Parks Long Range Planning
May 15, 2025
Meeting Materials

Chapter 7: Recommended Strategies

The 2025-2030 City of Madison Parks and Open Space Plan (POSP) is supplemental to the City of Madison Comprehensive Plan. The most recent Comprehensive Plan was initially adopted in 2018, with interim updates in 2023 and 2024. The Comprehensive Plan translates community input and ideas into policies and actions. The Plan is organized by seven elements which are major topic areas that influence the quality of life in the Madison:

- Land Use and Transportation: Compact Land Use | Efficient Transportation
- Neighborhoods and Housing: Complete Neighborhoods | Housing Access
- Economy and Opportunity: Growing Economy | Equitable Education and Advancement
- Culture and Character: Cultural Vibrancy | Unique Character
- Green and Resilient: Natural Resources | Parks and Recreation
- Effective Government: Efficient Services | Community Facilities |Regional Transportation
- Health and Safety: Equitable Health Outcomes | Safe Community

The Madison park system is integral in the quality of life for residents, as such the recommended strategies in the 2025-2030 POSP are organized within these seven elements. The 2018-2023 POSP was the initial basis for the strategies and corresponding actions, as this update process affirmed that they are still very relevant. The POSP incorporates information outlined throughout this document from the engagement process, recreation needs assessment, relevant planning documents, and various recognized park metrics into actionable data-informed strategies. As the city and park system continue to grow, develop, and evolve, these strategies will provide a roadmap towards achieving an ideal park system for everyone.

Land Use and Transportation
Strategy: Increase connectivity between parks to enhance access. • *Create a comprehensive system of greenspace connections by means of pedestrian, biking, and water trails through parks.* • *Increase connectivity with and through parks to key neighborhood facilities and public transportation methods.*
Neighborhoods and Housing
Strategy: Reduce parkland deficiencies and respond to increasing residential density. • *Make data-informed park planning decisions through evaluation of changing city residential population needs, market trends, and walkability standards.* • *Preserve, protect and advocate for sufficient undeveloped land for open space.*

- *Acquire new parkland on existing developed properties where feasible in areas of high residential density.*
- *Identify demand for additional parkland and sufficient improvement resources for Area Plans to address future residential density.*
- *Pursue joint use agreements with owners of other public recreation spaces, such as school properties, to improve access in areas where there is no walkable access to mini, neighborhood, conservation, or community City-owned parkland.*

Economy and Opportunity

Strategy: Create welcoming and inclusive park spaces and programming.

- *Develop parkland and amenities that are reflective of the diverse recreational needs of the community.*
- *Reduce barriers to use of park spaces, participate in programming, and support local business.*
- *Pursue alternative funding sources that support programming needs of the Division and provide opportunities to business owners.*
- *Incorporate public engagement methods and partnerships during the park planning process to ensure projects are representative of the diverse community.*
- *Develop and implement a comprehensive communication plan to educate and inform the public about options and services available within the park system.*
- *Create and promote awareness around relationship between good parks and a strong economy.*

Strategy: Foster meaningful connections with groups and organizations that advance the vision of the Parks Division.

- *Nurture and create opportunities to strengthen the intrinsic value of parks within the community.*
- *Develop a programming plan to grow and sustain relationships with existing partners, identify opportunities to address gaps in equitable distribution of services and programming across the city, and create frameworks to engage with future partners.*
- *Encourage connection with parks and nature through Friends Groups and other volunteer groups while aligning efforts with identified land management strategies and master plans.*
- *Support volunteers and recognize their contributions in planning, developing, programming, and maintaining park spaces and facilities.*
- *Cultivate relationships and partnerships that boost the overall economy within the region by supporting placemaking and tourism.*

Culture and Character

Strategy: Improve public access to lakes and waterways.

- *Engage the community in the design process to increase water access on public lands.*
- *Provide opportunities for year-round water recreation.*
- *Support efforts of partners and stakeholders to improve water quality in Madison's lakes and waterways.*
- *Encourage creative placemaking opportunities to connect the community to water.*

Strategy: Protect and celebrate the community's cultural richness.

- *Respect and protect tribal sacred sites.*

- *Continue to recognize, preserve, and enhance historic parks.*
- *Pursue opportunities for cultural enrichment through community events and promotion of community building activities.*
- *Evaluate operational resources for park and street use events to promote balance between park uses and support the needs of the system.*

Green & Resilient

Strategy: Protect and enhance natural resources.

- *Improve biodiversity by managing invasive species and promoting areas of native plant habitats and ecosystems.*
- *Acquire conservation parkland to preserve unique habitats.*
- *Preserve iconic and special landscape views.*
- *Preserve, promote and expand the urban tree canopy.*

Strategy: Improve the park system's capacity to adapt to environmental challenges.

