

A Model To Transform Youth Sports Programs In Small and Mid-Sized Communities

Botetourt County Parks, Recreation and Tourism

The Need for Program Advancement

Botetourt County, Virginia, is the fastest growing jurisdiction within the Roanoke, Virginia, Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), having experienced a 22% growth in population between the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Censuses. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2009 population estimate for Botetourt County, Virginia, is 33,299.

Between April 2000 and July 2009, Botetourt County saw an 9.2% increase in population¹. Of the estimated 4,500 children between the ages of 5-14, approximately 3,500 (78%) participate in our youth athletics program. The consistent increase in population for Botetourt County has put an ever-increasing need on the recreation department to provide a quality youth sports program. To meet these needs, the Botetourt County Parks, Recreation and Tourism (PRT) Department set out to explore a myriad of new initiatives targeted at providing cutting-edge youth sports services to its citizens.

The Building Blocks of Success

In December 2007, the PRT Department developed goals and objectives for enhancing an already formidable youth sports program. Those goals included:

- Increase use of technology and the PRT website in the youth sports program.
- Develop a strategic plan to improve the quality of Botetourt's athletic fields.
- Evaluate current policies and procedures and create new policies when needed.
- Develop a sports manual to effectively communicate recreation philosophy and policies and procedures to the community and its volunteer booster clubs.
- Develop a background screening program to protect Botetourt's youth from predators.
- Continue affiliation with parental education training program and youth sports coaches training program.

Once these goals and objective were set, over the next two years, a plan was executed to achieve these goals. The bullets on the following pages show a snapshot of that plan:

¹ Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service

❖ **Activenet Software**

In September 2006, driven by value and convenience for County residents, the PRT Department began offering online activity registration and facility reservation services through The Active Network, Inc., a provider of software technology and marketing solutions to community service organizations. With online capabilities, County residents now have the option to view, register, and pay for the Department's activities, including youth sports registrations, monthly trips, events, and special classes; and to view, reserve, and pay for select recreational facilities, at any time, from any Internet-enabled computer.

The department needed a solution to make our services more accessible to the community. The decision to offer an online program was very community-driven. With Botetourt County's large, wide-spread population, visiting the office only during business hours to register for programs and reserve facilities was often challenging for our customers.

By making online services available 24/7 via the Internet, the Department has reduced the manual paperwork required to process registrations. For the first time, the community also has the option of paying with a credit card, both online and in person. Active's Internet registration and reservation services make signing up for programs or booking facilities simple, fast, and convenient. County residents can search for activities and facilities; view details, schedules, and availability; and register or reserve in just minutes, when and where it's most convenient for them. As an added convenience, registrants will receive an e-mail immediately following an online transaction to confirm their enrollment in a program or reservation of a facility.

The online services not only benefit the community through quicker and increased service options, they also benefit the Department through improved efficiencies. The Department will no longer be hand-writing registration forms and receipts, and all of our administration will now be automated through the software, allowing us to distribute information to residents in an accurate and timely manner, and enabling our staff to continue driving new and improved programs and services.

❖ **Website Enhancements**

In January 2008, PRT met with the County's Webmaster to discuss a restructure and enhancement of the PRT website to create a site that would serve as a "one-stop shop" for any of Botetourt's 33,000+ citizens interested in registering for our programs or exploring what our department has to offer. Botetourt County PRT has worked tirelessly with the County's Webmaster to improve the appearance, layout,

content and flow of the department's website—www.botetourt.org/recreation—to benefit the 3,400+ youth sports athletes in Botetourt County. By August 2008, after numerous meetings between PRT and the Webmaster, our website was enhanced to meet these needs. The number of the Department's webpages doubled with the addition of sport-specific pages for youth sports, as well as a 'Recreation News and Events' page. The framework of the site was also enhanced to include a navigation bar for easier movement around the site. The website enhancements also coincided with the County's commencement of online registrations for all youth sports in the spring of 2008. The augmented website has also helped promote and provide access to the numerous new policies and manuals created over the past year. Links were also created for each of our athletic facilities complete with photos of each facility's amenities.

Having experience in maintaining website content, the Assistant Director accepted the responsibility of content management for the PRT website from the County's Webmaster. All changes made to the PRT website are made by the Assistant Director from his desk using the web management software, Adobe Contribute. This allows the department to keep the site current and accurate in a more timely manner, which is essential to creating a user-friendly site that citizens will check first before calling with questions. In 2009, the new PRT website won a state VRPS (Virginia Recreation and Park Society) award for website redesign.

The website contains directions to any County park or gymnasium; game schedules, scores and standings; contact information for booster clubs; rosters for coaches to complete and submit online and much more. All the hard work paid off in September 2009 when the new PRT website won a state Virginia Recreation and Park Society (VRPS) award for website redesign at its annual state conference in Roanoke.

