

CITY OF NEW YORK / PARKS & RECREATION

INNOVATIONS

Issue 2, January/February 2000
AN OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT PLANNING NEWSLETTER

EMERALD AWARDS FOR TECHNOLOGY

At the annual State of the Parks on Wednesday, January 19, Emerald Awards for the Most Creative Use of Technology were presented to the agency's Operations division and division of Operations & Management Planning (OMP). Operations received the award for using new technology to improve the agency's Sign Program, while OMP received the award for using new technology to make the Parks Inspection Program more efficient and effective. Both innovations, detailed below, demonstrate the importance of leveraging new technology to achieve innovation at Parks.

HAND-HELD COMPUTERS AND DIGITAL CAMERAS FOR PARKS INSPECTIONS

When the Parks Inspection Program began in 1985, the idea behind the program was as simple as it was revolutionary: send out trained inspectors to document and photograph unacceptable conditions in parks, and use those inspections to measure the performance of the agency and Parks personnel. Initially, however, the inspection process was not very efficient. All inspections were done on paper, and then manually entered into a database in the office. Photos were taken using Polaroid cameras and later affixed to backing paper. Labels for the photos were manually typed up. As a result, inspections were released only three times a year, and by the time they came out, many were too old to be useful.

In 1995, Operations & Management Planning introduced Fujitsu 1200 pen-based, hand-held computers to the inspection process. Hand-held computers enable inspectors to input their inspections directly into computers on-site, and simply upload their inspections into the main database when they return to the office. This vastly increased efficiency, and enabled OMP to cut the lag time from the beginning of a round of inspections to the release of the inspections by 80%, from three months to two weeks. The quicker turnaround time for an inspection has since been used by management at all levels of the agency to increase accountability for park conditions. This has made possible a dramatic increase in park ratings from 50% acceptable in 1995 to 87% acceptable in 1999.

In 1999, Operations & Management Planning did away with the old Polaroid cameras and began using Sony Mavica digital cameras. Now, inspectors can upload their photos in the office and print them out in color, four to a page, with comments from the database printed automatically below them. This has not only furthered efficiency, but also saved Parks thousands of dollars annually in Polaroid film.

Increased efficiency and cost savings are important. The bottom line, however, is that Parks has creatively used technology to improve park conditions.

The Fujitsu 1200 costs \$2400. The Sony Mavica costs \$300. Innovations pioneered by John Ifcher, Tom Reidy, and Joshua Hubbert. For information, call Josh (212) 360-8228.

TALK TO US!

We would like to hear about your innovations and receive your help in choosing a permanent name for our newsletter. Ideally, the name should be both parks related and refer to innovation. Contact Geoff Hash with your innovations or suggestions for a name at (212) 360- 8289 or via e-mail at bassclef@parklan.ci.nyc.ny.us.

SIGN MACHINE AND USE OF PLASTIC SIGNS

Under Commissioner Stern, signs with the Agency's 1-800 number and web site address have been posted in all of NYC's parks; "Keeper of the Park" signs have been posted identifying the Parks employee responsible for a park's upkeep; historic signs have been posted explaining a park's historical significance; and 33,333 tree labels that identify trees by their genus and species have been affixed to trees citywide. The cornerstone of the Commissioner's Sign Program has been the venerable Parks routed sign — a green sign with the name of a park carved into it (*photo above shows a sign routed for the State of the Parks ceremony*).

In May 1998, Parks procured a new Komo Machine sign router. This hi-tech computerized sign maker enabled the agency to route 400 signs a month, twice as many signs as in the past, at a cost of around \$26.50 per sign. Parks was paying an outside vendor \$50 per sign before the machine. However, while a sign could now be routed in 5 minutes, each sign still needed three coats of green paint, a process which lasted three days. In summer 1998, Operations began phasing in recyclable green-laminated plastic for use in signs. These new plastic signs are ready to be installed immediately after being routed — no painting needed! Routing exposes a layer of brightly colored plastic, resulting in borough-specific colored lettering: white in Manhattan, gold in Queens, orange in Brooklyn, cream (light green) in Staten Island, and silver in the Bronx. Plastic signs have five-year warranties and should not fade, bend, or delaminate. Use of plastic also saves trees, and when the plastic signs finally do need to be replaced, they can be recycled in the same bins as plastic bottles. Graffiti and stickers come right off of plastic signs using standard cleaning spray, and scratches may be removed using sandpaper. A heat gun can be applied to restore the original luster to a sign. Furthermore, the average cost of a plastic sign is \$18, which presents a great savings over signs purchased from vendors or wooden signs routed in-house.

A typical Parks routed sign is 2' by 2'. A new larger 4' by 2' version is ideal for large parks, long expanses, entrances, and hard to see locations.

