Chapter 3: Plan Purpose, Vision and Mission Statement

3.1 Plan Purpose

City of Madison parks play a vital role in the well-being of Madison residents. Parks improve the health and wellness of residents, and in turn contribute to the well-being of the entire community. The City of Madison Park and Open Space Plan (POSP) informs public policy and system-wide park facility decisions. This Park and Open Space Plan supports City Boards, Commissions, City agencies and staff, other government agencies, and interested residents and volunteers. It helps guide decision-making related to park policies; acquisition and development of parkland and facilities; and City financing and operations. The analysis and recommendations discussed in this plan relate to park development, management of core facilities, and broad concepts in park system planning. Specialized elements of the Madison Parks Division such as Forestry, the State Street/Capitol Mall Concourse, Golf Enterprise, Olbrich Botanical Gardens, and the Warner Park Community Recreation Center in many cases, have their own adopted plans, guiding committees, mission statements, and strategies. The 2025-2030 Park and Open Space Plan recognizes these plans as part of the recommendations of this plan. This plan does not address the City's bicycle and pedestrian system which are addressed in separate plans, with guidance provided by the Park and Open Space Plan.

The Park and Open Space Plan intends to be evidence-based and therefore utilizes extensive public input, census data, park use records, geographic information systems mapping, and other informational databases. The plan has been subject to public review, hearings, and is adopted by the Board of Parks Commissioners and the Common Council. The POSP is updated every five years to stay current with changing recreational trends, demographics, and park needs. Maintaining a current Park and Open Space Plan is also a prerequisite for participation in Federal and State park and open space grant programs. To accomplish many of the objectives laid out in this plan, it is important for the City to maintain its eligibility for these grant programs.

3.2 Planning Process

The planning process for 2025 to 2030 Madison Parks and Open Space Plan (POSP) took place over the following three phases:

Phase I: Plan & Assess

From fall 2023 to January 2024, the Parks division evaluated current data and existing conditions within the park system, changes to the park system since the last POSP update and identified key themes and issue areas to explore in the next iteration of the plan. The Parks Division also identified a consultant team to assist with the development of the plan and community engagement.

Phase II: Develop Plan

Over the course of 2024, the Parks Division and consultant team collaborated to develop the 2025-2030 POSP. Each chapter of the plan, including text, figures, tables, and mapping exhibits, were developed individually and reviewed by the Long Range Planning Committee (LRP) on a monthly basis.

Additionally, the Parks Division worked with the UW Survey Center in early 2024 to develop and distribute a survey to randomly selected households throughout Madison. In April and May 2024, the Parks Division held four Public Input Meetings (PIM) to solicit feedback from the general public on the planning process and priorities for the parks System. Additional engagement with communities historically left out or marginalized during planning processes occurred over the course of late spring to

early summer 2024. A detailed summary of the community engagement process and feedback are detailed in Chapter 5 (pg # TBD).

Phase III: Adopt & Communicate

Beginning in October 2024, the 2025-2030 POSP began its review by City Committees and Commissions, namely the LRP, Board of Parks Commissioners, and finally the Madison Common Council. The plan was formally adopted on [DATE TBD], 2025. Throughout 2025 the Parks Division will work to communicate the major themes, issues, and findings of the plan to the broader Madison Community.

3.3 Vision & Mission Statement

Vision Statement

- To provide the ideal system of parks, natural resources and recreational opportunities which will enhance the quality of life for everyone.

Mission Statement

- *Our Mission is* to provide an exceptional system of safe, accessible, well-planned and maintained parks, facilities, public cemetery, natural areas and public shorelines.
- *Our Mission is* to provide affordable opportunities for recreational and educational experiences.
- *Our Mission is* to preserve and expand our urban forest resources through a well-planned and systematic approach to tree maintenance, planting and natural area management.
- *Our Mission is* to preserve and promote parks' historic legacy.
- *Our Mission is* to provide opportunities for cultural interaction by facilitating community and ethnic festivals and through the display of public art.

3.4 Economic and Health Benefits of Parks [new]

Parks are some of the only free, multi-functional public spaces. In a fast-growing city like Madison, where development density is increasing alongside population, ensuring public open spaces remain available and accessible to residents is critical given the many health and economic benefits they provide.

Physical Health

Madison is a health-conscious community. The 2023 American Fitness Index developed by the American College of Sports Medicine ranked Madison, WI as the sixth fittest city in the United States, with 64% of residents rated as being in excellent or very good health. Madison also topped the rankings with the highest ratio of playgrounds per 10,000 residents.

Access to parks and open spaces, as well as free or low-cost programming creates healthier communities. The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) reports that physical activity at any age can reduce the risk of depression, heart disease, obesity, osteoporosis, stroke, and Type 2 diabetes. In fact, the City Parks Alliance reports that maintaining a healthy lifestyle can save more than $1,800 annually in healthcare costs per person.

Economic Vitality

In some cities, the ability to locate housing near parks or open space is a challenge. According to the NRPA's *Engagement with Parks Report*, 84% of adults in the U.S. sought high-quality parks and recreation when choosing a place to live. Thankfully, Madison's expansive parks system makes it easy to find park-accessible housing.

