

ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA: PLAY 'N' CLOSE TO HOME

A PLAYGROUND NEAR EVERY CHILD

HOW ONE MAN (THE MAYOR) MADE A DIFFERENCE

St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker developed a policy, Play 'n' Close to Home, to create a playground within a half mile of every child in the city. The mayor then leveraged his political position to create the organizational authority, systems, and resources necessary to implement this policy. Through joint-use agreements with the school district and community organizations, the city has significantly improved opportunities for play.

CONTEXT: IDENTIFYING A PLAY DEFICIT

St. Petersburg prides itself on its commitment to parks and green spaces. Since 1986, St. Petersburg has been consistently recognized as a "Tree City USA," and they display the sign on the front lawn of city hall. Voters indicated their support for capital improvement investments in parks by approving a 1990 public referendum dubbed "Penny for Pinellas," which increased the sales tax by 1% in Pinellas County. A significant majority passed a second referendum in 2000 to continue this 1% sales tax for another 10 years. According to Cliff Footlick, director of the city's parks department, the strong support for these referendums illustrates public satisfaction with and commitment to investing in the park system. Cliff points to citizen interest in a year-long celebration of the 100th anniversary of St. Petersburg's waterfront parks as further evidence of this pride.

While St. Petersburg excels in preserving and maintaining significant green space, parks and playgrounds were unevenly situated throughout the city. Not all residents enjoyed easy access to green space. In response, Mayor Baker developed and adopted a City Trails Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan in 2001 to link sidewalks and bike facilities to every school, park, and major destination in the city. As part of the City Trails planning process, the mayor also asked city officials to map out parks and green space, including playground space. The mapping surfaced a large inventory of playgrounds. But there were some significant geographical gaps, particularly in underserved communities, where there were no playgrounds. At that time, just 49% of city residents under age 18 lived within a half mile of a playground.

THE INITIATIVE: CREATING ACCESS TO PLAY

In 2001, Mayor Baker introduced his Play 'n' Close to Home playground policy, with the goal of ensuring that every child in St. Petersburg would have a playground within a half mile walk. By creating a clear policy directive, assigning it to a cabinet-level team member, seeking regular staff updates and relaying those updates to elected city officials, personally introducing the policy to each city council member, and promoting the policy in his stump speech, the mayor gave powerful signals to city officials and potential community partners that he was committed to delivering on this policy.

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Mayor Rick Baker celebrates another playground opening.

Population of St. Petersburg:
248,232

Population under 18:
39,631

The Key Driver: Mayor Baker

The initiative was, in part, a response to the park and playground mapping exercise, but it also reflected the mayor's priorities and values. Mayor Baker believes that people feel differently about their neighborhood if they have to get into their cars or take a bus to get to a playground. When making his case for this policy, he argued that access to playgrounds within walking distance is a quality of life and civil rights issue.

The mayor branded the Play 'n' Close to Home initiative and designed the logo, regularly drives around neighborhoods to identify potential new playground space, hand-selects playground equipment, gives input on its placement, and attends every playground launch. City officials report that Mayor Baker, at six feet, seven inches, is widely recognized by the city's children as "St. Petersburg's largest kid." His family regularly takes what they call "playground vacations" to visit and test out playgrounds around the country. In the case of the Play 'n' Close to Home initiative, the mayor created a campaign that he could authentically and powerfully promote through his leadership and example.

Building Political Capital

To publicize the initiative, Mayor Baker made it one of the five principles in "The Baker Plan," which he lays out in his standard speech to constituent groups. (The plan also includes education, safety/security, efficiency, and improving neighborhoods.) According to Susan Ajoc, the mayor's current neighborhood partnership director, citizens are aware of the policy and credit the mayor with playground builds in their community.

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And to build political support on an ongoing basis, the mayor personally briefs every new city council member on the initiative. He gives the full city council an update during their weekly meetings. According to City Councilman Wengay Newton, the playground policy is often on the agenda, as there are usually a few playgrounds in development.

Assigning High-Level Staff to Implementation

The mayor assigned one of his five cabinet members, Deputy Mayor Mike Dove, responsibility for implementation of the policy. Dove had previously been a neighborhood partnership director in St. Petersburg; as a result, he had the experience, skills, and authority to enlist the support of key partners—both inside city hall and out in the community—to deliver on the mayor's playground policy.

