



TESTIMONY OF DARLA CRAVOTTA
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SENATE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE HEARING ON OUTDOOR RECREATION

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2020

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address this committee on the impact of COVID-19 on outdoor recreation. Good afternoon to the members of the committee and to Senator Boscola and Williams for the invitation to provide testimony.

In March of this year, Allegheny County immediately began planning for the emergency response. As the government primarily responsible for emergency management, our many departments pivoted in the face of COVID-19 and began to look for ways to continue to provide essential services.

As March grew to April, park staff began working to cancel programming and close buildings for use. Cancelling scheduled parties, weddings and events was a challenging task, but people understood. Our nature centers were closed and our programming for children in schools was cancelled. Indoor activities were not allowed but as the weather changed, our parks remained opened.

Allegheny County owns and manages nine (9) regional parks with over 12,000 acres of land which are staffed by park rangers and park employees. In the early days of the pandemic, state orders and recommendations from our own Health Department resulted in buildings being shuttered. We also made the difficult decision to not open our four pools this season, but our parks never closed. Our Health Director and County Executive encouraged outdoor recreation as the open spaces in our parks provided the perfect place for physically distant, but socially engaged activities. Whether walking along the lake at North Park, fishing at Deer Lakes, birdwatching in Harrison, visiting the buffalo in South Park, or running trails within any of the parks, we saw a significant increase in many park activities.

In fact, every park experienced an increase in users. Our rangers took to the streets in our parks in vehicles and interacted more with park users reminding them of the need to physically distance, increasing the awareness of COVID-19 mitigation measures, even while outside. Rangers could be found doing programming on Facebook Live, Zoom and on the Allegheny County YouTube channel. The Parks-in-Schools Program continued virtually through social media.

Our parks staff imagined programming in new ways, but also continued programs where participants were already physically distant such as yoga in the park, or mountain bike classes. Drive-in Movies are being offered weekly and our summer music series continued as well, although in a different format – as

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we began showcasing the featured artists in a one-hour television show on the CW. Our two golf courses at North and South Park are operating and we continue to see more people coming out, even though there are new rules and protocols in place.

During all of this, Allegheny County also took important measures to ensure the safety of park users. Signage in all our parks have been up since April that reminds people to wear a mask and stay physically distant.

We have provided Bactronix cleaning of the buildings, golf carts and materials, and shelters, and continue to use our park rangers and employees to remind visitors of mitigation measures.

As we plan, we know outdoor recreation will continue to increase and safety measures will be of the utmost importance. Allegheny County staff are discussing the winter season right now and what necessary steps will need to be taken to safely open our two outdoor ice rinks in North and South parks and the ski slopes and tubing area in Boyce Park. As we look to the spring, ongoing preparations include installation of UV Light disinfecting systems in our spray parks, flush toilet facilities with sinks in each of the parks, and continued development of outdoor attractions that provide experiences in our parks safely.

The needs continue to be great. Funding specifically for safety measures specific to parks – at the state, county and municipal level is critical. The ability to provide safe, physically distant programming outdoors and using web-based programming is important. With that, access to affordable broadband internet and the equipment necessary to engage is a responsibility we all carry, especially as programming can be important for physical and mental health.

We remain committed to meeting the recreational needs of our communities in a variety of ways and will continue to provide the services and amenities that they rely on to the best of our abilities.

Again, I thank the Policy Committee for this opportunity to share our perspective and I welcome future opportunities to ensure that our parks remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic and outdoor recreation remains a priority for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.