EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Identifying and securing reliable funding has long been cited as a major challenge to growth by recreation and leisure professionals (Crompton, 1999; Walls, 2009). Whereas municipal park and recreation agencies have traditionally relied on tax-supported revenues, fiscal conservatism and recent economic conditions have necessitated entrepreneurial park funding strategies such as corporate sponsorship (Mowen, Kyle, Borrie, & Graefe, 2006; Walls, 2009). However, a greater understanding of constituent perspectives is needed for park and recreation agencies to effectively pursue, design, and manage sponsorships. This study seeks to add to the understanding of how park constituents perceive corporate sponsorship in public parks. Specifically, this study assesses how park constituents personally perceived advantages and disadvantages of corporate sponsorship of a public park agency. A qualitative method was utilized in order to allow constituents a chance to express their opinions in their own words. Data were collected through three open-ended questions attached to a larger online survey of park users about corporate sponsorship activities by the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA). Data were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Participants identified both potential positive and negative outcomes of corporate sponsorship activity, as well as reasons for support or nonsupport. Monetary benefits, and the resulting service, facility, community, and economic benefits were identified as positives. Negatives involved a perceived loss of public ownership, increased commercialization, poor sponsor/agency fit, and negative impacts on the park setting and experience. Respondents also provided advice for pursuing sponsorships, including pursuing other options first, creating a well-defined set of limits to sponsorship activity, emphasizing public benefits, and restricting where sponsorship activity could occur. Results from this study reinforce the notion that corporate sponsorship is a complex and potentially divisive issue. Sponsorship benefits often come with strings attached, and for many respondents the negative impact of sponsorship on these public spaces outweighed the potential positives. Park and recreation agencies wishing to
pursue corporate sponsorship should tread carefully when initiating or expanding
sponsorship programs. Soliciting public opinion, emphasizing public benefits
to sponsorship, proceeding with caution, and establishing a set of guidelines is
recommended. Certain areas within and services of the agency may be more
suitable to sponsorship than others, and the location and context of the situation
should be considered.

**KEYWORDS:** Corporate sponsorship, park finance, funding, public opinion,
qualitative methods

**AUTHORS:** Nicholas A. Pitas is with the Recreation, Park and Tourism
Management Department at The Pennsylvania State University, nap5045@psu.
edu. Andrew J. Mowen is with the Recreation, Park and Tourism Management
Department at The Pennsylvania State University. Toni Liechty is with the
Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at The University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign. Nate Trauntvein is with Recreation Management and Policy
Department at the University of New Hampshire.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT:** The authors wish to thank Nick Duray of the Fairfax
County Park Authority for his contributions to this research.

Securing adequate and reliable funding has long been cited as a major challenge to
growth by park and recreation professionals (Crompton, 1999; Walls, 2009). Municipal
park and recreation services have traditionally been funded predominantly by tax-based
general funds, with a smaller proportion of operating costs coming from sources such as
user fees and other revenue streams. Recreation and leisure boomed in the post-war years
of the 1940s, attributable to the newfound wealth of the era (Runte, 1997). Beginning in
the 1970s, however, attitudes toward government funding of parks and recreation began
to shift toward fiscal conservatism and support of small government. Due to a number
of phenomena, park and recreation agencies have experienced diminished funding from
tax-based revenue streams in recent years (Crompton & Kaczynski, 2003; Walls, 2009).
Although factors such as globalization and technological advances may have been to
blame for falling American wages and persistent unemployment, the government received
the brunt of the public’s ire, and as a result, expenditure of scarce tax dollars has come
under increasing scrutiny (More, 2005).

The neo-conservative philosophy born out of this time period argues that publicly
funded services stand in the way of the more efficient operations promised by a free-
market economy (Nozick, 1974). To this day, fiscal conservatism remains as a dominant
political paradigm with respect to support/operation of public assets. In response to
this world view, public sector park and recreation agencies have become increasingly
entrepreneurial in their funding strategies (Mowen, Kyle, Borrie, & Graefe, 2006; Walls,
2009). The sub-prime mortgage crisis led to an increase in the number of foreclosed and
abandoned properties nationwide (Barris, 2008), which have been demonstrated to reduce
the available tax revenue for public services (Immergluck & Smith, 2006). The increasing
scarcity of tax revenues stimulated fierce competition for remaining public tax dollars and
reinvigorated interest in enterprise revenue generation strategies (Kerstetter et al., 2010;
Walls, 2009).

Privatization and public-private partnerships have emerged as promising mechanisms
to enhance funding levels and/or to reduce service costs. Crompton (1998) argues that
four main forces are behind a movement toward privatization within park and recreation
agencies: 1) a shortage of tax-based funds, 2) it is an attractive option for park and
recreation agencies because of the high cost and bureaucratic red-tape of direct service
3

delivery, 3) the inherent inefficiencies of monopolies in the delivery of services, and 4) a recognition that purchasing services based on constituent demands may be superior to providing those same services in-house. Even prior to the financial crisis, an increasing number of public recreation agencies were exploring privatization of some or all of their operations (Van Slyke & Hammonds, 2003).

