

Help city celebrate Park and Recreation Month

By **MIKE GRIGGS**

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In 2009, the U.S. House of Representatives designated July as National Park and Recreation Month in recognition of “the great societal value of parks and recreation facilities and their importance in local communities across the United States.” Since then, hundreds of park and recreation agencies across the country have engaged with their communities each year during Park and Recreation Month.

At the Columbia City Council meeting on Monday, the mayor will officially proclaim July as Park and Recreation Month in Columbia. As we join cities across the nation to celebrate, it’s a good time to reflect on the relationship Parks and Recreation has with our community.



Mike Griggs

I often tell people that as the director of the Columbia Parks and Recreation, I have the best job in the world. That can be attributed to the fact that the majority of our citizens love and support their local parks, trails and facilities. Our 2015 Parks and Recreation citizen survey revealed that 92 percent of Columbia households use our parks. It’s no surprise that we’re well above the national average of 78 percent.

In 2013, Missouri was honored as the Best Trails State by American Trails. People seeking an appealing city in which to relocate and tourists who are trail users search the Internet to find which communities have a desirable trail system. While we are below the number of trails a city the size of Columbia should have, we are still on the way to becoming a well-connected city of trails. About half of the proposed 30-mile trail loop around the city has been completed. Each year we progress toward connecting more neighborhoods to our attractive trail system. In fact, 82 percent of Columbia households report using Columbia’s trails, which is an impressive 12 percent increase from just five years ago. With insufficient physical activity being one of the 10 leading risk factors for death worldwide, I am proud to serve such an active community that is interested in health and wellness and values its trail system.

As a native Columbian, it was easy for my wife and me to choose Columbia as our home to raise our two sons. Our sons were involved in a variety of sports from an early age. I have witnessed firsthand how being active in sports helps young people develop many great characteristics, such as fair play, leadership, teamwork, competitiveness, inclusiveness and hard work.

Last year, local youths put down their electronic devices, got off the couch and participated more than 48,000 times in Parks and Recreation-sponsored sports. When I think about the sobering national health statistics — such as one in three children in America being overweight or obese — I am happy my family lives in a community that wisely invests in our youth sports programs and facilities.

Our citizens get it. They know that as Columbia's land base expands, green space needs to be preserved to benefit the community and environment. Since 100 mature trees remove 53 tons of carbon dioxide, filter 430 pounds of pollutants and intercept 539,000 gallons of rainfall annually (reducing the expense and need for stormwater control), green space preservation is a good community investment. With the health of Hinkson Creek and other streams at risk, our community is highly motivated to manage stormwater and improve water quality. Consequently, Columbians have historically supported funding green space preservation.

One of our most popular parks, Stephens Lake Park, was a direct result of engaged citizens organizing a campaign to preserve this beautiful property as a park instead of having it fall to commercial development. Aren't we glad they did? I can't imagine what Columbia would look like without Stephens Lake Park nestled in the heart of the city, with all the festivals and events held there that bring our community together.

As part of our mission, we are committed to providing leisure opportunities for *all* Columbians, no matter their age, ability or income level. We have programs for the mentally and physically disabled, at-risk youths, preschoolers, teens, families and seniors, along with financial aid for those who need it. With our pools, lakes, "spraygrounds," golf courses, recreation centers, parks, nature areas and trails, our community enjoys a variety of recreation opportunities. In short, we are a "cradle to grave" operation.

In celebration of Park and Recreation Month, I invite you to participate in the fun family activities we have planned, including the Stephens Lake Park Amphitheater Concert Series on July 9, Movies in the Park on July 10 and Family Fun Fest: Fitness is Fun on July 15.

Columbia is a great place to live and play. Thank you for your support in making it so.

Mike Griggs is the director of the Columbia Parks and Recreation Department.

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