“Who gets what?” or in normative terms, “Who ought to get what?” is the central concern of political debate and recreation and park administrators are increasingly being required to directly address it. This article identifies eight different answers to this question in the form of a taxonomy of equity models, each of which is likely to be considered by some to be a fair, just and appropriate basis for equitably allocating recreation and park resources. The article then illustrates how these eight equity models relate to development of a strategic policy used to guide the allocation of operational and capital resources that is currently being implemented in Austin, Texas.

Urban leisure service providers are increasingly being challenged to make resource allocations that are demonstrably equitable. They are being required to define what constitutes a “fair” or equitable distribution of park and recreation resources. Five factors have contributed to the growth in awareness of equity’s central role in park and recreation administration.

First, over the past decade many cities have experienced fiscal retrenchment which has resulted in an increased scrutiny of service allocation decisions. As a result, efficiency, effectiveness and equity are now pre-eminent concerns of governmental organizations.

Second, a plethora of citizen action groups are now willing and mobilized to fight for maintenance of quality of life services such as recreation and parks. When resources are reduced or reallocated, these groups are increasingly likely to protest reallocations they feel are detrimental to their lifestyle in the community.

Third, the means by which service benefits are measured have improved markedly in the past decade and such measures are now increasingly used as evaluation tools by government.

Fourth, increasing numbers of equity models are currently viewed as appropriate for the public sector. For example, reliance upon fees and charges, joint ventures, innovative capital financing mechanisms and the co-production of service has increased greatly. These techniques have supplemented the previous almost exclusive reliance on general-fund tax support for public recreation and park services.

Fifth, the threat of disaffected groups seeking legal redress through the courts has heightened awareness among administrators of the need to provide equitable levels of service delivery.

Perceptions of Equitable Service Allocation

Perception of what constitutes equitable or fair recreation and park service delivery is derived from two highly individualistic factors. The first is an individual’s personal values system. For example, some feel strongly that it is government’s responsibility to provide a broad array of recreational services for all citizens, while others believe such government involvement curtails personal initiative and acceptance of personal responsibility, and inhibits the efforts of private organizations in these areas. The second factor is perception of who are the winners and who are the losers in urban recreation and park allocation decisions. Residents’ evaluation of an agency’s fairness depends upon the interaction of their personal value structures and their perceptions of an agency’s performance relative to those structures.

Residents’ assessments of service allocation patterns are not always accurate. Often they do not know either who receives the most or least recreation and park services, or how a given service is funded. Two court cases relevant to public leisure service delivery (Burner versus Washington, D.C. and Midwest Community Coalition versus Chicago Park District) are illustrative of such inaccurate assessments. In both of these cases, court action was initiated because minority residents of low income areas felt they were receiving less than their fair share of recreation and park services. In each case, follow-up investigation showed that at least as many resources (inputs) were expended in the minority neighborhoods as were expended in upper income areas.

The value structures of residents may not be well developed
which compounds the difficulty of getting constituents to articulate equity preferences. Regrettably, many individuals “do not know” or “do not care” about local issues. Additionally, these individuals’ value structures may change over time, thus altering their evaluation of the fairness of a service’s distribution. Reviewing new and accurate information may also serve to change an individual’s value system. Although equity preferences may be viewed as unstable among the general citizenry, nevertheless these opinions are the source that explains a wide range of behavior including levels of citizen activism, voting patterns, frequency of contacts with service providers and levels of facility/program use.

Definitions of Equity

The answer to the question “what is fair” inevitably will be determined by who is asked. Service allocation preferences are likely to vary in a heterogeneous urban setting. Figure 1 proposes a taxonomy of eight equity models based upon four fundamental definitions of equity: compensation, equality, demand and market equity. The challenge facing managers, elected officials and residents in an urban area is to select the most appropriate model for directing the allocation of resources for a variety of publicly provided leisure services.

Compensatory equity involves allocating services so that economically disadvantaged groups, individuals or areas receive extra increments of resources. The operational objective of this model is to increase the compensatory or redistributive role of public leisure services in order that opportunities for the economically disadvantaged may be improved.

The challenge with this model is to delineate who is disadvantaged. A number of authors have recognized need as a legitimate equity model but have not restricted it to the economically disadvantaged. Lineberry (1960:188) points out, “The concept of ‘need’ is a slippery one that, like beauty, tends to exist in the eyes of the beholder. All political issues are rhetorically wrapped in the raiment of ‘need’, which typically correlates with the advocate’s self-interest.” Without a qualifying economic criterion, need could be interpreted in a variety of contradictory ways.

