Providing public open space for high-density communities - Lyndall Bostock, Manager Urban Space, Narromine Shire Council

Do residents living in high-density communities' value and use their open space differently?

Introduction - Whilst working as a recreation planner, I was faced with a rapidly growing population and the task of determining the public open space provision requirements for my community. Through researching all of the elements that go along with this provision, such as size, location, accessibility and infrastructure choices, it came to my attention that I did not understand how the existing network of public open space in my community was being used, or if it was even of value to the community. I saw this as an opportunity to explore what the community wanted and, more importantly, what residents required in nearby public open space that could be utilised to lead active and healthy lifestyles.

The way in which residents' value and use public open space is relevant to many urban and recreation planners. As rapid population growth occurs in urban areas, public infrastructure often becomes strained. It is fundamental that urban and recreation planners understand the wants and needs of a community in order to provide well-planned public open spaces. At the time of this study, there was a rapid increase in high-density living arrangements within my local government area, and as a recreation planner, I had no theoretical basis on which to justify the provision levels of public open space. This led me to examining the available literature and researching this area.

The Study - This cross-sectional study explored the perceived value and use of public open space in high- and low-density communities in a select area of rapid growth on the outskirts of Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Population growth in this area has been rapid and ongoing, and high-density housing developments proposed as a solution to this demand. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to a purposive sample of 1089 high and low-density residents, resulting in 159 responses. Residents' responses to the questionnaire covered the topics of public open space usage and value, as well as self-reported health data. Multiple residential sites dispersed across the local government area were selected to increase the generalisability of this population to the wider metropolitan area.

Do high-density residents value public open space? - Yes! 100% of all high-density residents indicated that their nearby POS was important to them. When questioned about the specific qualities residents valued about their nearby POS, nature was collectively important to 100% of residents. Also rated highly was the opportunity for physical activity and the positive aesthetics that POS provides for the community.

Do high-density residents use public open space differently? - Yes! The data collected identified a significant difference in the time spent in public open space by high-density residents. Whilst regularity of visitation was similar between low- and high-density residents, people were staying longer in their nearby public open space in high-density areas. This variance can be attributed to the differences in living spaces between high- and low-density residents and the restriction of access to private open space such as a backyard or garden. Whether desirable or not, public open spaces are increasingly being considered as additional living space for the shrinking urban home, which adds an element of liveability and connection to nature for the surrounding neighbourhood.

In addition to visiting and staying longer in public open space, high-density residents also indicated they participate in a wider range of activities in the space, in comparison to their low-density counterparts. Popular activities for high-density residents were walking, playing with children,

sitting/relaxing and observing nature. We all know that public open space is often used for these activities, but when you consider the importance of these activities and the availability of the space to engage in these activities for health, social and emotional wellness, the importance of public open space for high-density residents drastically increases.

How can urban and recreational planners provide public open space for healthy high-density communities? - Firstly, we need to consider how important public open space is for communities that lack the ability to be outside and enjoy their own backyards and gardens. The importance of this space is different for high-density residents because of the value it provides to their social, physical and mental health. As identified in this study, nature and aesthetics appeal most to high-density residents and consideration should be given to these elements when planning for public open space.

We need to consider that high-density residents stay in the space for longer. The space should not only be comfortable, with amenities to service these stays, but well connected to encourage active transport options. Consider public open space as an extension to the home and a place to connect socially with others. It should be easy to access, with comfortable seating, shade, shelter, well maintained and clean, with access to water and amenities. This study identified the biggest deterrent from accessing public open space for high-density residents was poor maintenance, followed closely by poor security and access; in contrast the biggest attraction to use public open space was improved infrastructure, such as play elements, fitness equipment and toilets. These elements should be of importance to planners, to encourage higher usage of our POS and gain the flow on benefits to population health.

The question still exists ... *should we be providing more public open space to high-density communities?* Unfortunately we aren't in the space to answer this yet, with the lack of research in this area. With no current standard of provision, this is dependent upon each individual community and their priorities. The literature has already made a clear link between public open space provision and health improvements, however the potential increased demand for public open space in high-density communities needs to become a priority to ensure the health of our future communities. Further exploration of specific requirements for our POS distribution and provision levels with high-density areas is needed to ensure that we are acknowledging these community's needs.

Conclusion - As an urban and recreation planner, you have the ability to either positively or negatively impact a community through the way that you provide public open space. You have the ability to positively impact a community's health, economic, social and environmental status. Findings from this study aim to spark the conversation about how we can continue to improve each element of the community through public open space planning. As high-density developments increase in expanding cities, we are only now grappling with the huge task ahead of the urban planning industry. In a wider picture, this a starting point for the development of a public open space provision standard suitable to high- and low- density communities. However, there are small steps that can be made now to our current spaces to make our public open space more desirable and comfortable for residents who may use this space in a different way to which it is designed. By working together, urban planners, policy makers, health professionals and academics can contribute to the wider improvement of communities and their health and I challenge you to start this process now.