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Spartanburg County Council's action is a wise investment for the county

By STEPHANIE WAGNER

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Stephanie Wagner

Spartanburg County Council's unanimous approval of the 2 percent hospitality tax for parks funding, effective this year, validates the fact that parks and trails are critical community investments.

Parks are necessary for the public good, not simply as an amenity.

People with access to parks and trails can incorporate physical activity and stress reduction into their daily lives, which in turn improves health and productivity. South Carolina has one of the highest obesity rates in the nation, and more than 16 percent of our nation's gross domestic product is consumed by health care related expenditures. The costs of our collective inactivity will continue to skyrocket unless we get serious about building infrastructure such as parks to promote active living.

The Mary Black Foundation's 2006 Active Living Report Card notes: "Communities that focused only on educating people about healthy living and changing their individual physical activity and eating behaviors have had limited success in improving health outcomes. Changing the environments in which people live is an essential strategy in fighting the obesity epidemic."

The unanimous passage of the hospitality tax shows Spartanburg County's commitment to providing all residents an environment with nearby parks, playgrounds, trails or natural areas.

Parks are integral to our quality of life. Parks help mitigate the "nature-deficit disorder" that threatens our children's mental and physical health and their appreciation for nature. Today's children spend six to 10 hours a day in front of a screen, not creating memories of walking to school or playing outside.

Research also shows that access to parks is strongly correlated to decreases in crime and juvenile delinquency.

Public space provides our aging population an outlet for social interaction, physical exertion and a reason to stay in Spartanburg and "age in place."

Passive parks, such as greenways along rivers or forested trails, help protect our water and air quality by protecting natural buffers from flooding, erosion and air pollution.

More and more, magazines are publishing lists of the "best places to live" that have special characteristics for families, retirees, professionals and businesses. The winners almost always share the qualities that parks provide: significant green space, family-friendly activities and physical recreation options.

We are fortunate to have a mild Southern climate that allows us to be outdoors for a majority of the year and maximize the opportunities of parks and trails.

The benefits of parks should not be granted only to the segments of our population who can drive to a special facility or who can afford gym memberships, homes with large yards, user fees for sports leagues or housing developments with pools.

Spartanburg County Council should be commended for dedicating funding to the long-term improvement and maintenance of our parks system. This investment will pay huge dividends for our community's health, our economy and our environment.

Stephanie Wagner is a land use planning specialist for Upstate Forever.

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