

Financing dedicated recreational areas in the urban proximate environment

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The metropolitan area of Amsterdam is densely populated. Research shows that there is a shortage of outdoor recreational opportunities due to the highly urbanized nature of the region (Gijsbertse, 2008). To facilitate outdoor recreation in the region, several dedicated recreational parks were created. The aim of these areas is to provide space for outdoor recreation and nature for the urban population. The areas feature park-like landscapes build and designed to accommodate different leisure pursuits. These areas are usually located close to the city, either walking or cycling distance from the closest neighborhoods. They are up to 400 hectares in size, and the largest receive up to 2.5 million visits per year.

Each of these areas is governed by a separate governmental entity which manages the areas on behalf of its participants, which are the governments of the surrounding municipalities and the provincial government. Each participant contributes a fixed amount towards the management and upkeep of the areas. However, these contributions only cover part of the costs (from 20% up to 80%). Therefore, other means of financing maintenance and upkeep had to be developed. Part of the answer has been to lease parts of the areas to entrepreneurs to develop commercial recreational activities. However in recent years a combination of the economic crisis, and the age of the areas which necessitates more investments in upkeep, means that securing adequate funding is challenging and new measures have to be devised.

In this presentation we will discuss two of these measures and discuss their impact in terms of revenue, influence on the number of visitors and visitor satisfaction. These experiences are part of an ongoing process to find new and sustainable funding models. We have not yet reached a stage where we can present a general model.

Methodology

The number of visitors is determined by a combination of physical counting and extrapolation using previously gathered data. Data was gathered on the number of visits, mode of transportation and occupancy rate during several days in different seasons on all entrances to an area. Mechanical counters able to count the number of passing vehicles (bicycles and/or cars) were placed at the main entrances. Using the data from the counters, the total number of visitors is extrapolated by adjusting for traffic through other entrances, other modes of transport and average occupancy rate. Visitor questionnaires were conducted twice, in 2007 and in 2009. The Questionnaire included questions about satisfaction, frequency of visits and safety.

Paid parking

One of the earlier measures adopted in 2005 in Twiske, a medium size area directly north of Amsterdam, was the

introduction of paid parking. In the 3 years that followed the number of visits to the area dropped 29 %. Only in 2011 did the number of visits start to climb again (by 7%) (RNH, 2012). The visitor's appreciation of the area was not measured before introducing paid parking, but both in 2007 and 2009, paid parking was a complaint frequently voiced by visitors, and it impacted their indicated willingness to re-visit the area (RNH, 2010).

The measure had other unforeseen consequences. The residents of the surrounding municipalities were unhappy with the introduction of paid parking which has negatively influenced the municipalities' goodwill for Twiske which is essential when trying to develop other opportunities for increasing revenue.

A net positive effect of the measure was the decrease of unwanted and criminal activity, some prostitution and other sexual activity in the area. These activities, which were viewed negatively by the other visitors, disappeared after the introduction of paid parking, likely due to a combination of camera supervision at the boom barriers and the actual cost of entering.

Due to the mentioned decrease in the number of visits, paid parking has, so far, failed to raise the predicted revenue. The costs of keeping the system running are more or less equal to the revenues raised. The experience from the introduction of paid parking in Twiske means that in other areas that option will be not be considered, or a much stronger case needs to be made that the benefits, particularly the revenues, outweigh the sizable disadvantages.

Cutting costs

Cutting costs has been a popular approach in recent years as the financial and economic crisis has put pressure on the finances of the participants. De facto cost-saving measures were taken for many years preceding the crisis because the available budget was insufficient to cover all maintenance needs. The age of the areas, which were completed 30 years ago, means that the low maintenance regime has led to visible deterioration of many of the elements within it, such as bridges, roads and toilets. Since the crisis many elements in bad shape have been removed or closed off entirely and the image of areas with a lower than customary level of maintenance has been institutionalized.

For the purpose of comparing the effects of the lower level of maintenance on the visitor survey we reviewed the data for 4 areas of around 30 years old, with a focus on water and water based recreation. The review shows that those areas in which the level of maintenance visibly decreased and the scope of attractions diminished due to age of the facilities show a continuing decrease in the yearly number of visits. Figure 1 shows the number of visits per year expressed as a percentage, using the number of visits in the first year as benchmark set to 100%.

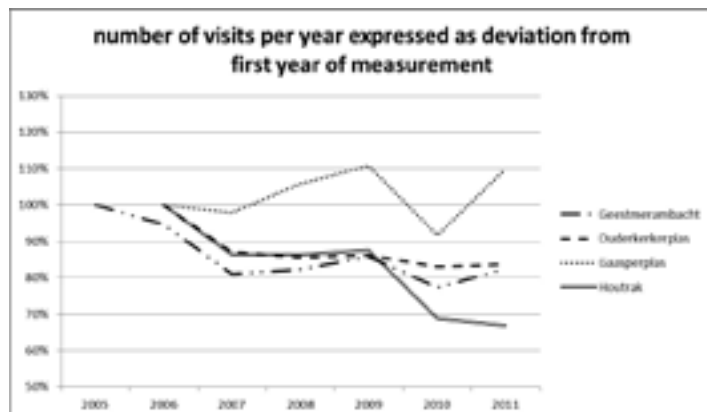


Figure 1. Number of visits per year.

The areas which escape this trend are those which offer a wider range of activities than those which fall under the traditional range of recreation (hiking, bicycling, sunbathing, swimming etc.), and continue to develop new offers. As visible in the figure, the number of visits to Gaasperplas increases against the trend when a new facility (indoor playground) was opened in 2008. Newer areas, created in the last decade, do not show a downward trend. In conclusion, cost saving measures that have visible consequences seem to correlate with a decrease in the number of visits unless new attractions are developed in parallel.

Gijbertse H., (2008) Recreatiecijfers bij de hand. Kenniscentrum recreatie, Den Haag
 Recreatie Noord Holland N.V. (RNH), (2010) Recreatieschap Spaarnwoude Recreatiemonitor 2009, Velsen-Zuid: RNH
 Recreatie Noord Holland N.V. (RNH), (2012) Recreatiemonitor Aantal Bezoeken Recreatieschap Het Twiske 2011, Velsen-Zuid: RNH