



Riverlife Testimony for 9/15/20

PA Senate Policy Hearing on Recreation

Convened by Senators Boscola and Williams

Good morning, everyone. I am Matthew Galluzzo, president and CEO of Riverlife. Our organization works to create, activate, and celebrate Pittsburgh's riverfronts, connecting people through exceptional places and experiences. Since 1999, Riverlife has spearheaded the development of a 15-mile system of riverfront parks, trails, and open spaces in the heart of Pittsburgh. Our organization has facilitated \$132 Million in infrastructure development and leveraged \$4.2 Billion in investment along those rivers. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about public open space, and the importance of adapting and seizing opportunity during the age of COVID-19.

Earlier this summer, The New York Times explored a fascinating chapter in American history. In 1907, at the height of the tuberculosis epidemic in this country, doctors and educators tasked with preventing the spread of the disease in schoolchildren experimented by opening wide schools' classroom windows, or moving classes outdoors altogether. They believed, as we increasingly know today with COVID-19 and CDC data, that viral transmission would be drastically reduced in fresh air environments. The 1907 experiment started in New England--in the middle of a brutal winter--and quickly spread across the country, with schools turning to rooftops and parks for outdoor meeting space. While it may be hard to imagine, children and teachers bundled up against the elements and conducted most of their learning activities outdoors, and the transmission rate of the disease plummeted in those schools.

While that anecdote may give us a bit of a shiver, we should also find that adaptation both inspiring and echoed in our response to COVID-19. This spring and summer, people around the world turned to outdoor spaces to meet their needs--not just for outdoor recreation, but for daily activities like dining, gathering, working, and learning. You will hear the statistics today from our colleagues at DCNR and other organizations. The reality of our current situation is clear: public outdoor spaces are essential during a time of pandemic, no matter where you live. We must think about these spaces in a different way--how and when they might be utilized--and what we need to do collectively to support those uses.

As we face the reality of living in a world where COVID-19 or other infectious diseases could be with us through several seasonal cycles, we must do everything we can to cleverly adapt outdoor spaces to accommodate new users and uses. Flexibility and rapid deployment will be key to implementing changes like temporary street closures, pop-ups and tenting, movable amenities, and signage in response to the changing conditions of a pandemic. As an example--and in response to COVID--Riverlife led an effort with Pittsburgh's Office of Public Art to swiftly design artist-created hand-washing stations with public health information kiosks at key locations along the riverfronts, which will be installed in the coming weeks. Resources are needed to quickly and efficiently manage crowds and to maintain these spaces in the face of increased usage.

And, heavy riverfront utilization during COVID has brought a key issue to the forefront: we need more open space. Pennsylvania is uniquely positioned to meet this challenge. One of our commonwealth's many assets is the number of waterfront towns and cities throughout the state. Of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania, 64 have significant creeks, rivers or lakes. As we have learned from witnessing people flock to Pittsburgh's riverfronts during the past six months, waterfronts are the flexible spaces in cities and towns for these activities when office workers, residents, and visitors need access to fresh air and physical distance.

Relatedly, and perhaps, most importantly, in creating these spaces we must capture the energy of this moment to elevate social equity. It is an issue that is rightfully staring us in the face at every turn. At Riverlife we center our work on the idea that the riverfronts belong to everyone--that we all connect physically and emotionally to these spaces. Our work must carry a cross-generational equity lens. The seeds we plant today may not yield fruit until years into the future. And, that is ok--and essential--for regional transformation. There are gaps in Pittsburgh's riverfront system, just as there are gaps in our statewide network of parks, trails, and outdoor public open spaces. Many of those gaps track with areas that have experienced significant disinvestment for generations. As we talk today about COVID and the need for safe outdoor space, if the benefits of those spaces do not accrue to everyone--because the spaces cannot reasonably be accessed or they do not exist--then it is incumbent upon us to elevate those needs and work in earnest to ameliorate those conditions. While hyperbolic, this is a crisis that we should not let go to waste. We need

to be more aggressive now--aligning resources in order to build safe and abundant outdoor open spaces that belong to everyone.

A terrific place for the legislature to start is by retaining and expanding the PA Waterfront Development Tax Credit as a tool to help create public open space projects. The \$1.5M WDTC, created with bipartisan support in 2016 and supported by Riverlife and waterfront development organizations across Pennsylvania, encourages private investment in approved waterfront improvement projects that benefit the public. The opportunities are abundant statewide.

Earlier this year Riverlife was certified by the PA Department of Community and Economic Development as a Waterfront Development Organization. We, along with WDOs across the commonwealth, are primed to utilize this tool to create those signature spaces. Those are spaces that not only provide much-needed places for recreation like cycling, kayaking, running, and boating, but also essential everyday activities like meetings and lunch breaks for workers, getting fresh air and a chance to stretch your legs for those confined to cramped living quarters, and yes, even potentially participating in classes in outdoor schools. We look forward to partnering with the Commonwealth in moving key projects forward and expanding the program's reach and effectiveness.

We are living in unprecedented times, and unprecedented times call for creativity and action (and maybe some extra-heavy sweaters). Let us continue our response to the moment, and may we maximize and grow the abundant outdoor open spaces along our Pennsylvania waterfronts--so that they may be enjoyed by everyone year-round.

Thank you for your time.