One form of privatization, corporate sponsorship, has emerged as a potentially viable strategy for park and recreation agencies looking to address budgetary shortfalls (Weiler, Moore, & Moyle, 2013). Corporate sponsorship is defined as “a cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically in sports, arts, entertainment or causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property” (International Events Group, 2000). Sponsorship differs from philanthropy and donations in that corporate sponsors expect some marketable return on their investment based on the sponsorship fees paid to public entities. Although sporting venues and special events have traditionally been the most popular context for corporate sponsorships, such partnerships are becoming increasingly commonplace among public park and recreation agencies (Baker, 2011; Cascante & Turney, 2014; Demas, Agnew, & Jinshi, 2015).

One consideration for park and recreation agencies discussing privatization-related practices such as corporate sponsorship is the issue of public opinion and their support for these types of partnerships (International Events Group, 2003; Mowen & Everett, 2000). Past research suggests that when public agencies such as parks and recreation pursue sponsorships, they may gain short-term revenues, yet sometimes these may come at the expense of long-term public support (Glover, 1999; McCarville, 1995; Mowen & Havitz, 2002). Corporate sponsorship of public parks can be controversial and can provoke strong opinions among users and nonusers alike (Mowen & Graefe, 2002; Mowen & Havitz, 2002). However, when compared to full-scale privatization (e.g., divestiture of assets and services to private companies), more limited corporate sponsorship activities and agreements may be more acceptable to members of the public and to recreation user groups (Liechty & Genoe, 2015). For example, a 2002 survey of residents of King County, Washington, found that public sentiment towards limited commercialization was positive. Seventy percent of respondents were supportive of corporate sponsorships, selling ad space, and private contracting of park services. Sixty-five percent, however, were opposed to the outright sale of parks (Evans/McDonough Inc., 2002).

Other studies have also highlighted the contextual and complex nature of corporate sponsorship in the minds of the public, both park-users and nonusers. For example, some research suggests that the public may view certain areas within park and recreation agencies as being more suited to corporate sponsorship than others. In their survey of residents of Idaho and New Hampshire, Samnaliev, More, and Stevens (2006) found that corporate sponsorships were supported by a majority of respondents at educational facilities and visitor centers; while corporate sponsorships at other areas such as trails and scenic overlooks faced opposition from a majority of respondents. In light of these findings, the authors suggest that corporate sponsorships be considered carefully, and that administrators be aware of shifting public opinion over time.

Although public opinion toward corporate sponsorships can vary considerably from one context to another, there may be characteristics of the citizen-agency relationship that are significant to the perception and acceptance of corporate sponsorship. Trust and commitment, in particular, have been identified as having an impact on citizen support for park funding and cost saving strategies (Winter, Palucki, & Burkhardt, 1999). For example, individuals who are committed to and have a trusting relationship with a park and recreation agency are less likely to support the use of privatization strategies (Mowen et al., 2006). Despite this earlier research, the relationship among trust, commitment and support of specific funding such as corporate sponsorships remain inconclusive. Furthermore, research is needed to identify and better understand what other elements may influence public perceptions of sponsorship.
Study Purpose

Although there are a number of empirical studies examining support for privatization, and numerous experts have weighed in on the merits and risks of corporate sponsorship, few studies have examined constituent views regarding this type of public-private partnership with respect to its advantages and disadvantages. The current study seeks to add to the understanding of how members of the public perceive corporate sponsorship in public spaces. Specifically, this study assesses how park constituents personally perceive advantages and disadvantages of corporate sponsorship of a public park agency. To accomplish this objective, this study applies a qualitative, inductive method similar to that of Kerstetter and colleagues (2010) in their study of park privatization perceptions among park users. Qualitative methods allowed participants to address and voice their perspectives on issues they perceived to be important without being limited to predetermined response options. As alternative sources of revenue continue to be considered, park managers who understand contextualized public perspectives regarding sponsorship advantages and disadvantages, as well as their rationale and their preferred implementation strategies, may be better positioned to design sponsorship programs that are sustainable and enjoy broad based constituent support (Mowen et al., 2006).

Method

Study Setting

In 2012, the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) cooperated with a major state university in the northeastern United States to study public attitudes and preferences for corporate sponsorship of this agency and its programs/facilities. Located within the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, FCPA operates 423 parks encompassing 23,000 acres. Facilities include nature centers, historic sites, trails, athletic complexes, recreation centers, and golf courses. Community recreation programming is provided, including but not limited to: competitive sports, wellness activities, craft workshops, aquatic programs, summer camps, musical festivals, golf, and nature education. Like many municipal and county park agencies, FCPA uses a variety of funding sources to support its operation: property taxes, user fees, foundation support, grants, sales/rental revenue, and general obligation bonds. Corporate sponsorship has also been used by FCPA, but sponsorship activity/agreements have been limited to event sponsorship of their summer concert/performance series (i.e., 10 events including 200 performances).