Equality entails allocating resources so either all residents receive equal input allocations for leisure services or all residents receive equal benefits from leisure services, regardless of need, the amount of taxes contributed or the price paid (Figure 1).

Because much leisure participation is crucially dependent upon the availability of a facility or service, implementing the equality of inputs model would mean allocating most resources to those neighborhoods which had fewest existing recreational opportunities. Operational difficulties would include determining whether or not residential, private and/or commercial leisure opportunities should be considered in evaluating which areas were spatially disadvantaged.

However, equality of inputs has little to do with equity if it simply enables people with more income and better education to win out over the less fortunate, even when the allocation of resources itself is equal. The equal
benefits alternative is a response to these limitations recognizing that equal resource inputs may not be directly related to equal outputs. The pragmatic concern in adopting an equal benefits approach is the difficulty of measuring recreation benefits. Evaluating the relative merits of facilities and services is a challenging research task.

*Demand* as an equity model allocates resources on the basis of demonstrated use (consumption) or vociferous advocacy. Because of their administrative convenience and apparent fairness, the demand equity models have been widely adopted. These two manifestations of demand may be conceptualized as being economic and political models (Figure 1).

Economic demand is manifested through demonstrated use. If this allocation approach is adopted, the public by their use of a service will determine where agency resources will be expended. The rational appeal of this "Adam Smith" model is that the maximum number of citizens are likely to benefit if it is adopted.

Political demand is operationally sought through the relative intensity of vociferous advocacy and frequency of citizen contacts. The neighborhood organization movement and the perceived desirability of citizen participation in public decision-making may have led to the belief that responsiveness to requests and complaints demonstrates accountability to constituents and is an appropriate basis for decision-making.

*Market equity* entails allocating services to groups or areas in proportion to the level of resources they contribute to fund those services. This approach draws from the prevalent allocation model used in the commercial sector, in that it is the market, not the agency, that determines the pattern of service distribution. Market equity may be operationalized in three different ways (Figure 1).

First, resources may be allocated on the basis of the amount of taxes paid. This would reverse prevailing income redistribution approaches through which it is intended that higher income groups help pay for basic services that lower income groups may not otherwise be able to afford. Wicks and Crompton (1988) found this option to be strongly disfavored by residents in Austin, Texas.

In response to demands to cut local taxes, many governments have imposed or substantially raised direct prices for a variety of leisure services. This second operationalization of market equity enhances the efficiency of resource allocation. Residents neither receive leisure services they do not want nor are they required to pay through the tax system for what other residents use.

The third operationalization of market equity is a least-cost approach. This model seeks to deliver a leisure service at the lowest cost, rationalizing that this is the most equitable use of tax dollars since it enables the greatest level of a service to be offered for the least amount of money. It responds to market forces by seeking out sites where the costs of delivering leisure services is lowest.

**A Model of Equity Implementation**

Open discussion of the "winners and losers" of local public policy-making is likely to be controversial and to provoke disagreements. Nevertheless, if an agency's objectives are to be sensitive to the public's will, the resource allocation issue should be openly addressed. It has been stated that:

*Allocation issues should be confronted, since making no choice or leaving things as they are amounts to tacit acceptance of the prevailing equity model. In the context of marketing government and social services, the equity issue is pervasive. It intrudes into every marketing mix decision, and it is an important ingredient in differentiating marketing in the public and private sectors.* (Crompton and Lamb, 1986, p. 173)

Decisions regarding program development or elimination, pricing and regulatory concerns can only be rationally and justifiably made if they are guided by a strategic policy plan that incorporates equity concepts. In the discussion that follows a five-stage policy implementation model to guide the allocation of resources is proposed, together with suggestions for managing differing
equity preferences (Figure 2). Examples are provided from the experiences of park and recreation administrators in Austin, Texas.

Stage 1. Conceptually Develop Equitable Service Categories

The first step is to conceptually develop service allocation categories to which each recreation and park service can be subsequently assigned. Austin's development of these service categories was based upon a review of the service delivery literature, survey data pertaining to residents' equity preferences and the professional judgments of agency personnel.

In Austin three categories were employed to classify services. The first category was the generic services. This category includes those services that are considered basic to the park and recreation needs of the community and they are not expected to recover any proportion of the costs incurred. Services that fall into this class are allocated uniformly and follow the equality equity model.

The second service category was for enhanced services which defines those programs or facilities that exceed the generic level in quality or quantity. Deviation above the generic standard is the important criterion for an enhanced service. For example, additional amounts of a basic service or any special amenities are considered enhanced. These services are selectively allocated only when a special need is shown to be present. The equity models of political demand, economic demand and compensation may apply to this category.

