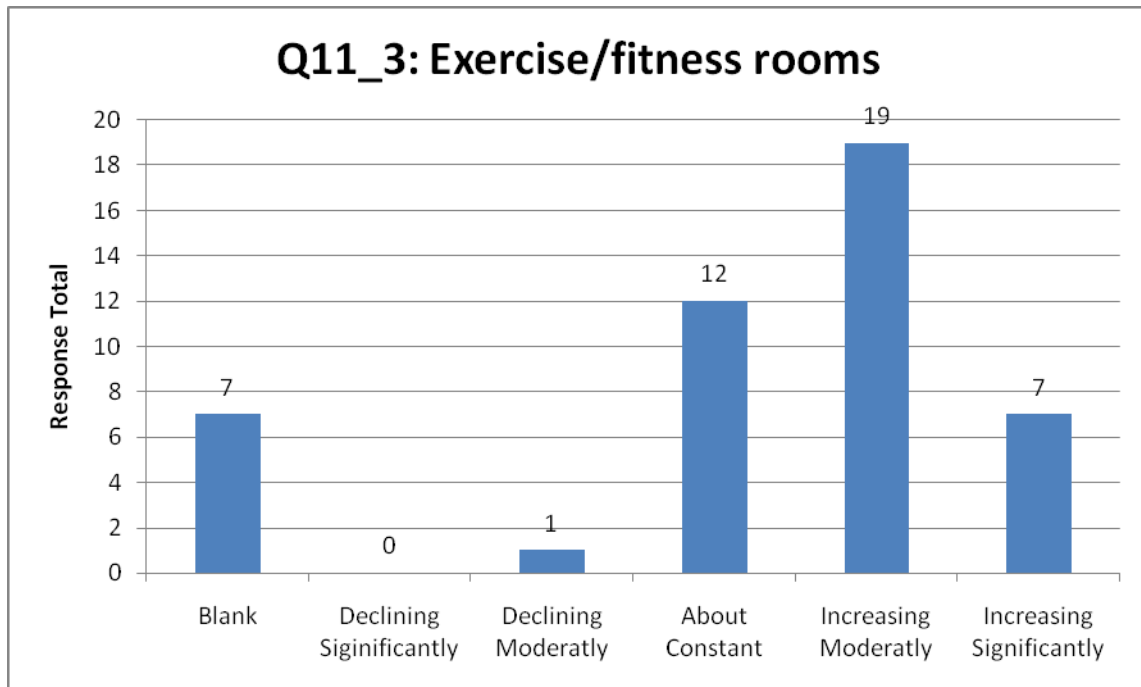




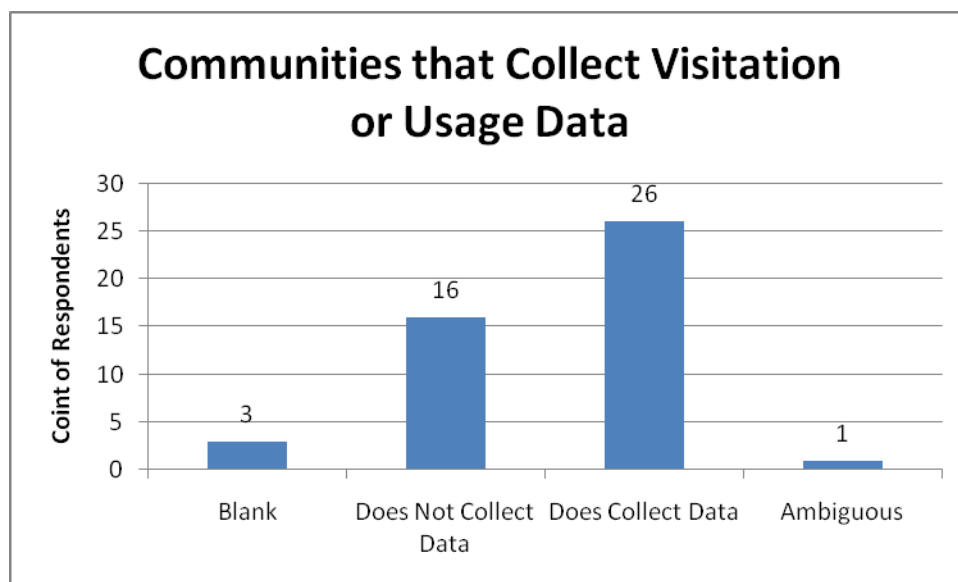


Question 11: Does your community provide centers with indoor recreation facilities? If so, please indicate the overall popularity trends.





Question 12: Does your agency collect visitation or usage data or conduct surveys to estimate visitation and use of your parks and recreation areas?



Appendix A: Resources for the Future Survey of Local Park Directors

Name: _____
 Street Address 1: _____
 Street Address 2: _____
 City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____
 Phone: 1 () _____
 Email: _____ at _____

(1) What are the biggest challenges that you are currently facing?