Data Collection

The Park Authority sought to assess, through an online survey, constituent opinions regarding corporate sponsorship of FCPA programs and facilities. FCPA wished to assess which types of sponsorship activities and conditions would be perceived as most or least desirable by their constituents and why. The study sample was drawn from the Parktakes subscriber database in 2012. Parktakes is the official magazine and program guide of the FCPA. Approximately 165,000 households subscribe to the publication, with 82,000 reachable by email.

The survey was distributed to a random sample of Parktakes subscribers (n=8,000). Reminder e-mails with a link to the questionnaire were sent 7 and 14 days after the initial mailing. Of those individuals invited to take part in the survey, 1,161 usable surveys were returned, for a 15% response rate. Nearly 79% of respondents were female, 80% were white (non-Hispanic), 83% had household incomes $75,000 or above, 43% had graduated from college, and 45% had completed graduate school. Respondent characteristics were generally consistent with the Parktakes primary subscriber base (e.g., predominately female, white, high income) and, with the exception of gender, of the Fairfax County adult population. We were unable to do nonresponse checks due to lack of private contact information (e.g., telephone numbers); however, this limitation is mitigated by the fact that qualitative research is inherently not intended to be representative of the population demographics.
The survey included an extensive battery of quantitative items, but for the purpose of the present study, we focused on respondents’ open-ended comments/perspectives regarding sponsorship. Specifically, data included responses to three open-ended questions, which were part of the larger survey. These questions asked respondents to express their opinions and viewpoints as to the potential advantages and disadvantages of sponsorship. Specifically, respondents were asked: 1) In your own words, what do you feel are the potential advantages of corporate sponsorship at FCPA facilities or programs?; 2) In your own words, what do you feel are the potential disadvantages of corporate sponsorship at FCPA facilities or programs?, and 3) What additional comments or opinions do you have (if any) about the corporate sponsorship of park and recreation agencies in general or of the Fairfax County Park Authority in particular?

Analysis

Data from open-ended questions were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). First, the primary investigator and another member of the research team individually open coded 100 responses to each of the three questions (positives, negatives, open-ended). Codes were generated from the responses of the participants, and represented the exact wording and phrases used whenever possible (Babbie, 2007). Another member of the research team then reviewed that effort and compared the results. From this an initial common codebook was generated collaboratively by three members of the research team, which was then used by the primary investigator to code the remaining responses. Next, we used axial coding to group the codes into categories (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the open and axial coding, researchers constantly compared codes and categories to each other and back to the original data to refine the dimensions of codes, the diversity within codes, and the relationships among codes. The final codebook that emerged was evaluated by the second member of the research team, who used it to independently code a selection of responses. Inter-rater reliability was deemed acceptable after the initial coding of the first 100 responses to each question, as well as during the evaluation of the final codebook (80% agreement or greater; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, trustworthiness was further increased by regular debriefing throughout the analysis process.

Results

Likely because of the specific questions asked, respondents generally provided three categories of data: 1) potential benefits of corporate sponsorship, 2) potential drawbacks of corporate sponsorship, and 3) opinions on how they thought FCPA should move forward in regard to corporate sponsorships. In our data analysis process, we did not restrict coding of responses to within the three questions (e.g., participants often discussed the benefits or drawbacks in response to the third question probing for additional opinions and perspectives). The key themes identified through our analyses, however, naturally fell into these three categories, so we will present the findings in this order in the section below.

Potential Positives

Themes in this category related to the potential positives that respondents identified in the corporate sponsorship model. Participants’ perspectives on specific types of benefits fell into four distinct themes: monetary benefits, service benefits, business/consumer benefits, and community benefits. Furthermore, participants discussed their reasons for supporting corporate sponsorship.

Monetary benefits. Monetary benefits were commonly mentioned as a potential positive. Respondents identified a variety of specific monetary benefits they perceived would come from corporate sponsorship, as well as often simply responding to question one with the word “money.” Respondents identified money as a necessity for the FCPA to carry out its mission, and continue to provide services. Money from sponsorships would provide “additional funding for FCPA facilities or programs.” Participants also identified specific benefits that might result from additional funding. Increased financial security during uncertain economic times was highlighted by a number of respondents, who said
that additional money would allow for “continued services and programs during difficult economic times and budget cuts.” Respondents also commonly cited additional funding as a way to improve the parks/facilities and provide access for nontraditional users, saying that “additional funding could improve the parks and reduce usage fees,” and that it would provide “additional money to supplement programs and aid the community that cannot afford regular prices.”

Service benefits. Building on the monetary benefits, participants specifically highlighted benefits of corporate sponsorship for park facilities and programs, and for a number of specific groups and staffing considerations. Respondents felt that the increased revenue from corporate sponsorships would lead to more facilities, as well as improved maintenance of existing facilities. The expansion and improvement of services and programs was another perceived benefit. As one respondent said, sponsorship could lead to increased “maintenance and upgrade of facilities and purchase of new equipment or expansion of services.” Participants specifically felt that improved access and services could be targeted for marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, low-income families, senior citizens, and children. Many respondents perceived that sponsorships would make “programs and facilities accessible to all residents of [Fairfax] county, regardless of income,” make “for a better experience for families and kids,” strengthen “programs for handicapped and disadvantaged persons,” and provide “reduced rates for retired/older residents, especially those on fixed incomes.” Sponsorships would also allow parks to keep “their employees on the payroll,” and that sponsors could “provide volunteers for events.”

