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OPINION

Healthy Parks, Healthy Portland and Clean Air

Hooray for smoke-free parks, spaces

BY MIDGE PURCELL

We know that physical activity can produce long-term health benefits and prevent chronic diseases, the leading cause of death and disability in the United States. It also, relieves stress, counters obesity, and increases your longevity. Most of us need to exercise more.

Maintaining a physical activity routine of 30 minutes daily of exercise for adults, and 60 minutes daily for children can result in better physical and mental health. You may want to check out Portland Parks and Recreation for



all the different recreational activities they offer.

Also, congratulations to Portland Parks and Recreation for now becoming a smoke-free environment

throughout the entire park system! The policy takes effect on July 1 and aligns with Portland Parks and Recreation's focus on "Healthy Parks, Healthy Portland." It requires all park areas

and events to be free of smoke and tobacco in any form including products such as cigarettes, cigarillos, cigars, clove cigarette, e-cigarettes, nicotine vaporizers, nicotine liquids, hookahs, pipes, chew, snuff, smokeless tobacco, kreteks and marijuana.

African Americans have particularly high rates of smoking-related chronic dis-

ease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns the dangers of the use of e-cigarettes as studies have found carcinogens and toxins in e-cigarettes.

Creating healthy and safe environments protects Portland residents and visitors, especially children, and protects parks and natural areas from the potential risk of fires and environmental harm caused by littering of cigarette butts and other tobacco-related waste.

This policy also supports individuals who are trying to quit smoking or tobacco use or have already quit. It reduces children and youth exposure to smoking and tobacco use, which not only protects their health, but also helps discourage them from starting a habit that is difficult to quit.

The leading cause of pre-

ventable death in Oregon is still tobacco-related diseases which costs Multnomah County \$223 million dollars each year in medical care, and \$196 million dollars in lost productivity.

Multnomah County recently awarded a three-year grant to increase the number of African Americans with access to tobacco/nicotine-free environments, among other things. One of three methods is to increase the number of outdoor settings implementing new or expanded tobacco and/or nicotine-free policies.

Called the Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health, the grant was issued as a way to create policy, systems, and environmental changes affecting the health of the county's African American/Black community in particular, through both nutrition

and tobacco policies to change the environment. These policies span the life-course and reach infants, youth, pregnant women, adults, and elders.

As Portland Parks Commissioner Amanda Fritz said, "expanding Portland Parks and Recreation existing tobacco-free policy across the entire system sends a consistent message. It helps create a healthy and safe environment within all of Portland Parks and Recreation -- especially the children and youth." Portland Parks and Recreation offers a variety of fun activities, listed on their website (check out summer free for all events) and includes amenities such as public transportation through TriMet, restrooms, signs, and parking.

Midge Purcell is director of advocacy and public policy for the Urban League of Portland.

Education Reform: The Equity and Excellence Project

Confronting the obstacles to college degrees

BY MARC H. MORIAL

All across the country, people are gathering to observe an annual academic rite of passage: graduation.

In a scene that will be played out countless times during this season of celebration, family and friends will dutifully take their seats in auditoriums and open fields around the nation and proudly look on as their loved ones walk across stages to receive their diplomas or degrees and, finally, turn the tassel on their graduation caps.

This tradition holds much more significance than its primary function as the formal recognition of a student's academic achievement. It is also firmly rooted in our American belief that education—particularly higher education—is the key to greater opportunity and the chance to live the American



dream.

The era when a high school diploma was enough to climb the ladder into America's middle class is long gone. In today's increasingly high-tech society, it is a college education, or degree, that has become the minimum requirement for that climb up our nation's social and economic opportunity ladders. Access to college, therefore, cannot remain a privilege afforded to a few when it has become a prerequisite to achieve greater success by the many.

In recognition of this enduring state of academic affairs, the National Urban League is spearheading the "Equity and Excellence Project." The project—which has six areas of academic focus tightly related to our organization's mission, including common core standards and improved access to high-quality curricula and effective teachers—has also made college attainment, and most importantly, completion one of its priorities.

Right now, there is much to

celebrate in our country when it comes to academic achievement in African-American and Latino communities. Today, we enjoy the highest high school graduation rates in history. More students of color are in college and dropout rates are at historic lows. But more work lies ahead.

Despite the fact that more blacks and Hispanics are getting a college education than ever before, there is a gap in postsecondary attainment. In 2013, about 15 percent of Hispanics had a bachelor's degree or higher, degree attainment was at 20 percent for African Americans and 40 percent for whites, according to recent Pew Research Center analysis.

When a young man or woman is denied access to opportunity through education, we all lose. That potential graduate loses a well-known and well-worn path to individual success. College Board research demonstrated that people with bachelor degrees earned over \$21,000 more than high school graduates. People with some

college and no postsecondary degree earned 14 percent more than high school graduates who worked full time.

When young people are not obtaining postsecondary degrees, our nation suffers from the loss of their talent, their increased tax revenues, their civic engagement and more.

As was often quoted by President John F. Kennedy, "a rising tide lifts all boats." We need to rethink our funding of grants, we need to take a serious look at our student loan

system, we—as a nation—need to confront head on all the obstacles to equity in access to quality postsecondary education.

The return on our investment of the time, effort and money necessary to increase college attainment and completion, would be a competitive American workforce, a stronger economy and thriving communities.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

The Law Offices of Patrick John Sweeney, P.C.

Patrick John Sweeney

Attorney at Law

1549 SE Ladd

Portland, Oregon

Portland: (503) 244-2080

Hillsboro: (503) 244-2081

Facsimile: (503) 244-2084

Email: Sweeney@PDXLawyer.com