Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation

10 YEAR MASTER PLAN

A Vision for the Future
Park and Recreation Mission Statement:

To enrich the lives of our citizens through the stewardship of the County’s natural resources and the efficient and responsive provision of quality leisure opportunities, experiences, and partnerships.
INTRODUCTION

The 10 Year Park and Recreation Master Plan for Mecklenburg County makes ambitious recommendations to expand and improve our recreation system. The plan includes facilities and programs for Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation and for the County’s towns with parks and recreation departments. A series of bond referendums in the coming decade would fund the plan, to meet the needs of our growing population. The plan is clear:

The time to expand our system is NOW, because the opportunity to acquire new facilities acreage is running out!

Recommendations are based on: desires expressed in a survey of citizens across the County, “best practices” of leading park and recreation systems, interviews with focus groups and community leaders, and recommendations of professional staff and consultants with broad experience. The actual plan has thousands of pages, available at www.parkandrec.com
CITIZENS SURVEY RESULTS

In an extensive countywide survey, Mecklenburg residents say we need more parks and recreation facilities. More than a thousand households responded. Residents rank the following as top facility needs:

- Walking and biking trails 74%
- Large community/district parks 63%
- Nature center and trails 62%
- Small (2-10 acres) neighborhood parks 61%
- Park shelters and picnic areas 59%

(The survey allowed several choices.)

Residents also say we need more recreation programs, specifically: special events/festivals, adult fitness and wellness, family recreation/outdoor adventure, nature education, and education/life skills programs.

Residents say they would be most willing to commit tax dollars to:

- Purchase land to preserve open/green space 45%
- Develop new, connect existing walking/biking trails 34%
- Use floodplain greenways to develop trails/facilities 34%
- Fix-up/repair older park buildings/recreation centers 26%
- Upgrade existing neighborhood/community parks 25%

(The survey allowed multiple choices.)
NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND RANKINGS

The Master Plan prioritizes needs for facilities and programs according to a scoring system based on many factors—the citizens survey, evaluations of professional staff and consultants, coverage areas of existing facilities and programs, etc.

**Top 10 priorities for new facilities are:**
1. Walking and biking trails
2. Small neighborhood parks
3. Nature center and trails
4. Large community parks and regional parks
5. Indoor fitness and exercise facilities
6. Playground equipment and play areas
7. Indoor swimming pools/leisure pools
8. Indoor running/walking track
9. Community gardens
10. Outdoor swimming and spraygrounds

**Top 10 priorities for programs are:**
1. Adult fitness and wellness programs
2. Special events/festivals
3. Family recreation/outdoor adventure programs
4. Nature education programs
5. Education/life skills
6. Youth learn-to-swim programs
7. Water fitness programs
8. Senior programs
9. Youth/teen fitness and wellness
10. Tennis lessons, clinics, and leagues
Mecklenburg County is in the closing leg of a race for land, to preserve some of what is left of our natural environment. We race against some of the fastest urban and suburban development in America. Time is running out. By 2030, an estimated 96% of Mecklenburg County will be developed.

The Master Plan used a process called “Greenprinting,” to identify 60 properties totaling 3,578 acres as its “Tier 1” priority for preservation, plus 28 more properties totaling 2,591 acres as the “Tier 2” priority. The Master Plan designates them targets for “stewardship” by the County, Mecklenburg’s cities and towns, conservation groups such as Trust for Public Land, or by conservation easements on private property. But the County must play the leading role.

“Greenprinting” rated the land with point system that included wildlife preservation, tree and vegetation cover, land adjacent to nature preserves, and protection of water quality. Highest points were given for large parcels because many animal and plant species require large areas to survive. Each stewardship site covers at least five acres. The plan recommends that five “Land Banked” properties owned by the County, or parts of them, be developed as nature preserves:

• Stevens Creek Nature Preserve
• Berryhill Nature Preserve
• Oehler Nature Preserve
• Gateway Nature Preserve and Community Park
• Davis Farm Nature Preserve

NOTE: Of 6,169 acres identified as Tier 1 and 2 priorities, on-site inspections revealed that 608 of these acres were lost to development, even before the Master Plan was published!
GREENWAY ACTION PLAN

The Master Plan’s citizens survey identifies walking and biking trails as our top recreational need. Greenways are a major way to address this need. Greenways allow us to walk, jog, run, bike, skate and walk the dog—close to where we live. They also preserve the environment.

The County has 24 miles of greenways. The Master Plan calls for building 42 miles of new greenways in five years, estimated to cost $46.8 million. The emphasis in this 5 Year Action Plan is to build on land the County owns or that is easily available. Greenway sections will be linked as needed by sidewalks and bike lanes along streets. Where possible, loop routes will be designed to create easy exercise routes.

In the second half of the decade, the Master Plan includes land acquisition and completion of major greenway systems such as Little Sugar Creek Greenway and Mallard Creek Greenway. The plan encourages connecting to regional greenway systems such as the Carolina Thread Trail. In 10 years, the Master Plan envisions 129 miles of greenways, five times what we have now!