Business/consumer benefits. In addition to direct benefits of sponsorship for the agency, participants identified benefits to the local business community, as well as consumers, from corporate sponsorships. For individuals, consumer benefits involved additional information about businesses from the community that share common values with parks and recreation. For example, respondents felt that corporate sponsorships could provide “Exposure to some worthwhile companies, [and] coupons for discounts.” Some participants felt that displays by sponsors would allow for those interested to benefit, without burdening park users who were uninterested. As one respondent commented, “coupons or products would be beneficial for these interested in learning more, while others could bypass the sponsorship event [display] with little bother.” This exposure could in turn benefit local businesses, which would gain exposure among a more targeted group of consumers who valued their contributions to parks. As one respondent noted, “sponsorships would encourage those attending an event or visiting a facility to support local businesses of which they might not otherwise be aware.”

Community benefits. Finally, participants identified potential benefits to the larger community including economic benefits, the conservation of valuable and vulnerable places, as well as the less tangible benefit of increased perceived ownership of public spaces. Respondents highlighted the contribution that parks made to the community, identifying them as valuable community resources that deserved to be maintained. Some respondents perceived that corporate sponsorships would help to alleviate the “impact on tax payers to maintain and enhance the great resource our communities enjoy. Also enhances the value of our properties and community setting to have these facilities and activities available.” Participants felt that the increased money and exposure from corporate sponsorships could also provide for “more volunteer activity, awareness, responsibility, ownership, [and] support of the system.”

Reasons for support. Respondents did not restrict their commentary to simply identifying a list of potential advantages. Participants who indicated support for sponsorship often elaborated on their reasons for supporting FCPA’s use of corporate sponsorship. For example many respondents commented that they trusted the FCPA, and therefore supported exploration of this alternative funding source, with statements such as “I am in favor of corporate sponsorship and trust FCPA to respect the communities that they serve,” and “FCPA does a terrific job and I trust the decisions they make for the citizens of Fairfax County will be good ones.” Others based their support on the belief that sponsorships would be mutually beneficial to residents as well as the business community. Some respondents
gave conditional support, stating that they would be in favor of sponsorships if it was
done in a certain way: “Go for it, but be smart and tasteful,” “corporate sponsorship may
be helpful, if not overdone,” and “they just have to be done selectively and well.” Others
stated that they would be in favor of sponsorships if the alternative was a reduction in
services, or an increased burden on citizens and users. As one respondent put it, “In a
perfect world, tax dollars would be sufficient to meet the needs of County residents; sadly
I don’t believe that is the case. It is with great reluctance that I’d consider a financial boost
from corporate sponsorship.”

**Potential Negatives**

Themes in this category included the potential disadvantages or negatives that
respondents identified with respect to corporate sponsorship of FCPA. Here, six distinct
themes emerged highlighting specific concerns in the areas of ownership, park experience,
user experience, commercialization, conflict of interest/sponsor fit, and reasons for lack of
support.

**Ownership.** One of participants’ most commonly mentioned concerns related
to sponsorship was the potential erosion of public and community ownership of FCPA
facilities and programs, with a loss of access as a consequence. As one respondent put it,
“The concept of public ownership and equal access to public facilities is sure to suffer if we
are confronted by corporate logos, special favors, and entitlements that come with opening
the door to corporate sponsorship of valuable public resources.” Many respondents felt
that corporate sponsorships would make these places less welcoming, alienate visitors,
and marginalize users in favor of corporate interests. In effect, they worried that corporate
sponsorship would increase the “risk of pushing certain people or groups away due to
personal preferences.” The loss of identity of a certain park or facility was another
commonly cited potential negative, with respondents concerned that with frequent name
changes and corporate logos, “the facility, golf course, pool, historic site loses its identity
and becomes synonymous with the corporate sponsor.” Protecting the public image of the
FCPA was also an issue, with some respondents concerned that if sponsors were “viewed
negatively by people, that may carry over to FCPA.”

**Impact on park settings and facilities.** Another common concern was that corporate
sponsorship would diminish park settings and/or facilities in a number of ways. Some
respondents felt that the services and facilities offered by the FCPA would suffer due
to sponsorships, leading to “abuse of the facility,” “advertisement trash,” and that “the
money from corporate sponsorships would become the main focus of the facilities and not
serving the public.” A major concern for many respondents was that the vulnerable places
that parks protect would be damaged or destroyed as a result of corporate sponsorships.
In particular, respondents highlighted visual and cultural values of natural and historical
areas: “I would object to corporate sponsorship of a historical site; seems like selling out
our history to the highest bidder. I’d also prefer the natural beauty of trails not be marred
by corporate signs.”