	Not a challenge	Minor challenge	Significant challenge	Major challenge	Huge issue
1 Insufficient funds for land acquisition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Insufficient funds for other capital expenditures and construction of new facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Insufficient funds for operation and maintenance of parks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Insufficient funds for programs and activities at parks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Lack of acreage or suitable sites for new parks and recreation facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Congestion or crowding at some parks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Inadequate use/vacancy at some parks or facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Complaints from citizens about park conditions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Problems staffing facilities or training employees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Determining how to best provide services to different user groups and to manage different uses of the same parks (e.g. hiking vs. organized sports vs. nature programs, etc).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 Ensuring public safety in parks and recreation areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 Some other issue (s), please list (if any)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you had to name the single biggest challenge, which one of the above issues would you pick? (list the number) _____

Please describe in more detail the barriers you face to overcoming this challenge.

- (2) What was your total operating budget for the most recent fiscal year? _____
- (3) What percentage (approximately) of your operating budget comes from the following sources (please try to have the percentages add to 100):
- (a) The general fund _____
 - (b) Fees, facility rentals, leases _____
 - (c) Federal grants/funding _____
Please list the sources _____
 - (d) State grants/funding _____
Please list the sources _____
 - (e) Another local government _____
 - (f) Private grants/funding _____
 - (g) Sponsorships/Naming Rights _____
 - (h) Other _____
- (4) In the most recent fiscal year, approximately what was the value of volunteer hours (@ \$18.50/hour) spent on park and recreation programs and operations in your community?
- _____
- (5) In the most recent fiscal year, approximately how much money was generated by park foundations, conservancies, “friends” groups, or other private donors (wills, gifts, special fundraisers) to support parks and recreation in your city? _____
- (6) To the best of your knowledge, approximately what percentage of this money was used for:
- (a) land acquisition _____
 - (b) capital projects _____

- (c) park/recreation programs_____
- (d) general park and facility repair_____
- (e) other (please list)_____

(7) Has your community passed a referendum/bond issue in the past 5 years to provide financing for open space, parks, and/or recreation? _____

If possible, please provide additional information. For example, what initiative or program was on the ballot, how much money was raised, what financing mechanism was used (e.g., bond or tax), what the referendum outcome was, and so forth._____

- (8) How many acres do you manage?_____
- (9) What is the population of the area you serve? _____
- (10) In your opinion, what are the overall popularity trends of the following *outdoor* recreation activities in your city’s parks? (You may leave blank or answer ‘NA’ if the activity is not applicable to your parks.)

	Declining significantly	Declining moderately	About constant	Increasing moderately	Increasing significantly
Picnics/Social gatherings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hiking/Walking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Water-based recreation, other than fishing (watercraft, swimming)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fishing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bird-watching/wildlife viewing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organized team sports, e.g. soccer, baseball, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other sports, e.g., biking, tennis, golf, Frisbee, etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Skate parks or other “extreme sports” activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Resources for the Future

Walls et al.

Dog parks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Playground use	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Environmental/outdoor education programs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outdoor recreation, overall	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outdoor recreation among youth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(11) Does your community provide centers with indoor recreation facilities? If so, please indicate the overall popularity trends.

	Declining significantly	Declining moderately	About constant	Increasing moderately	Increasing significantly
Indoor recreation, overall	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swimming	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Exercise/fitness rooms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(12) Does your agency collect visitation or usage data or conduct surveys to estimate visitation and use of your parks and recreation areas? _____

If so, please share any information that you have on visitation and use of your parks and recreation areas, e.g., annual/monthly visits or visitor-days.

Appendix B: List of Respondents

Arlington, TX
Arlington County, VA
Arvada, CO
Atlanta, GA
Bakersfield, CA
Baltimore, MD
Baton Rouge, LA
Boise, ID
Boston, MA
Brookline, MA
Charlotte (Mecklenburg County), NC
Chesapeake, VA
Chicago, IL
Cleveland, OH
Columbus, OH
Corpus Christi, TX
Dallas, TX
Durham, NC
El Paso, TX
Fort Wayne, IN
Fremont, CA
Fresno, CA
Glendale, AZ
Glendale, CA
Grand Rapids, MI
Greensboro, NC
Honolulu, HI
Kansas City, MO
Lincoln, NE
Mesa, AZ
New York, NY
Norfolk, VA
Providence, RI
Riverdale (Prince George's County), MD
San Antonio, TX
San Diego, CA
Santa Ana, CA
Scottsdale, AZ
Seattle, WA
Stockton, CA
St. Petersburg, FL
Tacoma, WA
Tampa, FL
Tucson, AZ
Virginia Beach, VA
Wauwatosa (Milwaukee County), WI