

Greg Petry Thrives on a Challenge

Overseeing the administrative functions of the 21-square-mile park district, covering 535 acres of land and serving nearly 71,000 people, is a challenge.

By Steve and Suz Trusty

A day at the park isn't all picnic for Greg Petry, executive director of the Waukegan, IL, Park District and past president of the Sports Turf Managers Association. Overseeing the administrative functions of the 21-square-mile park district, covering 535 acres of land and serving nearly 71,000 people, is a challenge. But then Petry thrives on challenge.

Managing the "front office" is a challenge much like walking a circus tightrope. The spotlight is on. The crowd has preconceived expectations of how the job should be done. There is limited time, space and funds. Each step influences the success or failure of the performance.

In the rush of a busy season, many within the industry forget there are sports turf managers working as long and hard at a desk as others are on the field. A sports field has to exist before it can be maintained. Funds must be generated. The commitment to better and safer sports turf areas must be kept strong.

Waukegan's 37 park properties include an 18-hole and 9-hole golf course, a bird sanctuary, nature preserve, greenhouse,

two recreation centers, a center for the arts, two outdoor swimming pools, a "farmhouse" and museum, a rental hall, 14 picnic areas, 16 basketball courts, 19 tennis courts, 15 ball diamonds and six soccer fields. There's a flurry of activity year-round, with 53 full-time and 200 part-time employees to direct.

Waukegan's Park District isn't a division under the city's banner, but a separate entity, with its own elected Board of Commissioners, its own land acquisition, improvement initiatives and taxation authority.

The board appoints the park district's executive director, who is responsible for "implementing and executing" the policies and direction they set forth. The focus is on planning and finances. Petry was appointed to this position in January of 1995.

He says, "I started with the Waukegan Park District in August of 1987 as superintendent of parks, and served in that capacity until I became executive director. As superintendent, I was responsible for the park maintenance and planning divisions. I managed day-to-day programs. As executive director, I'm less involved with

day-to-day activities. Now I concentrate more on making it possible for the department heads to do their job."

Waukegan, like many older Midwestern cities, has multiple challenges. Its population is a mix of long-time residents and newcomers – senior citizens, young families, people from different ethnic backgrounds – all with their own ideas about the recreation facilities.

Petry says, "It's very important to be open-minded and non-discriminatory. Everyone must make an effort to understand other points of view. The exciting thing is that it can be done – and everyone benefits from it."

Like many other "mature" cities, most of Waukegan's park land was allocated years ago. Petry says, "We have a need for more space, but the costs are a tremendous investment. It's vital that we analyze the use of existing facilities and prioritize them.

"For example, interest in soccer is growing rapidly. Though our population is 23 percent Hispanic, over 50 percent of our school children are Hispanic. Many of their parents consider soccer the number-one sport. It's not unusual for



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Managing the "front office" is a challenge that Greg Petry finds exciting.

3,000 people to turn out for an adult soccer game. To serve this group, soccer facilities must be in top shape. To be fair to the entire community, all areas must be safe and pleasing."

When Petry first joined the district, some parks were deteriorating. Petry's immediate challenge was to unite the community with a sense of pride for "their" parks.

Petry says, "Al Grosche Field is one of the best park-and-recreational baseball complexes in the nation. The people of Waukegan have always supported athletics, especially baseball programs. Recognizing the success of baseball at Grosche Field, the city renovated it in 1980." It was a major capital project that included the renovation of turf; the construction of dugouts, two bull pens, a practice batting cage and a concession/pressbox with restrooms; and the installation of perimeter fencing, spectators' bleachers and an irrigation system.

The community united behind this project and their commitment didn't stop with the renovation. Petry says, "The success of baseball programs prompted park district decision makers to make a commitment to athletic field maintenance."

In 1988, Petry and Mike Trigg, who moved up from parks supervisor to Petry's former position as superintendent of parks, submitted Al Grosche Field for the Beam Clay/STMA Baseball Diamond of the Year Award.