**User experience.** Diminishment of the user experience was another concern for
respondents, who felt that the advertising that may accompany corporate sponsorships
would have a negative impact on their recreation at FCPA. Many respondents felt that
the advertisements would be unsightly visually and distasteful morally, and worried that
sponsorships would bring “gross, intrusive signage that ruins everything,” and that “on
the nature and historic sites I believe it would appear tacky and demeaning.” Many also
felt that the advertising would be too prominent, causing “visitors [to be] bombarded with
marketing schemes,” and some were afraid that sponsorship meant “having to look at large
tacky signs with the sponsor’s name on it EVERYWHERE.” Finally, as one respondent
put it:

Why would I need to be nagged for a Pepsi or a Coke or a Gatorade (if they are
a sponsor) when I am trying to promote enjoying nature, or exercise for the fun
of it to my children. Why do I have to tell me friends I will meet them at the Jiffy Lube park instead of South Run park?

**Commercialization.** Related to a diminished user experience, participants frequently reported concern about the commercialization of the public space. Instead of focusing on the aesthetic nuisance of signage, some respondents were most concerned about the idea of capitulating to corporate interests, and feared that sponsorship would lead to the “perception of ‘selling out’ even our trails and rec centers to corporate America.” Many felt that there was too much advertising in society at large, and that parks should be reserved as a noncommercial space; incorporating sponsorships into parks was seen as going too far:

PLEASE DON’T DO THIS! How much more of our living experience is going to depend on the support, or not, of corporations? I can’t pump gas, watch a movie, or walk through the supermarket without being subjected to unwanted messaging from a corporate “sponsor.” Those are for-profit entities and I can choose not to be a patron. But the park facilities are maintained for the public, with public dollars. Corporate sponsorships will ruin these experiences for me and my family. Don’t sell out.

For many of those concerned with commercialization, limited sponsorship was seen as the first step down a slippery slope, starting with small, innocuous sponsorship activities, but ending in full-scale park privatization. For example, respondents said that sponsorship would be “a dangerous step toward corporate influence of how programs and services are provided,” and that “it would be a disappointing direction for a parks and recreation program that until now has a reputation as one of the nation’s best.”

**Conflict of interest/sponsor fit.** Poor fit between FCPA and the sponsor was another potentially negative factor frequently mentioned by respondents, who highlighted concerns such as political and religious agendas (this would be “mixing church and state by having sponsors with religious affiliations or having sponsors with a political agenda”), as well as perceptions of favoritism by the FCPA. Some respondents were also concerned that corporate sponsors would undermine the FCPA, and take control of the parks and services offered, stating that “corporations who can buy participation may try to change the event into what they want it to be or dictate processes and procedures.” Many were also concerned about the specter of corruption within the FCPA if corporations got involved, saying that sponsorship would mean “destroying the integrity of the park system with corporate lies,” and that “county government would potentially be looking the other way in order to sustain sponsorship.”

A lack of fit between the agency and potential sponsors, specifically in terms of the products and services advertised was another concern for many. Many respondents found it incongruous and inappropriate for companies without a good environmental track record or image to sponsor a park: “Corporate involvement should not conflict with the purpose of the facility; for instance, Monsanto Chemicals should not sponsor Riverbend Nature Center.” A similar concern was that a corporate sponsor might promote unhealthy products, especially targeted at children and families. One respondent said, “I am very concerned that children not be inundated with advertising for products, especially fast food and unhealthy foods.”

**Reasons for lack of support.** Similar to comments in support of corporate sponsorship, respondents did not restrict their commentary to identifying disadvantages. Those who opposed sponsorship further explained their position or reasons for opposing the use of corporate sponsorships, citing a number of specific reasons. Many felt that corporate sponsorships would result in a lack of support, either from themselves or park users in general: “Corporate sponsorship will most likely cause me to greatly curtail or sever my participation and support of the FCPA.” Some respondents also stated that in the past they had witnessed corporate sponsorship arrangements work out poorly, and that they were wary as a result: “Certain corporate sponsorships have left a bad taste in my mouth.” Issues such as unsightly clutter, as well as a dislike of naming rights were also commonly
cited. Some respondents also stated that they felt disappointed in the FCPA for considering this course of action: “I would feel very disappointed and betrayed to find corporate logos all over the facilities and parks.”

Operational challenges were also cited as a reason for lack of support. Respondents were worried that the job of seeking out, negotiating, maintaining, and monitoring sponsorships would take a toll on the employees of the FCPA. A common concern was that these extra tasks would keep employees from fulfilling their duty to the public: “Time spent by FCPA employees to complete and update the sponsorship related paperwork could take away from time spent on other work duties.” Some respondents also felt that FCPA would not be able to negotiate favorable contracts with sponsors: “I’m not confident [Fairfax County] can negotiate fair and reasonable sponsorship fees.”

