***HOSTING A COMMUNITY OPEN HOUSE***

Do your neighboring communities know you (or your park/forest) exist? Do they understand the great amenities offered there?

A great way to make sure is to invite them to attend a community open house.

In 2016 in conjunction with the Gateway Communities initiative that seeks to connect our state parks and forests with the towns and villages that surround them, PPFF worked with the Borough of Ligonier on a variety of project. One of the components of the initiative was an open house at Linn Run State Park.

***What is a community open house and why would you want to host one? Good question!***

An open house is a place where community members, stakeholders and the general public can learn about a project or a location. In this case, they would be learning about the amenities offered at your park or forest, opportunities for visiting the location, and what you do as a friends group.

You may be surprised to learn that not everyone knows who you are or that the park or forest welcomes visitors! Folks may be new to an area, feel intimidated to visit a new location, or believe that the park isn’t “for them” due to confusing signage or lack of understanding of how Pennsylvania parks and forests work.

If you want to host an open house, the first question to ask yourself is: What do I hope to achieve with the event? Perhaps you would like to let folks know about other trails in the park to reduce pressure on a well-known or favorite trail. Perhaps you want to share volunteer opportunities. Perhaps you want to showcase a new project. Perhaps you want local businesses to know about the park so that they can tell others about the opportunities available.

Answering that initial question will help you plan your event, build your guest list, and achieve success.

***Steps to planning:***

First, make sure that your park or forest manager is on board! Meeting the staff at the park or forest is just as important as meeting the Friends. The manager may be able to help build the guest list, identify places to showcase, or share some additional goals for the event.

Second, choose a date and time.

Third, build your guest list. When we hosted the open house at Linn Run State Park we actually did it in two parts. On Friday evening, we partnered with the Chamber of Commerce to host an evening event with their members, with the intention of building relationships with local businesses and helping these businesses to understand about the park. The following day, we hosted an open house for the general public. Knowing your goal will determine your audience.

Fourth, identify how you will market to the audience. Is this a targeted event? If so, will you invite via personal invitation? Print or email? Who will prepare and manage the invitation list?

Is it for the general public? How will you market? Will you create a Facebook event? Will you share on regional calendars? Will you do a press release? Will you put it on the PPFF calendar (of course you will!)

Fifth, work with your park manager/district forester to identify what you want to showcase—where will people meet? Who will offer tours? How many tours? Include a short presentation by the Friends group outlining the things you have done and the things you want to do. Consider leading a stroll or other simple activity.

Sixth, identify and assign volunteer roles. These may include;

* Public relations
* List management
* Food planning
* Greeter
* Tour guide
* Announcer
* Map designer

Seventh, identify what you will need on the day of the event

* Name tags
* Maps
* Brochures or information sheets
* Membership brochure
* Program for the day
* Kids scavenger hunt
* Display board about the friends, park, and/or forest
* Question board or table staffed with a knowledgeable volunteer or staff member
* Signage—directional, etc.
* Sign-in sheet to capture names—don’t let those future volunteers fall through the cracks!

Eighth, refreshments are IMPORTANT!!

People connect over food. It helps to break the ice, provides a shield, and attracts attendees. It doesn’t have to be difficult or fancy. It could be cookies and lemonade, or a build-your-own s’mores fire, etc. You may even partner with a local business who would welcome the exposure to new clients.

Ninth, have your day-of game plan – and your back up plan if needed (could be your wet-weather plan, a plan if you are too successful, etc.) Communicate your plans to your volunteers, board, and park/forest staff so everyone knows their roles and where they need to be.

Tenth? Have fun! This is a fun way to get to know your community and local businesses.

After the event, it is important to have a debrief – what worked, didn’t work, etc. Were any connections made? Who will follow up on those connections? Consider a follow-up email or mailing to those who signed in to your event and provide an email.

***Other tips:***

Be sure to specifically invite local elected officials – the township supervisors, borough council members, county commissioners, and state senators and representatives who represent your neighbors, as well as local chambers of commerce, visitors’ bureau officials, and service clubs like Rotary, American Legion, and VFW.

We can’t say this enough: Food is important!

Attachments/samples:

* A flyer / handout prepared for the Linn Run State Park open house
* The invitation that was sent to elected officials
* Sample press release