The clarity and specificity of the half mile standard helped to focus city resources and staff attention. Dove and the other responsible city staff were keenly aware of the policy, and they were held accountable on a weekly basis to report on progress. Progress updates were reflected on a wall-size map of the city hanging in the mayor's office. The map indicated existing playgrounds and a half mile radius around them.

The city staff charged with implementing the mayor's playground policy are well-spoken advocates for neighborhood playground development. In particular, they describe the social benefits and educational opportunities of neighborhood parks and playgrounds.

The parks director Cliff Footlick, who worked closely with the deputy mayor on implementing the policy, has noticed that “kids are more entertained when they learn to entertain themselves. This is not just about muscle development—playgrounds allow kids to use their imagination to create a fort or a house.” He describes playgrounds as a magnet for social interaction. “People will come together around a play structure and socialize in a way that they would not at an open park,” he says. “It draws the children in, but it also draws the adults in, including single mothers and grandparents.”

Other staff members touch on the equity aspects of playground access. Ajoc says, “Play is an important part of the education process, and we have a responsibility to stand up for children who cannot stand up for themselves.”

And Dove notes that playgrounds and parks have become even more important during difficult economic times. He argues that people affected by the recession tend to stay close to home for recreation, turning primarily to their neighborhood parks and playgrounds. Those spaces deserve city investment, he says, especially since “parks are often the only jewel in tougher neighborhoods.”

City staff also describe the cost-effectiveness of investing in play spaces. Footlick makes the case that well-maintained playgrounds have an anticipated life span of 20 years, cost an average of \$5,000 or less per year, and serve thousands of children across multiple generations.

Funding and Designing the Playgrounds

With these social and community benefits in mind, the city developed eight new playground spaces on public land from 2001 to 2004. The average cost was \$75,000 per playground. To

finance the capital expenses, the mayor relied on revenue from the Penny for Pinellas sales tax. As mentioned, Pinellas County residents chose to add an additional penny on the state sales tax in their county for infrastructure expenses. To finance the Play ‘n’ Close to Home initiative, the mayor directed \$500,000 per year from St. Petersburg’s share of the Penny for Pinellas sales tax to new playground builds.

These new playgrounds were designed as intergenerational spaces that would serve as social and community hubs for people of all abilities. Careful thought was put into the placement of benches and other facilities to accommodate caregivers. The parks department used equipment that was ADA approved and accessible to all children, including universally accessible pathways, and elevated sand tables and activity panels. According to Barbara Heck, a member of the Council of Neighborhood Associations, these playgrounds pulled the neighborhoods back together. “The playgrounds get people out of their homes and bring out the child in everyone,” she says, “no matter what your age is.”

It’s important to note that Mayor Baker did not encounter any particular opposition to this early investment in playground development. However, a key early challenge was a technical one: a lack of undeveloped space. Since St. Petersburg is 95% developed, land is at a premium. The mayor and his staff were not going to be able to deliver on Play ‘n’ Close to Home without building collaborations with community partners.

SCALING UP

In order to fulfill the policy mandate of the Play ‘n’ Close to Home initiative, it was necessary to identify potential playground space beyond city property. School playgrounds were identified as the best opportunity, since they offered undeveloped or dilapidated playground space in areas that were not covered by the city’s playground map. Due to liability concerns, however, school grounds were off limits to the community after school hours. Some spaces were used by sports teams and organizations after hours, but an entity with insurance was always responsible, not the general public. Overcoming these liability concerns was the single greatest challenge the mayor and his staff encountered in implementing Play ‘n’ Close to Home.

The mayor, city council, and school board engaged in discussions for two years before reaching an agreement. Issues of liability, insurance, maintenance, security, and vandalism significantly slowed the negotiation process. In the end, the city and school board agreed to share liability for the school space, with the school responsible during school hours and the parks department responsible after hours. The city would fully fund the playgrounds’ creation and maintenance, including proactive inspection on a regular basis.

Mayor Baker was successful in this negotiation, in part, because of his strong track record of building political good will with the school district. According to school board member Mary Brown, the mayor developed strong relationships with school leadership early in his first term, and maintained constant visibility at the schools. Even though education is not within the mayor’s purview, he awards high-performing principals and assistant principals with the “Mayor’s Top Apple” and has raised \$10 million in corporate funds to support 1,000 four-year college scholarships for economically disadvantaged youth.