Advice for Pursuing Sponsorships

In addition to identifying the pros and cons of corporate sponsorship, many respondents gave their opinion on how the FCPA should move forward to further pursue (or to avoid) corporate sponsorships. A common theme in this area was the need to “proceed with caution.” For example, respondents suggested, “Be very careful with what you do [to] the FCPA,” and “be very careful opening the door to corporations!” Many advocated for short-term contracts, or utilizing a “trial period” before entering into long-term contracts with corporate sponsors: “Make sure that they are of short duration, and if they are undesirable, do not hesitate to terminate them.” Others spoke of a gradual process, rather than a total switch directly to a sponsorship model: “tread lightly and [do] not jump full in,” and “A little at a time might be the best way to find a balance.” Finally, a need for more information (“A little background is needed for me to feel more strongly one way or the other”), and a call for continued public input and representation was put forth (“I would highly recommend continuing to get community feedback before proceeding”).

Some who were against sponsorships felt that it was only a temporary solution to a long-term problem, and implored FCPA to wait out the tough economic times: “Please remember that these hard times will not continue forever. I hope Fairfax County will not give away its good park system.” Indeed, many respondents felt that other funding options should be considered in lieu of sponsorships, or at least considered before sponsorships. Some of the alternatives identified included increased use of volunteers (“Call out an All Hands On Deck Volunteer Fairfax Day to help repair”), donations (“Ask us to donate sweat equity and time or monetary donations...do not sell out to Coke et al.”), and increased user fees or taxes (“I’m fine with paying more taxes,” “If more money is needed, increase the charge for use”).

Respondents frequently advocated that FCPA only proceed with sponsorships after creating a set of well-defined limits. These participants often viewed sponsorship as a “necessary evil” and felt that if the benefits outweighed the drawbacks, it was necessary to create guidelines that would maximize benefits and minimize damages. Many respondents felt that delimiting what type of sponsorships were appropriate from a political, religious, and sponsor-fit standpoint made sponsorships more palatable both to them and to the general public. Increasing awareness of the benefits to the public was another strategy for making sponsorships more appealing: “It is important for the public to see what the sponsor is providing in return, such as new equipment, new park areas, updates to facility, etc.” Delimiting the areas or facilities that could be connected to corporate sponsorship was another strategy advocated for, as some areas within parks were also seen as more appropriate than others: “Athletic fields and rec centers are more appropriate than trails.” This was particularly important when playgrounds or other areas targeted at youth were considered: “It would definitely fit in better at some places, (i.e. golf courses) rather than others (children’s play areas).” Similarly, protecting natural and historic areas was another priority and therefore, participants felt these spaces should not be connected to corporate sponsorship: “Please don’t let the corporations follow us to nature trails and outdoor parks and historic sites.”
Discussion and Implications

This paper builds upon and substantiates a body of research examining public attitudes toward corporate sponsorship of public parks (e.g., McDonough, 2002; Mowen & Graefe, 2002; Mowen & Havitz, 2002; Samnaliev, More, & Stevens, 2006). In contrast to the emphases of prior empirical research regarding overall level of public support and their response to researcher-defined sponsorship activities and conditions, this project utilized inductive, qualitative methods to identify sponsorship thoughts, opinions, and meanings expressed by park constituents, allowing for a wider range of possible issues. Consistent with prior empirical research on this topic, our findings supported the complex situational and contextual nature of the phenomenon (Reiling, Cheng, Robinson, McCarville, & White, 1995), highlighted key positive and negative themes, and revealed stakeholders’ preferred strategies or guidelines for implementing or expanding upon park sponsorship programs.

Common Concerns

Over-commercialization of a public, noncommercial space was identified as a major concern for respondents. Although commercialization has saturated almost every facet of the American cultural experience (e.g., sports, public transit, etc.), public parks, nature preserves and open space, remain relatively noncommercial. In this study, respondents valued the chance to escape from the normal routine of life, and spend their leisure time in a noncommercial setting. Although the presence of a corporate logo on a visitor center or trail sign may be insignificant from a physical perspective, our findings suggest that the implications of such a presence were far reaching and perhaps more symbolic among those respondents who voiced a concern about sponsorships. Beyond the potential aesthetic challenges of corporate logos in park settings, their presence represents a broader range of implications: betrayal of the public park mission, endorsement of a corporation by the agency, an encroachment on public ownership, and an erosion of the user experience. Concerns raised by respondents regarding over-commercialization are consistent with past research by Kerstetter et al. (2010), as well as the warning issued by Wade (2005) and others concerning the threat privatization poses to our public lands.

One potentially mediating factor, even among those who were completely enthusiastic about sponsorship, was their institutional trust in the Fairfax County Park Authority. A number of respondents stated that although they were not in favor of sponsorships in general, they trusted FCPA to make the right decision either way. This finding was consistent with the work presented by Mowen et al. (2006), who found that trust was a key ingredient in shaping support for alternative funding strategies. Other literature, however, has noted that park and recreation agencies often struggle to gain constituent support for alternative funding strategies (Dustin, More, & McAvoy, 2000; Mowen & Graefe, 2002; Mowen & Havitz, 2002). It is possible that FCPA has garnered long-term trust by developing their sponsorship program slowly and incrementally in appropriate venues such as sports leagues, fitness centers, festivals/special events.