❖ **Background Screening Program**

After months of research and review, PRT's background screening program was implemented in February 2008. Botetourt County is committed to providing a safe environment for the children in our sports programs. The Department does this by conducting background screenings on all volunteers who coach in our programs. The head coach and a minimum of one assistant coach are screened from each recreational team in the County. To date, over 575 coaches have been screened.

The Assistant Director has also presented at state conferences on creating screening programs and has also assisted other localities with creating their own screening program².

❖ **Online Registrations**

In April 2008, youth sports registrations were made available online for the seven booster clubs in Botetourt County. With the size of the County (more than 500 square miles), it was important to bring this registration accessibility to the parents of the children that participate in our youth sports leagues.

Online registrations were made possible by the department's purchase of the web-based Activenet software in the fall of 2006. Citizens without internet access can still register by completing an athletic registration form and returning it, along with payment, to the PRT office.

This took the great burden of registering every participant off of the volunteer booster clubs and allowed citizens to register their child from the comfort of their own home. At the end of the registration period, reports are compiled for each club showing registered participants and sent out to all seven booster clubs.

❖ **Facility Use Policy and Application**

This policy was implemented in the spring of 2008. It sets requirements for the use of fields and gymnasiums in Botetourt County that include an application, insurance requirement and team roster. This policy allows the Department to manage Botetourt County athletic fields and gymnasiums in a manner to assure equitable distribution, to maximize use of County facilities by the public and to give preferential consideration to teams comprised of Botetourt residents. Teams with more than three non-residents must pay a rental fee, and teams with less than three non-residents can utilize the fields and gyms for free with certain restrictions.

❖ **Strategic Plan for Athletic Field Improvements**

PRT has developed a Strategic Plan to improve the quality of the athletic field turf and infield playing surfaces and to enhance the overall appearance of County and school recreation facilities and parks. This plan includes developing an athletic infield maintenance plan, developing an athletic turf maintenance plan, developing an athletic field signage replacement plan, making fields more handicap accessible and

² See article at back of Exhibit G

compliant with ADA regulations and developing an overall park beautification plan. This plan has been adopted by the Botetourt County Board of Supervisors and is currently being implemented.

❖ **Youth Sports Manual**

Released to the volunteer booster clubs and the community in February 2009, this 40-page manual is a compilation of the new athletic policies written in the previous two years as well as all rules and regulations concerning youth sports in Botetourt. This manual will help to educate and provide reference to the Botetourt County community and seven booster clubs on the youth athletics program.

❖ **PAYS (Parents Association for Youth Sports)**

The PAYS (Parents Association for Youth Sports) educational program is a training seminar that is administered by the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) and offers a simple, effective way to make parents aware of their roles and responsibilities and offers ways they can make the youth sports experience more enjoyable and positive. Moreover, the PAYS program seeks to hold parents accountable to a strict Code of Conduct defined by the Parents Code of Ethics. In order to complete the program, parents must read and agree to this code of ethics. The PAYS program is required for at least one parent of each child. Memberships in the PAYS Program are active for 12 months from the time the parent views the video, pays their membership fee and receives a certification card.

❖ **NYSCA (National Youth Sports Coaches Association)**

The National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) is a membership organization and the most widely used volunteer coach training program in the nation. The NYSCA volunteer coach training program is designed to sensitize volunteer coaches to their responsibilities and hold them accountable to a strict Code of Conduct defined by the NYSCA Coaches Code of Ethics Pledge. In order to complete the program, coaches must read and agree to this code of ethics pledge. This certification is required for all coaches. Memberships in the NYSCA Program are active for 12 months from the time the coach views the videos, pays their membership fee and receives a certification card.

Program Financing, Staffing, and Results

❖ **Financing**

With the exception of staff initiative and hard work, the execution of most of these goals and objectives are not found on any budget worksheet. The technology and background screening components did require budgetary allocations. The acquisition of the Activenet software technology was funded at \$10,000 for the initial purchase and training in FY 2006-07. Currently, \$3,000 is budgeted annually for maintenance and fees associated with the software. The background screening program was funded at \$5,000 for the initial startup in FY 2007-08 and is currently budgeted at \$3,000 annually. In general, the youth sports program is funded at approximately \$130,000 annually in the PRT operating budget.

❖ Staffing

Staffing for the administration and oversight of the youth athletic program is better handled through the cooperative efforts of Botetourt County's 6-employee professional recreation staff and 11-employee maintenance staff along with the County's seven volunteer booster clubs. The strong working-relationship with the booster clubs has been the cornerstone of the youth athletics program in Botetourt.

PRT staff have also received various national certifications over the last two years. The Director and Assistant Director possess an industry certification known as a Certified Parks and Recreation Professional (CPRP). This exam is administered by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA). The Recreation Programs Coordinator has also taken and passed the Certified Youth Sports Administrator (CYSA) exam. This exam is administered by the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS). Moreover, all 17 PRT staff have been certified in First Aid and CPR.