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Mayor Baker says his negotiations with the school district over joint-use agreements succeeded because “people know that I won’t go away.” He credits his reputation for tenacity—he once took the case for building a new post office to the White House—as the reason the city and school board were able to overcome significant liability concerns. “There is immense power in deciding,” he says. “I decided that our city would have a playground within a half mile of every child. I made this a goal and communicated to staff that they needed to make this happen.”

Creating the Joint-Use Template: Mount Vernon Elementary School

Once a general agreement was reached with the school district, the city focused on relationship building with the schools and, in particular, with school principals. According to Deputy Mayor Dove, involving the principals was critical because “principals are kings in our city.” In the beginning, Dove and an attorney—hired to negotiate terms of liability and agreements with potential partners—spent a year meeting with “anyone who would listen.” They found that the “hardest pressed” schools were the most willing to negotiate and work with the city. Fortunately, those schools were often located in areas the mayor had targeted for playground development.

The city selected Mount Vernon Elementary School as the first school site for development. It was selected for several key reasons. First, there was no playground or park located within or near a half mile. There was also no available land for development within a half mile. The school’s current play equipment was outdated and unsafe, and 50% of the students were on free or reduced lunch. Also, the neighborhood had previously been populated with more elderly residents, but younger families with school-age children were moving into the neighborhood. The mayor earmarked \$80,000 for the site, including equipment, fencing, and gates.

Mount Vernon Principal Valerie White was initially cautious about the proposal, even after it had been approved. To help build support, the city staff engaged Principal White along with the school’s physical education teacher, general education teachers, and maintenance staff in the development process. Working together, they chose the playground structures, determined their placement, and set up a maintenance schedule. Meetings to work out the details included White, city staff, school maintenance staff, school board members, and legal representatives. The collaborative process, along with specific design features—including a fence around the school that was closed during school hours and a fence around the playground that was open after school hours—increased White’s comfort level with the management issues.

In March 2004, the first joint-use playground opened at Mt. Vernon Elementary School. According to the deputy mayor, White came to see the playground as a strong asset for the school and one that would attract young children as a “choice” school. In the end, she supported public access after school hours, not only to the playground but also to a large open field, baseball diamond, covered shelter, and basketball courts. Under the agreement, the city maintains the 1.6 acres of playground in exchange for public use of the land outside school hours from sunrise to sunset. Neighbors now have access to significant open space and recreational facilities beyond the playground. Mount Vernon’s current principal reports that neighbors care about access to this space and use it heavily. In fact, neighbors call her if the gate is not opened to the community after school hours.



A new playground in St. Petersburg.

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Using the successful template of Mount Vernon Elementary, the city has since developed further joint-use facilities around the city. “Through joint use facilities, whether they are playgrounds, ball fields, or libraries, we’re improving cost efficiency for both the city and the school system,” says Mayor Baker. “Many of these new playgrounds enhance school facilities and help meet the goals of plans created by the neighborhoods.”

Developing Broader Community Buy-In: Norwood Baptist Church

With a pressing mandate to develop playgrounds within a half mile of every child, city officials continued to survey land around St. Petersburg to identify possible playground space beyond public space and school grounds. For additional land, the city partnered with a number of other non-city groups that own property in the mayor’s targeted areas. Partners include St. Petersburg College, commercial property owners, Little League groups, and homeowners associations.

The city created one such partnership with Norwood Baptist Church. Norwood offered an opportunity to develop land beyond city and school board property and in a neighborhood that was underserved regarding playground access. Norwood owned a dirt lot, which served as an overflow parking lot on Sundays but was otherwise infrequently used. It took a year of negotiation to finalize the partnership, which included the development of a lease agreement with the national organization overseeing the church. In return, Norwood gained a new playground that served the youth at its pre-school as well as the broader community.

Similar to their work with the schools, the city staff listened and responded to concerns from key stakeholders and neighbors in the community. After privacy complaints from one neighbor, for example, the city created a six-foot fence around the playground, rather than the standard four-foot fence. Anticipating and responding to neighborhood questions and concerns has been an important part of the city’s design and implementation process.

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With each playground launch, the city worked with the local community to engage their participation. The ribbon cutting at Norwood Baptist Church was held during a festival at the church. It was well attended by church members, along with the mayor, city council members, and city staff. The city helped generate community buzz by sending press releases to local media outlets, and the ribbon cutting was covered by the city-owned local television station.

SUSTAINABILITY

The success of the St. Petersburg playground program was largely due to Mayor Baker's leadership, says Deputy Mayor Mike Dove. But Dove also credits the "creative and dedicated people in the parks department" who refused to listen to reasons why Play 'n' Close to Home would not work. Instead, the staff focused on solutions and sustainability.

