

# WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Bright days ahead for public parks and recreation? You bet, says futurist Jim Carroll.

**T**he future of public parks and recreation? Sunny with a chance of excellent opportunity, says futurist Jim Carroll.

Sounds good, but just who is Jim Carroll, you may ask? Well, in addition to being one of the country's leading futurists, an expert on innovation and trends, Carroll is the keynote speaker at this year's NRPA Congress & Exposition in Salt Lake City. He will deliver his address on Wednesday, Oct. 14 at 8:30 a.m.

Carroll doesn't come at this stuff armed with voodoo and a crystal ball. Instead, he has delivered strategies for innovation, branding, and leadership for Fortune 500 clients that include CapitalOne, Lincoln Financial, IBM, and a host of others.

These are big dogs, in other words. Somewhat gospel, his words carry weighty influence in the boardrooms of these American corporate behemoths.

So, just what makes parks and recreation's future so bright? Well, according to Carroll, a number of components are conspiring to place public parks and recreation in a command position. Among these are the growing popularity of social networking tools, an aging population, and new ways of looking at the concept of community.

We recently caught up with Carroll to see what makes innovation tick, and to learn more about what he has in store for NRPA delegates in October.

**Parks & Recreation:** *Some organizations innovate while others die? What's the secret?*

**Jim Carroll:** It really comes down to leadership, and a willingness to accept that from this point on, you are going to

have to accept that the fundamentals of the world around you are changing rapidly, and will continue to do so. You've got to innovate—do things differently—simply in order to keep up with, and hopefully surpass, expectations.

I often say that it's really quite simple: Innovative organizations anticipate obvious future trends and begin to shift fundamental assumptions and attitudes in order to advance change.

Do that, and innovation is really quite simple.

**P&R:** *How do the key elements for innovation in the corporate world apply to nonprofits and municipal entities?*

**Carroll:** I don't see it as being any different. I always advise folks: Innovation isn't just about Steve Jobs coming up with a cool product like the iPhone. It's about having a leadership group that challenges every member of the organization to think about three key issues every day: What can we do to run this business better? What can we do to grow this business? What can we do to transform this business?

Substitute nonprofit or municipal into those phrases, and it still works.

What can I do to run my business better? There's no shortage of cool ideas on how to streamline registration processes in order to reduce cost.

What can I do to grow usage of my facilities? There's a wealth of ideas on how to use social networks to make people aware of your programs.

What can I do to transform my [citizen or friends] group? There's a new citizen activism online; how can we take advantage of it to continue to build ongoing respect for nature, to redesign our municipal spaces, or do



Jim Carroll offers 10 examples of trends park and recreation professionals should be aware of.

other awesome things?

Give me a community, take apart what we do there, and we could come up with a zillion innovative ideas. The challenge is getting people energized, thinking, strategizing, implementing.

Making innovation work is hard work—and it all comes down to leadership.

**P&R:** *It appears that a big part of innovation is unlocking or realizing your potential. Talk a little bit about this.*

**Carroll:** I think a lot of people don't realize that they should be innovators. They think that it is something for a special "chosen few." I've seen many organizations blow themselves up because they've established a special innovation team and have sent them into a special room to come up with ideas. Talk about exclusionary.

We need a culture in which everyone is thinking about the three questions above, and is given the latitude to make things happen. It's about empowering people to actually do things—try things out—and fail on occasion. Failure is good because that is how you learn about new stuff.

The other thing: How many people actually have innovation in their job descriptions, or are rewarded for being innovative? Do salary reviews include an assessment of innovation? If not, they should.

**P&R:** *What does innovation look like during an economic recession?*

**Carroll:** Someone once said that a crisis is not a good thing to waste. I think everything is right for innovation right now because we know there are a lot of big challenges to overcome. What's obviously worked for us in the past might not work for us going forward into the future since many things have changed in a fundamental way and, given limited resources, creativity is probably the best thing we've got going for us at this point. Creativity is the driver of innovation.

I think a lot of it is about mindset, too. When the recession hit, I saw that people were going through what I've come to call the "Seven Stages of Economic Grief." Obviously, lots of folks went into the shock, anger, and denial stage pretty quickly. I think if you consciously move yourself along into the

acceptance stage, you'll have a better attitude and will realize that innovation is something you can focus on to get things going again.