Increased signage in parks has made the agency more accountable to the public and fostered identification with Parks. Innovative use of technology has made increased signage possible.

For more information, call Chief Keith Kerman or Dan Froehlich at (212) 360-8234.

GREENING INFIELDS IN THE BRONX

Bronx Operations has recently cut costs and improved service at some of its ballfields by converting infields from clay to grass. For years, the Bronx's ballfields have been made almost exclusively of clay, because clay is supposedly cheaper and easier to maintain than grass. Clay infields, however, have several drawbacks. First, they become easily eroded and rutted, which is hazardous and a maintenance nightmare. Second, the generous use of clay necessitated by clay infields has become an exorbitant expense, costing \$40,000 annually in the Bronx. Since infields planted with grass require clay only for the pitcher's mound and the baselines, a greened infield cuts a ballfield's annual maintenance cost including clay from \$390 to \$100, a \$290 savings. Moreover, grass infields are preferred by the public. They are more attractive, provide a more even playing surface, and are the standard in professional baseball.

The conversion of a clay infield to grass is usually done best as part of a complete rehabilitation of a field. A recent ballfield renovation and conversion to grass infield by Bronx Operations cost \$4220 for topsoil, sod, clay, sand, and seed.

In the Bronx, leagues have been given much of the responsibility for the upkeep of newly greened ballfields. In fact, Bronx Operations has made a point of choosing fields where users are willing to help maintain the ballfields after conversion. Leagues are responsible for watering the fields and, in some cases, cutting the grass. Bronx Operations reseeds, aerates, and refertilizes the fields as necessary. The Bronx currently has around thirty grass infields among its one hundred ballfields.

Innovation pioneered by Chief Dottie Lewandowski and Frank Collela in the Bronx. For more information, contact Ray Acosta at (718) 430-1803.

INTENSIVE TRAINING

The Parks Academy will launch its fourth annual Intensive Training Program this February. The first session will run from February 2 through March 17, and the second from March 21 through April 28. The following classes geared toward field and borough managers and supervisors will be offered:

- Inspection Program Large Parks Standards & Customer Service Standards – ½ day
- Everything You Wanted to Know About Discipline – ½ day
- Special Events Management – ½ day
- Hands-On Horticulture – full day
- DOT Drug Testing and Map Reading & Route Planning – ½ day
- Roadwork Safety Training – ½ day
- Oral Presentation – 2 days

For information, call Michael Crescenzo at (718) 760-6588.

WATERPROOFING BENCHES IN QUEENS

For about three years, Queens Operations has been applying Behr's Clear Waterproofing to unpainted wood bench slats at sites coming out of capital renovation. They have found that this product, which is meant to protect wood exposed to the elements from deterioration, also enables easy removal of graffiti with standard graffiti removers. As an added bonus, the waterproofing gives the benches a dark stain look that is quite attractive. On benches that have not been waterproofed, graffiti removers are ineffective. For years prior to this innovation, graffiti on benches in Queens has been removed by painting the entire bench green. Once painted, however, future graffiti must be removed by repainting the bench again and again. Eventually, the many layers of paint begin chipping and bench slats must be completely replaced.

Waterproofing benches prevents this destructive cycle from beginning. The waterproofing serves as a sacrificial coating on the outside of the wood: that is, when graffiti remover is applied, both graffiti and waterproofing are wiped away. The waterproofing need only be reapplied where the graffiti was removed. After waterproofing, benches should not be used for 48 hours in order to dry. For maximum effectiveness, benches should also receive a complete new coating every six months to a year.

Starting this spring, all wood benches at sites coming out of capital renovation will have two coats of this waterproofing. Five gallons of Behr's Clear Waterproofing will also be provided by the contractor as extra materials. Tests in Queens have shown that Behr's Clear Waterproofing (No. 92 Natural Seal Plus NWF, \$15.97/gallon at Home Depot) is more effective than similar products on the market.

Innovation pioneered by Eric Goetz and Larry Kalman. For more information, contact Deputy Chief Janice Melnick at (718) 520-5925.

CPF GRANT PROPOSALS

Do you have an innovation in need of funding? Try applying for a quarterly grant from the nonprofit City Parks Foundation (CPF). Grant proposals for the first quarter in 2000 are due February 15.

For information, contact your borough grant coordinator: Bronx: Adrian Sas, 718-430-4653; Brooklyn: Melissa Kornblau, 718-965-8912; Manhattan: Jane Rudolph, 212-408-0110; Queens: Michelle Frye, 718-520-5914; S.I.: Michael Molinari, 718-390-8021.

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-- Newsletter prepared by Geoffrey Hash--