According to a study completed by NRPA and George Mason University, over 50% of 70 studied communities used parks and recreation images in their economic development materials. The study notes that parks and recreation contribute to economic development through business and talent attraction, retention, and expansion. If a park system is designed with connections to regional destinations, additional visitors can also be brought into a community. This additional tourism can be a significant benefit to local businesses.

Community Wellbeing

Public parks are hubs for community interaction and neighborhood activity. They can be places where residents gather for social events, recreational activities, and meetings about local issues, increasing social interaction and creating an overall sense of community. The power of parks as a community gathering space was highlighted both nationally and locally during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people flocked outdoors for a safe way to connect with one another during a period of historic social isolation.

Through events like Carts in Parks, which brings food carts and trucks into the parks, and Parks Alive, which activates the parks during the summer with music, family-friendly activities, and free food, Madison Parks strives to strengthen community ties for all Madisonians regardless of age, phase of life, or ability.

Equity

In 2018, Madison Parks launched a Parks Racial Equity Change Team (PRECT) to align with the city-wide Racial Equity & Social Justice Initiative. In 2021, Madison Parks developed a Racial Equity Action Plan, which identified 8 major goals for improving racial equity and social justice within the Madison parks system. Poor quality or lack of park access is often linked to other disparities, such as poverty and poor environmental quality. In 2023, the Trust for Public Land (TPL) rated Madison 73 out of 100 points for equity, noting that non-white majority neighborhoods had higher access to nearby park space in comparison to its national peers, but also lower accessibility to parks for majority low-income neighborhoods.

Environmental Health

As the climate continues to warm, public health hazards linked to air pollution, heat waves, and flooding will become more common. The City of Madison is taking these threats seriously, and the parks system is integral to the city's strategy to alleviate some of the adverse effects of climate change. For instance, park and open spaces can help lessen the urban heat island effect, act a sponge to minimize flooding, and provide natural habitat to support native pollinators. Madison has roughly 1,000 acres of parkland identified as managed meadows designed to protect and enhance pollinator habitat. Parks also help mitigate stormwater by slowing and absorbing runoff.

3.5 Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility [Parks; new]

Parks Racial Equity Change Team
Madison Parks plays a vital role in the City of Madison's Racial Equity & Social Justice Initiative (RESJI). The RESJI's mission is to establish racial equity and social justice as a core principle in all decisions, policies, and functions of the City of Madison. The City of Madison leads with race as we know that race

dictates outcomes and recognizes that racial inequities have been created and perpetuated into government and that racial inequities across all indicators for success are deep and pervasive.
African Americans, Latinos, and people living in low-income urban areas across the United States have disproportionately been denied the health, social, and environmental benefits of vital public spaces—inequities born from historical and current-day policies, systems, and norms. These inequities are the product of policies and practices like residential segregation, redlining, racially biased planning decisions, and exclusionary zoning, as well as problematic narratives and ways of working in the green space field that has often excluded or tokenized Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities.
The history of park usage and access locally and nationwide has not been equitable. For example, communities of color faced segregation through "separate but equal" and Jim Crow policies, where white communities would see more investment in parks and infrastructure than African American communities. While Parks serve as the heartbeat of a community and a public gathering place for all ethnic backgrounds, conflict over differences are common in park and open spaces that often end in violence against BIPOC communities.
In 2018, Madison Parks launched the Parks Racial Equity Change Team (PRECT) to advance the City's REJI. The PRECT's mission is to ensure that race will not limit access for BIPOC communities to our parks, natural resources, and recreation opportunities by design or service. The PRECT's work centers on the Parks Racial Equity Action Plan (REAP). This internal working document guides the organization's racial equity priorities and serves as the heartbeat of the racial equity work for Madison Parks. The Racial Equity Action Plan is a lens that establishes priorities, timelines, accountability, and performance measures. Madison Parks has four goals to guide its racial equity work. These goals support the ongoing internal transformational change to ensure a continued high level of service to the evolving community and staff of Madison Parks Division.

Action Plan Goals

- Improving health outcomes and connection to the Parks system
- Strengthening outreach and public participation from BIPOC communities
- Creating a racially diverse and inclusive workforce
- Ongoing training to improve understanding of racial equity concepts and tools

In response to the murder of George Floyd, 180+ days of demonstrations downtown Madison, and escalating tensions, the PRECT created the Morning Café. The Morning Café is a safe space for staff to learn about race and equity challenges in our community and across the country to increase their understanding of the topic covered. We accomplish this by learning from those on the front lines of dismantling institutional racism and most impacted by systems of power. The monthly training is an example of an outcome from the REAP to normalize the conversation about race, provide continuous learning opportunities, and build organizational capacity to advance equity in Parks.
In 2021, 19 equity team members planned, coordinated and hosted 10 unique Morning Café sessions, creating 304 hours of enrichment and connecting staff with local, regional, and national equity leaders to advance Park equity. 95% of the Morning Café participants stated the training was beneficial and increased their knowledge of the subject covered.
Learn more about the City's Racial Equity & Social Justice Initiative.