- *Incorporate of plant species that thrive and adapt to environmental changes with fewer resource inputs.*
- *Integrate facilities, equipment and materials that reduce the carbon footprint of park operations.*
- *Use best management practices for stormwater runoff and infiltration to address increased precipitation.*
- *Support year-round outdoor recreation and extended season use through activities that are not impacted by climate change.*
- *Develop an opportunistic approach to maintenance and programming that adapts to the unpredictable nature of climate change.*
- *Create spaces and adapt programming to keep the community safe, healthy, and emotionally resilient in the face of stress and uncertainty.*

Effective Government

Strategy: Develop new parks and amenities in a fiscally sustainable manner.

- *Implement comprehensive data-based decision making in strategic planning and investment.*
- *Secure adequate funding for infrastructure improvements within existing and future parks.*
- *Revise parkland dedication and park impact fees every ten years to maintain adequate levels of parkland and funding.*
- *Require parkland dedication of parks five-acres or more for new residential developments where feasible.*
- *Expand existing park land where appropriate and feasible in accordance with adopted plans*
- *Seek out and utilize innovative sources to expand and develop existing parkland and amenities.*
- *Fund and construct necessary infrastructure improvements in parks acquired through annexations and cooperative plans.*

Strategy: Secure sufficient resources to sustain service levels across the growing and changing park system.

- *Preserve public funding t*o maintain current levels of service in *the Parks Division's Operating and Capital budgets.*
- *Allocate funding equitably to maintain and upgrade existing infrastructure and develop new facilities.*
- *Pursue opportunities to diversify and increase revenue streams that support services.*

- *Evaluate staffing and location of operational facilities to optimize resources for new City facilities.*
- *Provide technical and administrative support to volunteers whose work supplements park maintenance, programming, and improvement.*
- *Implement Results Madison and develop an asset management system to aid in data-informed decisions related to resource allocation.*
- *Encourage public interaction and participation with the Parks Division's governing bodies.*
- Develop appropriate professional development and recruitment programs to attract and retain employees committed to advancing the vision of the Parks Division.
- ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATION IN DISCUSSION:
  - *Define an approach to identify park land that may be surplus to the recreational needs of the community to serve broader public purpose and fund park needs without creating parkland deficiencies.*
  - *Define an approach to identify park land that may be surplus to the recreational needs of the community to further parks mission and serve broader public purpose.*
  - *Identify park assets that are underutilized that may create a funding source, further parks mission and serve broader public purpose.*

Strategy: Pursue regional solutions to regional issues.

- *Enhance or develop regional recreation facilities, where possible, as identified by the Wisconsin SCORP for the Southern Gateways Region to address supply shortages.*
- *Continue joint planning efforts with Dane County Parks to implement recommendations of the Dane County Park and Open Space Plan within the City of Madison.*
- *Collaborate with park advocacy organizations and surrounding municipalities to meet park and recreation demands.*
- *Pursue strategic partnerships to provide tournament-scale venues.*

Health and Safety

Strategy: Promote the physical and social health of the diverse community.

- *Incorporate amenities that promote active recreation and social interaction for all skills and abilities, especially youth and seniors.*
- *Provide flexible multipurpose spaces that can respond to changing recreational trends.*
- *Provide sufficient fields, courts, and other facilities to accommodate larger competitions.*

POSP KEY TAKEAWAYS

Chapter 2: City of Madison Planning Considerations

2.1. Demographic Overview

While Madison may be considered relatively affluent overall, that affluence is unevenly distributed, with race and ethnicity being key differentiators. Parks have the potential to be equalizers by providing spaces, services, and programming that reduce barriers and provide opportunities for everyone within the community to thrive. Identifying the specific needs and desires of underrepresented community members is vital to ensuring equitable park access to all.

Madison's population growth and increase in residential units will result in the need for greater or improved park access. The Parks Division must be able to sustain and adapt to cultural shifts, as Madison is becoming both older and more diverse. Residents of different ages and cultures have distinct values for parks and open space; therefore, these trends have significant implications for park planning. An adaptable, flexible parks system should evolve in conjunction with changes in its user base.

2.2 Related Planning Efforts

There are a significant number of active plans and reports pertaining to the work of City staff. In addition, the relevant plans and reports, which are built on significant public engagement and overseen by various public bodies, often set goals for what the community expects in terms of programming and operation of park spaces. Knowing how those plans interact with the work of the Parks Division provides for more cohesive and effective service delivery that aligns with the goals and expectations of the community. These documents provide useful population projections and insights as to how the City is expected to grow, as well as potential means to address park access goals by assuming adherence to established park access standards. Parks leadership and Planning staff use this information to make decisions related to land acquisitions; inform park master/development plans and implementation of those plans; and also identify strategic partnerships that may help to advance the mission of the Parks Division. Parks Operations staff use this information to inform land management practices and equipment purchases, while Parks Community Services staff use the information to inform how the Parks Division goes about activating park spaces.

