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Parks & Rec deserves the best, so apply now!

By LAUREN BORNFRIEND & PETE HOSKINS

Philadelphia's parks are poised for change. They have new potential they haven't had for decades. But for this potential to actually be achieved requires another step. And this one is quite simple.

Last fall, the city's voters overwhelmingly supported a charter amendment to reform the park and recreation system. It called for merging the two departments, placing direct accountability for their management and revitalization on the mayor and the appointment of a new parks and rec commission to be selected for the first time in a transparent and public process.

Soon this new commission will be appointed by Mayor Nutter, and he needs the best recommendations possible.

But first, applications must be submitted to City Council, which will hold a public hearing before forwarding nominations to the mayor. And this is where anyone who cares about parks and recreation gets to help.

What's clear is that as we strive to make Philadelphia a thriving and sustainable 21st century city in a growing region, parks and recreation are an as-yet unharnessed tool of economic and community development.

Better parks and recreation are a win-win-win for every citizen in every neighborhood in and surrounding the city, for businesses large and small, for visitors, students and investors.

The bad news is that city parks suffer from decades-long underfunding, with a budget lagging significantly behind increases to the total city budget.

The good news is that a Trust for Public Land study commissioned by the Philadelphia Parks Alliance has just reported that the parks generate hundreds of millions of dollars a year in health-care savings, increased tourism, community cohesion and environmental protection.

Which brings us to the new Parks and Recreation Department. It needs new ideas, new enthusiasm, new allies. The new commission - charged with creating guidelines for protection of park land and facilities, expanding and diversifying funding and resources, and promoting and enhancing the system's image - has a tremendous opportunity to be

part of what comes next.

The city and the nation face severe financial challenges. In fact, in this time of near-depression when people have dramatically less money to spend, parks take on an even higher role as free places to gather, play and take a breather from everyday worries and responsibilities.

Because these new opportunities come at such a daunting time, the new commissioners will face tough challenges. Preserving and improving our parks will require entrepreneurial thinking along with the experience, flexibility and know-how to get things done. It requires talented innovators with complementary skills and backgrounds who share a vision of all that our parks and recreation can be, and the will to take the steps to make it happen. It requires the curiosity to learn about successes in other cities and the creativity to apply relevant lessons here. And of course, they must love parks.

It's time to think about identifying possible candidates for the new commission who have what it takes to shepherd our parks and recreation to the next phase, to bring forth people who have a record as change agents and who have respect for the unfulfilled potential of our parks and recreation.

It's time to ask them to consider applying. Then the best need to be recommended to City Council and the mayor.

If you know someone who fills the bill, please ask them to apply. You can download the application at www.phila.gov or pick one up at Room 402 in City Hall. You can also download the application and learn more at the Parks Alliance Web site at www.philaparks.org.

The deadline is March 9. *

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