Importance of Context and Location

Respondents identified context and location as important variables in the debate over corporate sponsorship in public parks, echoing what has been reported by others such as Samnaliev, More, and Stevens (2006). While a corporate sponsor may be seen as acceptable by some at a visitor center, fitness facility, or golf course, not a single respondent indicated that historical, cultural, or natural areas were acceptable settings for corporate sponsorship, and many stressed that they were not. The type or degree of obtrusiveness/visibility related to sponsorship recognition was also important to respondents, who were generally more comfortable with low-key recognition than more prominent displays of corporate logos on signage, billboards, or in the form of naming rights. Again, this was consistent with the empirical findings of Mowen and Frankeberger (1999-2000) who found that facility naming rights were rated the lowest with regard to their level of appropriateness.

The importance of context and location was further reinforced by the positives and negatives identified by respondents. While positives such as monetary benefits and access
for underprivileged residents were cited with respect to fitness centers and agency program offerings, such benefits were not anticipated in or mentioned with respect to more pristine or natural FCPAs settings such as historical sites or natural areas. In these types of areas, corporate sponsorship was seen categorically as a negative, corrupting the user experience by introducing profit-seeking motivations into a noncommercial space. Indeed, the park experience was frequently cited as a potential casualty of sponsorship, the application of which would distract from the goals of recreation in a public area.

The importance of context and location was also reflected in an overall synopsis or overall appraisal of potential positives and negatives as expressed by respondents. For example, when respondents spoke of positives, they tended to focus on tangible benefits such as money, services, programs, or access for disadvantaged groups; whereas when they discussed negatives, the focus shifted to ideological issues such as the value of nature, preserving the integrity of the user experience, or the concept of public ownership of parks. Many individual comments were not simply for or against sponsorship activity; rather individual respondents identified both the pros and the cons, but then acknowledged that one outweighed the other for themselves. The potentially positive impact of corporate sponsorship on facility maintenance and programmatic offerings was appreciated, in many cases even by those respondents who stated that they were opposed to corporate sponsorships. For those individuals, the potential benefits that would come with additional revenue were outweighed by the perceived damage to the mission and long-term reputation of the agency.

The idea of corporate sponsorships as a “slippery slope” toward complete park privatization or over-commercialization emerged among a number of respondents. These sentiments were consistent with concerns raised in prior empirical studies and commentary (Kerstetter et al., 2010; More, 2005; Wade, 2005). The fact that corporate sponsorship is now being considered as a core funding strategy by park and recreation agencies may be indicative of an incremental shift in public acceptance and entrepreneurial funding policies (International Events Group, 2014a; Weiler, Moore & Moyle, 2013). Public attitudes toward commercial interests within the public sphere may have changed in recent years, as a result of the continued encroachment of for-profit entities into public services and the adaptation of business principles/language in public recreation provision (Kerstetter et al., 2010). Comparisons of the quantitative data from the 2012 survey, as well as an earlier sponsorship survey conducted in 1998 indicated a shift towards increased support for corporate sponsorship (International Events Group, 2014a). Although corporate sponsorships are seen as largely acceptable and advantageous in sectors such as tourism and rural community development (i.e., Murray & Kline, 2015), these relationships and programs are relatively new or limited within the public park and recreation sphere.

Clearly, there is no universal prescription for agencies to successfully implement and navigate corporate sponsorship. What one individual may consider over-commercialization may be acceptable or desirable to another constituent. For some constituents, even a small corporate presence may be too much or be seen as a betrayal of the agency mission and purpose. There are several factors to consider, such as the extent to which sponsorship activities would occur (i.e., large-scale sponsorship of the entire agency, or more targeted sponsorship of special events or programs), the type of sponsors solicited (i.e. local businesses vs. larger national brands), as well as the fit between agency and sponsor. Agencies must also decide whether the benefits of pursuing corporate sponsorship are worth the expense required, in terms of work and time invested. Identifying, soliciting, negotiating, and retaining sponsors represents a significant undertaking, and may not be worth the risks and rewards associated with increased revenue from sponsorships.

**Practical Implications**

For agencies that decide to pursue sponsorship, several suggestions emerged from the findings based on the ideas put forth by respondents, as well as the perceived positives and negatives identified. An incremental approach to sponsorship activity, building slowly with small, reversible steps, may help reassure respondents who are wary of the perceived
slippery slope toward over-commercialization. Agencies should exercise caution when selecting sponsors in order to ensure a fit with the agency, as well as the community at large. Consider the image and history of a corporation, as well as the products or services produced when evaluating potential sponsors. While an outdoor gear store may be a compatible match, companies that sell fast food, products that harm the environment, market specifically to children, or engage in other controversial activities, may not. The findings support research that indicates that sponsorship by local businesses are in general more favorable, and that avoiding naming rights and exclusivity is recommended (Mowen & Frankeberger, 1999-2000; Mowen, Kyle, & Jackowski, 2007).