**P&R:** *Can you provide some examples of the types of trends that park and recreation professionals should be aware of?*

**Carroll:** I can offer 10:

1. Era of big transformations. In five to 10 years, we will look back at this point in time and go, "Wow!"
2. Hyperconnectivity. Everything is plugging in. What we do today with smart highways and interactive body sensors is just the starting point. There's a huge link between ourselves, our digital lifestyles, and how we interact with parks and recreation.
3. Next-generation re-engagement. With Baby Boomers retiring, next-generation is very different. For parks and recreation, this means a new sense of activism, a new means of fundraising, and a new means of associating. They'll affect more community and national and global change faster than ever before. Parks and recreation will have to learn to change and evolve faster according to demands.
4. Health care. Not the current funding debate; instead, the key trend is a complete flip in medical orientation—from "We fix you after you are sick" to "We know what you are likely to become sick with, and will base our treatment on that."
5. Fragmentation. The impact of a faster, more highly connected world is the ever-more-rapid fragmentation of sports/recreation/hobbies into smaller, more widespread niches.
6. Community redefined. For example, we'll tend to think more locally as we solve the big problems that we face—whether with health care, poverty, energy, or the environment.
7. Water/Energy/Environment. Water as the next oil, the rapid evolution of new solutions through the next five years with innovation coming from nontraditional players, and a big impact on community design.
8. Workforce trends. Nomadic work-

ers, contingent workforce, de-scaling of large organizations, rapid partnerships. Big workforce trends have big impacts on community, expectations, and recreation. Wal-Mart has gone to 24-hour shopping to accommodate new workforce trends. How do we manage the 3 a.m. tour group?

9. Demographic trends. Lots of obvious stuff here: Hispanic trends, but this can be billed in other ways. For example, in Toronto, some of our baseball diamonds are being converted to cricket pitches.

10. The expectation gap. The current funding crisis is but the starting point. There is a big disconnect between what the public expects and what the public can afford. Innovative thinking, new ideas, new partnerships; the existing model likely won't carry us forward, and so we'll need a lot of new thinking as to what will.

**P&R:** *With the explosion of social networking tools, the way we connect with one another is changing every day. What does this mean for public parks and recreation?*

**Carroll:** I think it's a great opportunity for park and recreation professionals to connect with one another, and to re-engage with the citizen/customer/user in a new and different way.

Innovation comes from ideas, and if you turn yourself into "Park and Recreation Dude 2.0" using social networking tools to link to your peers, you've got a whole new way to understand their ideas—and how you can fit those into your areas of responsibility.

Plugging yourself into Twitter or Facebook or LinkedIn is like plugging yourself into a river of ideas. Get in, get your feet wet, and you will discover that there truly can be some things out there you hadn't thought about before.

Then there is the whole aspect of re-engaging with the community; huge, huge opportunities here.

**P&R:** *President Obama's recovery plan focuses on health care, renewable energy, and education, among other things.*

*What does this mean for park and recreation professionals?*

**Carroll:** I think that parks and recreation is perfectly aligned to play a key role in each of these major trends.

Health care isn't just about realigning the structure of the system. The really deep, transformative trend is that we are moving from a health care system in which we fix you after you are sick to one where we know what conditions you are likely to develop (based on your genetic profile), and plan a course of action from that. Obviously, we'll have a better idea of who will develop lifestyle diseases, and maybe we can take a more proactive approach in terms of wellness with them.

The other part of health care is the simple reality that we will have a huge expectation gap. Simply put, there are 78 million Baby Boomers, and only 46 million Gen Xers. The latter is going to be hard-pressed to pay for the health costs of the former.

The result is that wellness, managing obesity, providing a healthy lifestyle will all become a big part of how we will put a cap on rapidly spiraling health-care costs.

In terms of renewable energy, I think we are on the edge of some remarkable change here. I really believe that there is some global momentum going on in terms of innovative science, and I think we can begin to transition from a reliance on fossil fuels—although that certainly won't disappear.

If we think about how big a trend this is, we can begin to more aggressively re-architect our urban and rural areas to fit renewable concepts. I think we'll be able to be far more aggressive in terms of bike-path infrastructure, for example, because people will accept a more aggressive agenda.

Education is undergoing a huge change; community colleges and just-in-time knowledge are going to play a bigger role in society. People will develop short-term skills, use them, and then transition into other new and different careers.

I think a lot of these new skills will revolve around the big challenges of society: health care, the environment, and energy. In effect, we'll see a lot more people going into careers with a big societal impact.

And so a career in parks and recreation will have a huge appeal because it provides that personal sense of accomplishment from helping to fix our society and provide a better life.

**P&R:** *What role does an active citizen play in promoting healthier, happier communities in the 21st century?*

**Carroll:** Simply put, we have to deal with the obesity and lifestyle crisis that faces the country. Not doing that would be one of the greatest tragedies of the 21st century.

If it isn't dealt with, it could be the one thing that bankrupts the country. Fixing the structure of the health-care system is one thing; having a society where people take responsibility for their behavior is another.

Personally, I think that dealing with this challenge is going to be bigger and more difficult than what Washington is dealing with in terms of health-care funding. And parks and recreation professionals and supporters are—and must be—on the front line on this one.

**P&R:** *What can attendees expect to learn from your keynote address at October's NRPA Congress & Exposition in Salt Lake City?*

**Carroll:** Hopefully, I can give them a sense of inspiration that the future is still very much out there, that despite the extremely challenging times some of the attendees find themselves in, there is still much that can be done. I think people want to believe that there is a lot of opportunity out there—for the country, for their region, and for themselves.

I certainly believe we live in a world of transformative times and big opportunity, and I want to be able to share my passion in that belief with your folks.—D.V.