

# MAYOR'S CORNER: Bristol's parks are critical to our health

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By Mayor Ellen Zoppo-Sassu

Summer is a great time to pause and think about how fortunate we are to have the over 785 acres of park and recreation facilities, as well as the important role that they play in the health and wellness of our community. Over the course of the pandemic, we saw the critical role that parks and open spaces played in public health. A recent national survey found that 83% of adults surveyed reported that visiting their local parks, trails and open spaces had been essential to their mental and physical well-being during that time.

In addition to and as a result of the role of outdoor recreational spaces during covid, we also know that the various parks are important to mental health and for those residents in recovery who are seeking alternate paths for recreation and wellness. Many challenges faced by those struggling with alcohol and substance misuse were amplified during covid. In addition, school and activities were disrupted for youth, adding to mental health and trauma.



In Bristol, the Youth and Community Services division is under the Parks & Rec umbrella, and this provided benefits including staff being trained with Narcan, maintenance crews sanitizing and cleaning frequently used spaces, and virtual groups and check-ins with families; as well as providing fall care for students of working parents while schools were closed.

Health and wellness really began in our parks when Albert Rockwell donated 80 acres to create his namesake park for the enjoyment of the public, especially the hundreds of New Departure factory employees who worked six days a week, with many of them living in the densely populated neighborhoods and tenements that did not have much green space. Over 100 years later, we have adapted these spaces to include a skate park, mountain bike trails, pickle ball, and even as sites for covid-19 vaccinations.

Across town, Dewitt Page soon followed his brother-in-law's lead, and donated the 70 acres for Page Park. Park improvements this year included the long overdue renovations to the Pool, which is attracting hundreds of people each day since it opened. And not only did Rockwell and Page donate the land, they provided an endowment, \$500,000 of which was tapped from the Page Park Pool Fund to help pay for the project. Two weeks ago, the Parks & Rec sponsored a sneak peek reception at the Pool as a fundraiser for the Friends of the Parks fund at the Main Street Community Foundation. Over \$10,000 was raised so that funds will be available for projects to be enjoyed by the next generation as well.

The Parks & Recreation Department also completed a new Master Plan complete with a statistically valid survey showing what Bristol residents want. It can be accessed by visiting [bristolrec.com](http://bristolrec.com). This Master Plan

will help drive future projects and grant requests. In fact, based on the #1 priority of more trails, a grant is being completed this month for submission to the National Park Service.

Health and wellness also includes prioritizing nutrition through healthy eating and access to healthy food. Parks are important community nutrition hubs, which is why school lunches were distributed from Rockwell during the pandemic; why healthy snacks are a part of all the Parks & Rec summer camps, and why the City and United Way partnered to do the Farmers to Families food box distributions across the City since last July. Almost 30,000 boxes of food weighing 977,900 pounds have been distributed. The next three distributions are scheduled for July 15, Aug. 5 and Aug. 19. Recent boxes have included spaghetti squash, peppers, potatoes, cabbage, cucumbers and zucchini.

The Farmers Markets have also been a wonderful way for seniors and families to access fresh food in the downtown area. The Bristol-Burlington Health District is offering Healthy Family food vouchers to those families who qualify and can shop at the Market, and the vouchers for senior citizens will be available from the Senior Center in mid-July, giving them \$15 booklets to spend at participating vendors. And even more good news is on the horizon, as the Market will soon be equipped to accept EBT cards, bringing access to fresh produce to even more people.

Due to the desire from citizens to have a central gathering place and the success of the Farmers Market, future downtown plans may include some green space for future events. On behalf of the City Council, I encourage everyone to stop down to the Market each Saturday from 10am-1pm. I am there each Saturday, as are members of the City Council, to hear from our residents and get their feedback as to what they want to see happen in town. You can also catch a glimpse of the new Bristol mural to the rear of the Centre Square by the railroad tracks, shop a great array of vendors, support our local farms and non-profits, listen to some music, and maybe have lunch and play a game of corn hole. We look forward to seeing you there, at Muzzy Field for a Blues or Legion game, or one of the many parks, pools, splash fields, baseball fields, volley ball fields, tennis courts or playgrounds that we are proud to have within our City.

Ellen Zoppo-Sassu is the mayor of Bristol.