"Earning the Field of the Year Award led to my active involvement with STMA," says Petry. "Mike Schiller, a fellow 'parks guy' and a great friend, had been devoting lots of effort to STMA and urging me to do so. I found out first hand what Schiller had been so excited about. I met these great, friendly people who were super sources of information. And they were all committed to raising the level of professionalism and promoting better and safer sports turf areas."

Petry tackled the challenge of "active involvement" in typical fashion. He jumped in to help. He and Dr. Gil Landry devoted countless hours to the organization, especially over the last four years.

Petry gives accolades to Landry, the board members, committee members, volunteers and the staff of Smith, Bucklin & Associates for their efforts on behalf of STMA. Petry says, "We've come through some critical times over the last few years, but these people were there to help when the chips were down. I'm proud of the progress we've made, and can't thank these people enough for all they did."

Petry's head-on approach to challenges is a life-long trait. A native New Yorker, born and raised in East Brunswick, he always loved sports. He ran cross country and track throughout junior high and high school, and his first summer job, at age 16, was as a recreation specialist with the parks and recreation department. He earned his BS degree, *magna cum laude*, at Manhattan College, Bronx, NY, with the intent of becoming a teacher and coach, but changed his mind. "The New York City 'attitude' at the high school level let me know that I didn't want to spend 20 or 30 years in that position," says Petry. "I switched my focus to the area I'd really enjoyed, parks and recreation."

He earned his master of science degree in the Recreation and Park Program at Penn State University, then served a one-year graduate internship as an administrative assistant. "The internship program was designed to provide a variety of experience in the field and to build enthusiasm. It did both. I was exposed to all aspects of the program, having a part in everything from writing grant proposals to developing policies and manuals."

Petry then took a position as an assistant director of a park district in Illinois, where he headed day-to-day operations

and assisted the director in formulating policies. Always on an upward path, Petry next accepted a position as coordinator of park services in Park Ridge, IL, where he worked for five years, then applied for and got the position as Waukegan's superintendent of parks in 1987.

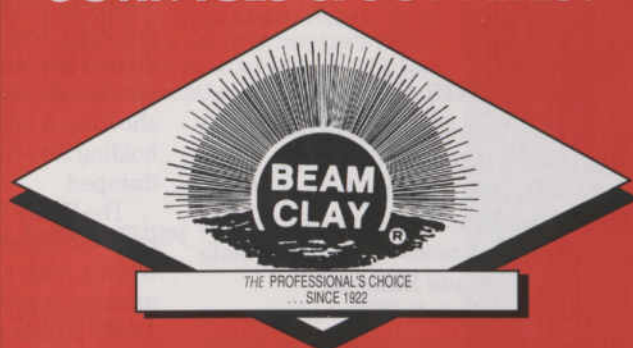
Petry is active in other professional associations as well as STMA. He served on the board of regents of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), Park Maintenance Management School; has served as director of the Parks and Natural Management section of the Illinois Park and Recreation Association (IPRA); and is currently serving as president of the Midwest Institute of Park Executives (MIPE). In 1991, he was named MIPE Park Professional of the year.

Petry and his wife, Candia, another east coast native, met in college. It's obvious that thriving on challenge is a family tradition. Candia is a pharmacist, and the couple have twin boys, Stephen and Daniel, who will be five in March. It's a juggling act to satisfy family, job and association commitments, but one that Petry declares is well worthwhile in terms of both personal and professional growth.

He says, "There's so much potential in the sports turf field and there's so much yet to do to realize that potential. I urge everyone connected with this industry to get actively involved, to volunteer your time and talents to help STMA meet its goals. I guarantee that the more you give, the more you'll get back."

Steve and Suz Trusty are partners in Trusty & Associates, a consulting firm located in Council Bluffs, IA. Steve is executive director of Sports Turf Managers Association.

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