

Effective & Efficient Campground Development

Are you planning to develop or expand your campground or RV park in the near future? Does the mere thought of the development process intimidate you? As a professional campground designer, I bristle at the different ways people use to "cut a corner" or "save some money." While many campground and RV park operators don't want to hire a professional, perhaps I can offer a few suggestions that might prove helpful.

Effective campground development is not a matter of popping in a couple of sites over here, or completing a fill-in-the-blanks form. Effective campground development is a process based on individual strategic analysis. What are the site's physical strengths and weaknesses? What are the local and regional market demands for camping/RV sites? Strengths need to be maximized in such a way that your facility stands out from all others. Weaknesses or potential problems need to be addressed in such a way that they are minimized or overcome. A site's strengths could include unique vistas, relative flatness, or proximity to water.



Photograph 1 illustrates a campground adjacent to major river. In addition to providing access for canoes and kayaks, the river offers opportunities for fishing, photography, and general relaxation. Yet, this campground has done nothing to promote access to the river. The campsites, in fact, are situated immediately adjacent to the watercourse, effectively blocking access to the river by the majority of campers. In other words, one of the property's strengths has not been developed to its fullest potential.

Effective campground development is different for each particular campground or RV park. Design is based on three distinct qualities: customer satisfaction, ease of campground management through reduced site maintenance, and safety.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction should be the No. 1 concern of every business. Ninety per cent of all our decisions to buy anything are based on our own experience or on the recommendation of someone else. An unsatisfied customer will not return, and if they are really disappointed with their experience, they will probably tell at least 10 other people.

In the campground industry, customer satisfaction is based, in part, on quality designed and developed facilities. You can have a wonderful operation, smiling staff, but if the basics - the campground layout, site size, shade, easy access to basic amenities - are not in order, the customer will not be satisfied. And an unsatisfied customer will not return. You can't fill a bucket very fast if it's leaking.

What are customers looking for? From my experience, campers are looking for proximity to amenities and like-minded others, privacy, easily accessible campsites, personal safety, a choice of service (water, electricity, sewer, telephone, and cable) and programs. A well-designed campground layout will accommodate the needs and wants of campers. The design starts with an inviting gate or entranceway and continues with ease of access into the park (read: no bottlenecks), a well-marked and laid-out road pattern, and continues all the way through to a spacious, furnished, clean, level campsite.

For campsites along riverbanks, customer satisfaction could be maximized if a public corridor was maintained adjacent to the river. Campsites could be developed along the corridor, still providing the visual qualities associated with a riverfront site. The net result of these types of considerations should be happy customers who show their appreciation through loyalty, increased business, word-of-mouth promotion and insensitivity to rival opportunities.

Ease of Campground Management

Operating a campground/RV park can be a stressful experience. It needn't be. Stressful situations often arise from circumstances that could have been avoided if a campground had been developed that considered the needs of the customer as well as the operator. Campgrounds and RV parks that include such features as electronic security gates, internal access gates, well-positioned registration offices, self-explanatory signage and self-directed recreation programs, can take much of the burden off campground operators.

What about grass cutting? Campgrounds can be laid out in such a way that grass cutting is totally eliminated. Sites are laid out utilizing existing vegetation as buffer. If required, additional plantings can be done to fill in thin areas.

Campground Safety

It might have been wise to start my discussion with campground safety. All the efforts you put into operating a profitable campground could be washed away by an accident or mishap that occurs on park property. When I visit campgrounds, I am often struck by the number of physical hazards caused by poor layouts, faulty construction practices, and improper maintenance. The natural resources can also pose a danger to campers. These potential liabilities could include poorly designed/constructed/maintained playgrounds, straight roads that encourage speeding, positioning of attractions too close to roads and traffic patterns, broken tree limbs overhanging campsites and buildings, poor lighting around washrooms, eroding trails, etc.



Photograph 2 illustrates the problems associated with a straight road. The No. 1 problem is the speeder who views the straight stretch as a chance to see if his vehicle actually can do zero to 60 in under five seconds! A curved road would discourage the temptation to accelerate. Secondly, look at the campsites themselves. Boring! One site after another, all in a row. No buffer. No site delineation. No character. Then look at all the grass that needs to be cut.

Think about the customers. What are they looking for? Effective design considers the worst-case scenario and incorporates sufficient controls to ensure that under normal circumstances, your customer will be safe. Have you adequately addresses safety in your designs, layouts, road patterns building and facility locations? The consequences of cutting corners could haunt you for years to come.

Most important, the end result of effective design should be an increased net profit. If You can demonstrate to your clientele that you have taken their needs into consideration through the design and layout of your campground and instituted safety checks throughout

the system, net revenues should increase as a direct result of increased traffic. As an operator, You can accommodate increased traffic because you have developed your facility in such a way that it's "easy" to manage. You have retained control. You have eliminated costly operations. You know what you are doing. What a great feeling!



What makes a design efficient?

- it's done right the first time
- costly facility maintenance is eliminated
- it will last well into the future