The parks department is responsible for the development and proactive maintenance of these playground spaces, regardless of whether or not the playgrounds are on city property. As part of the joint-use agreements, the parks department agreed to send a staff member to each location monthly, rather than relying on people to report problems or file a maintenance request. The cost for this preventive maintenance program, staffed by two people, is \$1.6 million per year. The parks department has also asked the police department for its support in patrolling areas where new playgrounds are installed, especially on non-city owned property. Finally, the city asks schools and neighborhoods to take responsibility for watching over their play spaces on a daily basis. With a proactive maintenance system and collaboration with the community, the parks director reports minimal to no complaints or maintenance issues.

To field citizen inquires and complaints, the city has established a web-based Action Center. Citizens can either call or e-mail concerns to the center. According to Ellen McDowell, the administrative support manager for the Action Center, there are very few complaints related to the parks department, perhaps one or two in the last year. She commented that citizens generally contact their local facility with any concerns and the concerns are promptly addressed.

The safety standards and requirements that the city has for playgrounds are much higher than the school district requirements. As a result, the schools save money on liability insurance with the current cost-share relationships with the city. The schools also report a decrease in injuries on schoolyard playgrounds that have been developed and maintained by the city.

One challenge in the care of joint-use school facilities has been turnover in school administration. Parks department staff report that principals who were there for the build of the playground are often more invested in its ongoing care. Principals who weren't the original administrator during a build may need reminders regarding the joint-use agreement and accessibility of the playground to the community after hours. In these cases, the joint-use agreements—which clearly delineate roles and responsibilities—and regular follow-up have been crucial to successfully maintaining both the partnership and the play space.

OUTCOMES

Over seven years, Mayor Baker increased the percentage of youth age 18 and under who live within a half mile of a playground from 49% to 75%. The mayor also directed \$500,000 in public resources per year to new playground development during that period.

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Quantity: The mayor’s playground policy resulted in 25 new playgrounds across the city, many of which are located in underserved communities.

Quality: The mayor’s initiative resulted in eight new play areas on school grounds, where the previous equipment was often inadequate, outdated, and dilapidated.

Access: Joint-use agreements with schools and community groups resulted in 11 new playground facilities open to the local community after normal usage hours.

Playground Coverage

	Population within 1/2 mile	% population within 1/2 mile	18 yrs and under population within 1/2 mile	% of <18 yrs population within 1/2 mile
Playgrounds before 4/1/2001	111,834	45%	26,041	49%
Playgrounds by 12/30/2009	170,301	69%	39,631	75%

CORE FINDINGS

Set a clear standard and policy for playground accessibility. The city set a clear standard that every child should live within a half mile of a playground. The specificity of the mandate focused the attention and resources of city staff.

Establish responsible personnel for accountability. The deputy mayor was explicitly charged with accountability for day-to-day execution of the play policy, reporting progress to the mayor on a weekly basis.

Engage political elites early in the process. The mayor was proactive in meeting with new city council members to introduce Play ‘n’ Close to Home and in building relationships with school principals and the school board. He ensured that key political leaders were aware of his policy and were updated on its progress.

Develop political capital with key stakeholders. The mayor leveraged his business acumen to develop corporate partners and gain financial resources for every school in St. Petersburg, building good will that served him during negotiations with the school district on joint-use agreements.

Implement joint-use agreements. The mayor developed partnerships with schools and community groups to cost-effectively increase access to play space and share liability and insurance costs.

Leverage events and media for policy awareness and promotion. The mayor attended every ribbon-cutting ceremony to underline his play policy in a way that actively and visibly engaged the local community and provided citywide publicity through newspaper and local television coverage.

Determine clear responsibility for maintenance. The city developed clear lines of responsibility and schedules for maintenance. This proactive maintenance system minimized complaints.

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CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

St. Petersburg's Play 'n' Close to Home program was successful, in large part, because a unique individual—who happens to be the mayor—cares deeply about accessible play spaces for children and was able to use his office and tenacity to promote an ambitious play policy. What will happen when Mayor Baker leaves office? Has the change been systemic enough to be sustainable? Will public support for this policy affect the next mayor and help to sustain political support? Staff turnover at individual schools has been a challenge for this city. How can St. Petersburg, and other cities with similar agreements, find more effective ways to increase the buy-in of incoming school administrators?

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