This focus on continuing education and certifications has increased the recreation knowledge of staff and relays to the community the department's commitment to raising the level of service and programs produced.

❖ Program Results

In the fall of 2007, Botetourt County Parks, Recreation and Tourism was one of five communities in the country to be awarded The Excellence in Youth Sports Award by the National Alliance for Youth Sports. This national award honors programs that are doing superior jobs of conducting diverse activities with a focus on providing safe and positive experiences as well as how well they demonstrate that they embrace a child-centered recreational sports philosophy that is aimed at providing a positive and safe experience for all youth. The award was handed out at the annual International Youth Sports Congress in

Orlando, Florida. Additionally, the Department was awarded an Honorable Mention for this same award in the fall of 2008.

The strategic plan to improve the quality of Botetourt's athletic fields has set PRT on a course for consistently quality fields year-in and year-out. Numerous fields have had irrigation systems added that greatly aid in the retention of quality turf. The measureable indicators of this improvement are the decrease in complaints on field conditions, the marked improvement in the general aesthetics of the fields and the increase in positive feedback. The implementation of a facility use policy has also helped control the activity on our fields and, thus, contributed to better turf conditions.

Fulfilling The Criteria For Selection

❖ *An Innovative Solution*

Botetourt County is innovatively meeting the challenge of providing a quality youth sports program to such a large and growing community. The effective use of current technology—such as online registration software; a website that is current, informative and active as a marketing tool for new programs and policies; fillable forms that allow youth coaches to complete and submit their team rosters online; and blast emails from the online registration database advertising programs—has allowed PRT to speak to the community in a way that it never has before. The constant and timely contact creates open lines of communication that allow citizens and volunteer booster clubs to build a rapport and 'trust equity' with the department. Trust equity makes it easier for PRT to roll out new initiatives, because the community has a trust that the department has what is best for the Botetourt community in mind and will be open and honest should questions arise. This is a trust that PRT understands can be fleeting and, therefore, constantly works hard to maintain.

❖ *Partnership and Collaboration*

To meet the goals and objectives set for the youth sports program, several departments within the County were utilized for their expertise. Because of the financial transactions associated with the acquisition of Activenet software, the Treasurers Office and Finance Office, as well as the Management Information Systems department were heavily involved in bringing this technology to the County. Likewise, with the development of the background screening program, the County Attorney and the Crime Prevention Office within the Sheriff's office were consulted. The website redesign and enhancement relied

heavily on the County web-master for guidance. Most of these changes would have been exponentially more difficult without the buy-in and promotion by the County's seven volunteer booster clubs. The PRT department works hand-in-hand with its booster clubs to get feedback on new initiatives. With regards to the facility use policy, numerous meetings were held with Botetourt County school system personnel during the development of this policy to assure that our policy dovetailed into their existing policy regarding the usage of school gymnasiums.

The PRT department is responsible for maintaining over 35 outdoor recreational and athletic facilities, consisting of over 500 acres of land owned by Botetourt County, the Botetourt County school system, townships within Botetourt County and land leased from a private corporation. The PRT Department has model working-relationships with all these entities. With PRT only owning three parks in the County, the Department maintains and utilizes 11 school facilities, one park owned by a Town (Buchanan) and one athletic facility leased from a private corporation (Boxley Fields leased from Boxley Materials Company). In addition, the Department maintains the grounds at three industrial parks and an education center. This variety of working affiliations allows PRT to build strong public and private ties in the community as well as create mutually beneficial partnerships.

Lastly, the most important partnership that the PRT Department has is with County administration and the five-member Board of Supervisors. PRT receives the third-most budget dollars in the County behind Public Safety and Public Education. The importance that County administration places on PRT was qualified at a recent board meeting by a board member: "A well-run and productive Parks and Recreation Department is the best way to show community tax-payers the tangible effects of their tax dollars."

❖ *A Model For Other Localities*

Due to the similarities in Botetourt's youth sports program with other volunteer booster club-based departments around the state, the administrative model and extensive local public and private partnerships that PRT has designed for a youth sports program can be easily copied and manipulated to fit into most small and mid-sized communities.

Summary

The Botetourt County youth sports program is a nationally recognized program that strives to provide an all-inclusive, modern youth sports program for the entire community. The youth sports program

is a collaborative, cooperative, locally administered program, which has achieved measurable, practical, and lasting results through staff expertise, initiative and hard work.

The following exhibits are in support of this application:

- Exhibit A: Youth Sports Manual
- Exhibit B: Excellence in Youth Sports Award information
- Exhibit C: 2008 Strategic Plan for Athletic Field Improvements
- Exhibit D: Recreation Resources Summary Chart
- Exhibit E: Website Award Press Release
- Exhibit F: Facility Use Policy
- Exhibit G: Background Screening Policy and Article