Enterprise services comprised the third category. These are defined as those services which far exceed the minimum standard and that may be provided by other segments of the leisure service delivery system. The objectives of enterprise services are to provide a recreation service but at the same time to recover a high proportion of the costs incurred. The market equity model is the dominant guideline for resource allocations in this category.

Stage 2. Determine Cost of Services

A central element in the definition of the three service categories described above is the degree to which services in each category are to be subsidized or, conversely, the price which is to be charged. The subsidy/price issue and ultimately the equity of service allocation cannot be rationally addressed without a knowledge of each service's costs. For example, a decision that an enterprise service should generate 100 percent of its costs, or that an enhanced service should not receive a subsidy greater than 50 percent, requires that service costs be determined.

Figure 3 shows the conceptual relationship between the eight equity models in the taxonomy described in Figure 1 and the service classification categories used in Austin. The equity models suggested for those services described as generic are equality of inputs and equality of outputs. Because the objectives of these equity models are to provide a minimum level or standard of service for all city residents, the primary source of funding is the general fund with minimal reliance upon fees or other market equity revenue sources.
Those services assigned as enhanced may reflect one of three equity options; compensation, economic demand (use) and political demand (advocacy). The redistributive nature of compensatory equity requires that it be funded predominantly through general tax revenues. However, although the source of revenue is the same as that used in the two models of equality, the objective of the compensatory model is not to maintain equal standards of service but rather to provide an extra measure of that service to those who are economically disadvantaged. Sources of revenues for the demand models are likely to vary widely depending on the relative strength of the actors involved in the decision-making process.

For example, those strongly advocating development of a favored service may be expected to lobby for the greatest public subsidy of that program. Although some form of price structure is likely to be imposed, the scenario of relying upon public debate to determine the acceptable price/subsidy ratio may be repeated for each service and by each interest group. The uncertainty associated with the decision-making process is reflected in the “negotiable” portion of these equity models shown in Figure 3.

Enterprise services may be distinguished from generic or enhanced services in that the sources of revenue are proportionately linked with levels of consumption. The equity model calling for allocation based strictly upon the least cost alternative relies upon third party inputs. Rather than allocating services to those paying the most fees or the greatest taxes, the low cost option requires that the greatest level of services should be allocated to those areas in which joint ventures are possible or where residents are willing to co-produce the service through voluntary help. The distinctive criterion of this service classification is the direct linkage between the means of providing inputs to government (co-production, revenue from prices, taxes) and the market-oriented consumption of service benefits.

Stage 3. Categorize Service Offerings

Assigning services to the three categories—generic, enhanced or enterprise—is a critical step in the implementation process. To illustrate, assume that recreation centers were classified as enterprise services embracing the market equity model of revenue support from prices. This would require that the program offerings cover expenses, thus leaving only two options to resolve a discrepancy between revenue and expenditures—raising prices and/or reducing services. However, political pressures could force a different equity model to be used to direct allocation of that service and thus move recreation centers from the enterprise to the enhanced or even the generic category.

Stage 4. Policy Review Process

Political intervention is expected and may be viewed as an important part of the checks and balances system. Adjustments made to agency recommendations by elected officials, courts or other sources of intervention are viewed as temporal shifts in
the preferred equity preference. There is likely to be significant political wrangling over these issues until the "ground-rules" are established. Special interests will vigorously defend their position regarding favorite service offerings.

The first time through the process of determining the prevailing equity model by assigning services to allocation categories is likely to generate controversy because agency personnel will be dealing with irate residents and threatened elected officials. Only sound and persuasive justification for the requested policy changes will alter the value system of opponents, and accurate cost accounting data are essential for supporting these positions and negating false accusations.

Stage 5. Implement Policy and Evaluate

In this phase of the model, policy changes for service allocation and user pricing are put into effect. Resident user and non-user attitudes to the new policy(s) are monitored and, where appropriate, cost accounting is used to track the economic effect of the new policy. Should strong public sentiment emerge or participation rates change significantly, the policy may then be revised accordingly.

Implications

Although the process of including equity considerations in public sector decision-making appears fraught with opportunities for political infighting and public dissent, there are multiple benefits to the agency. For example, following the model described above may help provide a rationale for a meaningful pricing policy and a capital improvements program that reflects the long range needs of the city.

Implementing the proposed model provides a rare opportunity to develop a broad-based policy that includes all of an agency's service offerings. Formulating service allocation policy on an ad hoc basis does not permit public decision-makers to adequately consider overall service allocation patterns, unique preferences of resident groups, or historical discrepancies in service distribution patterns. The negative effects of ad hoc decision-making may be lessened and the influence of special interests diminished when equity-based strategic policies are adopted.

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