How to manage/monitor sponsorship programs is another concern that confronts park agency managers. For example, at least one respondent in our study questioned whether fund-raising activities (e.g., sponsorship solicitation) would take away from other job duties. Should staff be responsible for soliciting and overseeing sponsorship activities and payments? Should park “friends organizations” and foundations be tasked with these responsibilities, or should the entire enterprise be contracted out to private firms? Answers to these questions are likely a function of two issues: availability of organizational expertise and capacity. In some smaller agencies, the director or another key staff person has assumed these responsibilities with some success (City of Medford, 2010), while in larger organizations, sponsorship roles are assumed by marketing departments (e.g., Cleveland Metroparks, 2015). In many other cases, however, the responsibility for such programs is being contracted out (International Events Group, 2014b). However, contracting out sponsorship duties is no longer seen as a panacea as contracted expertise now comes with retainer expenses regardless of whether any degree of sponsorship success is achieved (International Events Group, 2009).

Another suggestion for implementing park sponsorship programs reinforced by this study is to solicit, and be cognizant of, public opinion. Allowing a citizen advisory committee to participate in the development of sponsorship guidelines, review potential sponsorship applicants/packages, and evaluate the outcomes from sponsorship programs could foster institutional trust, as well as limit concerns regarding transparency. Emphasizing specific, direct benefits to the public from sponsorships agreements (at the individual and/or community level) could make these partnerships more appealing to those who are undecided or even opposed. Finally, acting on the input provided by the public is essential in fostering an enduring trust of the agency. Having the courage to cancel programs that are publicly unpopular, even if they may provide monetary benefits, may be necessary in order to maintain public support. Remembering that the core mission of park and recreation agencies is to serve the public, not please corporate sponsors, will avert a great deal of potential controversy and conflict.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this project sought to solicit the public’s voice on corporate sponsorships in parks, more research is needed across a range of park agencies in order to clarify how multiple audiences perceive these activities in different contexts. Individuals participating in this study were active participants of Park Authority programs (either currently or in recent years), and were more likely to be involved/committed than nonusers. Further, the limited scope of the agency’s existing sponsorship program could have influenced respondents’ awareness of park sponsorships as well as the depth/complexity of their commentary. While the Fairfax County Park Authority is interested in the potential of corporate sponsorship, their current sponsorship effort is focused primarily on securing sponsors for their summer entertainment event series. Other metropolitan park systems (e.g., Cleveland Metroparks, Miami-Dade County Parks) have more expansive sponsorship programs/agreements that transcend event/festival sponsorships.

In addition to these contextual limitations, there were also instances of respondents expressing confusion about the range of potential sponsorship activities, which may have inhibited respondents’ ability to respond effectively. Thus, future research on this topic
could expand their scope through interviews with a more diverse group of respondents. In addition to park users, a broader base of stakeholders including local board members, elected officials, and members of the local business community should be engaged.

The design of this study could also be considered as a potential limitation. While an online survey allowed for a wide reach and a large number of respondents, the level of data collected was not as deep as may have been achieved using a smaller sample size and more in-depth data collection. Subsequent research should consider a series of focus groups or interviews targeting key stakeholder groups. These methods may provide useful information and also allow for follow-up questions from researchers. Nevertheless, the present study provides the foundation to craft initial discussion questions and secondary probing questions.

It is also important to note that the purpose of this study (as with most qualitative research) was to identify the range and diversity of responses. This is unlike past quantitative research regarding corporate sponsorship of municipal park agencies, which was concerned with relative levels of support or nonsupport rather than reasons for support or nonsupport; essentially this research examined the questions of “what” and “why” as opposed to “how much.” As such, additional research is needed to understand the prevalence of various perceptions and their prevalence among various groups. It is also important to note that a study of this nature will yield different results in different geographic settings. For example, residents from rural communities may have less exposure to park-related sponsorships and, thus could express different viewpoints.

**Conclusion**

Results from this study indicate that corporate sponsorship can be a complex and potentially divisive issue for public-sector park and recreation agencies. The core sponsorship themes identified by study participants (i.e., specific advantages and disadvantages) reflected similar public-private partnership issues debated among scholars and practitioners (Crompton, 1997, 2014; LeRoy, 2005, Wade, 2005) and support the need to carefully design/structure sponsorships. Although a host of potential sponsorship benefits were identified, respondents also recognized that these relationships do come with strings attached. For some, the positive impact of increased funding was enough to justify a corporate sponsorship, especially when compared to the undesirable alternatives of potentially losing a valuable park or program. Others, however, felt that for-profit entities had no place in public spaces, regardless of the potential benefits. Many comments, however, fell more in the middle of this support/opposition spectrum, recognizing both potential positives and potential negatives to sponsorship activity and indicating that for successful sponsorship, “the devil is in the details.”

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature by supporting the notion of sponsorship’s benefits and risks (as voiced by core park agency constituents) and by providing insight into their perspectives as to how park agencies should proceed in terms of implementing sponsorships. The breadth and variety of responses identified in this study lends further support to the complexity of the issue and sets the stage for future, more in-depth studies of constituent views regarding sponsorship as well as other types of public-private partnerships. The concerns and advice expressed by participants in this study serve as a cautionary tale for park and recreation professionals who are considering corporate sponsorship as a funding strategy.

**References**