ATHLETIC FIELDS

The Master Plan concludes that Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department’s park system is well-balanced with 189 athletic fields, most in community and regional parks. But more than 100 fields are used more than generally advised. The plan recommends these fields need rest and maintenance, and all fields should not be in service at all times.

Recommendations for new athletic fields include:
- A 6-8 field youth/fast pitch softball complex
- 8-10 additional multipurpose fields
- Evaluation of existing multipurpose fields for possible conversion to synthetic turf, to handle more play than grass
RECREATION CENTERS

Recreation centers have evolved into sophisticated facilities for all kinds of activities—fitness and wellness, recreation for families, programs for senior citizens, youth/teen after-school programs, and cultural arts programs. The Master Plan concludes that Mecklenburg has only two-thirds of the recreation center square footage per capita recommended by national standards. The shortage increases as population grows. To help close the gap, the Master Plan recommends:

- Four new regional recreation centers as “destinations” that may tie-in with aquatics, nature centers, community and regional parks
- Expansion of nine existing centers
- Renovation of three centers for programs such as services to teens or cultural arts
- A new facility for visual and performing arts
- Working with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools for more joint facilities

The trend in recreation centers is to build them ever larger, to house more activities and operate more cost efficiently. Many factors were weighed in locating the centers: sites already owned by the County; areas unserved; connection to greenways, parks and transit, partnerships with schools, senior centers, churches, etc.
RECREATION PROGRAMMING
The Master Plan recommends a goal of increasing household participation in recreation programs from 19% to 30% in three years, and specifically targeting for expansion.

- Aquatics
- Senior programs
- Summer camps/after school
- Environmental/Nature Center/Outdoor adventure
- Facility rentals

- Cultural Arts
- Athletics
- Therapeutic Recreation
- Community Events
- 4-H Clubs
- Fitness/Wellness

This program evaluation included assessments of the programs and services of all community suppliers such as towns and YMCA's.

AQUATIC FACILITIES
The Master Plan recommends expansions of aquatic facilities including in the first five years:

- Expansion of Marion Diehl Pool
- New swimming facility at Mallard Creek Recreation Center
- Renovation/expansion of Mecklenburg County Aquatic Center
- New pool at Tuckeseeggee Recreation Center

In 10 years, the Master Plan identifies needs for:

- Three new pools at two existing recreation centers and a park
- Rehabilitation of Cordelia and Double Oaks pools to create zero depth entries
- Seven new spraygrounds
- Expansion of Ray’s Splash Planet for family fun/fitness and learn-to-swim

Determining where new aquatic facilities should go included ratings for areas underserved by existing facilities; ability to produce revenue; need for programs like water safety, youth obesity or crime prevention; ability to generate partnerships, etc. In several instances combining pools with recreation centers would help to create recreational “destinations.” The plan contemplates that all aquatic projects can be built on land already owned by the County.
NATURE CENTERS
The Master Plan recommends five new nature centers, part of a $54.9 million plan for nature centers and preserves. Nature centers were highly ranked in the citizen survey and needs assessment. They provide family recreation and help the public learn about the environment.

New nature centers would be larger than existing ones. Choosing where to build them is heavily based on covering gaps in growing population areas. The plan recommends two centers for existing nature preserves, three for future preserves. Recommended locations are:

- Latta Plantation Nature Preserve
- Stevens Creek Nature Preserve
- Gateway Nature Preserve
- RibbonWalk Nature Preserve
- And possibly Summerwalk Nature Preserve, as it develops

FACILITY STANDARDS and 2008-2018 CAPITAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT
The Master Plan assembles a list of 239 needed capital projects (facilities) for Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation over the next decade. Total cost: $1,450,485,602 ($1.45 billion). The list encompasses all projects for both new development and improvement/renovation. Land costs, estimated at $576 million, are also included. Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department will work with the County Administration and County Commissioners on a funding strategy.

This 10 year “needs list” is based primarily on findings of the citizen survey and on recommended “facility standards” which identify the need for:

- 2,332 acres of Neighborhood Parks/School Parks (2-20 acres each). School parks are a new category to be developed in conjunction with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
- 2,053 acres of Community Parks (20-100 acres each)
- 1,785 acres of Regional Parks (100+ acres each)
The standards include amenities like playgrounds, picnic pavilions, athletic fields, tennis courts, etc. The standards are based on needs expressed in the citizen survey, user focus groups, “best practices” of similar cities and counties, and assessments of consultants and professional staff.

The list ALL projects, locations, proposed schedules, descriptions, and costs—is available in “Appendix 4 – Capital Improvement Plan” of the Master Plan section at www.parkanderec.com

**CAPITAL COSTS - MAINTENANCE**

Mecklenburg Park and Recreation maintains more than 210 facilities, and maintenance is a big job! The Master Plan’s estimate for maintenance/renovation on existing facilities totals:

- $21,924,706 for 73 projects and categories-of-projects in the next five years
- $31,653,392 for 52 projects in the second five years

For a system the size of Mecklenburg’s, these costs are not high. They reflect a strong, ongoing maintenance program which already exists. A list of ALL maintenance projects is available on www.parkanderec.com