Chapter 4: Engagement Strategies and Recreation Facility Demand

4.1 Community Engagement

Madisonians place great value in their park system and the important role it plays in their lives. They are passionate about protecting parks and open spaces and see them as integral to the city's character. Consistent themes across all engagement efforts indicate that residents want policymakers to prioritize maintenance and repair of existing facilities, invest in ecological restoration to combat climate concerns, and support the park and recreation needs of adolescents. At times, the desire for environmental protection is somewhat at odds with the need and desire to maintain recreation spaces and provide more facilities and amenities, such as additional playgrounds, bike paths, and sport courts. Across the different engagement activities, residents expressed a desire for more basic park facilities such as benches, picnic tables, shade and shelters, drinking fountains, and restrooms, and additional specialty facilities such as skateparks, pickleball, pools, and splash pads.

It is notable from both the community-wide survey and the BIPOC and youth focused engagement efforts that there is still work to do to ensure all Madisonians feel comfortable, safe, and welcome within the parks. This can be addressed in part through improved communication regarding park policies, especially regarding sound/music and shelter reservations. There is a consistent message that there is a need for more facilities and events geared specifically towards the teenage co-hort. The Parks Division must continue to make authentic connections with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, lower income and otherwise marginalized communities and non-park users to better engage them with planning efforts and fully understand their park and recreation needs.

These engagement results are a snapshot in time and based on the assumption that feedback received from individuals who participated is consistent with the needs of others within their demographics. These results take into account the participants' preferred use of the parks and programs within the existing system, not future parks or needs of future residents or residents that did not participate in these efforts. All of the input received through these efforts is valuable and must be balanced with the overall needs of the park system, other planning considerations and available resources. These outcomes are not the only determining factor in how decisions will be made within the park system. As Madison continues to grow and expand, the Parks Division, other city planning staff and policymakers will need to ensure that new parks meet the recreational needs of the surrounding community.

4.2 Recreation Facility Demand

The use of park spaces continues to increase, and the typical season for park usage continues to extend farther into the spring and fall seasons. The feedback received through these efforts affirms the Parks Division's long-standing recognition of the need for additional larger scale athletic fields that can accommodate tournaments and multi-field play for a variety of sports. Resident use of park spaces has evolved over time, and it is important to anticipate and prepare for the ever-changing recreational needs of the community. As seasons lengthen and recreation offerings evolve as the climate changes, it is important to provide spaces that can accommodate outdoor recreation through improvements such as field lighting systems and potentially some artificial turf fields.

The Madison Park system is well-activated throughout the year. Parks-operated special use facilities continue to grow, and programming has evolved in response to the community demands for these services. To learn more about how park spaces are activated, see Appendix E: Ongoing Initiatives - Activating Parks.

Chapter 5: Outdoor Recreation Needs Assessment
5.3 Regional and Statewide Planning Efforts
Madison residents have excellent access to the parks around the community. As the community continues to grow, it will be important to adhere to park access goals and provide adequate facilities to serve the growing population. Park leaders will need to continue actively pursue land acquisitions in areas of deficiencies as new construction and infill development occurs. Likewise, partnering with Dane County and the Wisconsin DNR may help alleviate some of the challenges that the region is facing when it comes to access to outdoor recreation. Key areas of collaboration include responding to the impact of climate change on winter recreation, investing in park facilities, and improving the natural environment.

Chapter 6: Parks Funding
6.4. Park System Growth Considerations
Historically, the primary funding sources of the Capital Budget have been GO borrowing through property taxes and impact fees from residential development. These two sources are no longer adequate to address the deferred maintenance needs of a large and aging park system as well as development of new parks and facilities. Ongoing concerns with the tax levy limits have proven to create significant challenges to the availability of GO borrowing support for these improvements. Impact Fee funding from new residential development has continued to generate funding for infrastructure and land acquisitions; however, it is important to recognize that this revenue source is directly dependent on a healthy economy. In addition, the effectiveness of the Impact Fee funding and any pertinent adjustments must be evaluated through a new Needs Assessment to ensure the needs of both the growing and existing park system are met. Strong partnerships are more important now than ever to the future of the park system.
General Fund levy support within the Operating Budget is not sufficient to sustain the existing and growing park system along with the other City facilities the Parks Division is responsible for maintaining. Despite voters approving a $22 million referendum in the fall of 2024 to increase General Fund levy support for the 2025 budget, alternative funding sources are critical to ensure that the Parks Division is able to continue to address the demands of an ever-growing population with diverse needs.
The City must actively pursue sufficient resources, both financial and in-kind, to cover additional development and operational resource needs necessary to design, construct, maintain and operate these parks and ensure park access standards are maintained now and into the future. The pursuit of these sufficient resources will likely require innovative and diverse strategies to ensure an excellent park system that can sustainably serve the community’s needs into the future.

Executive Summary

Madison residents have recognized the importance of park and open spaces for over 130 years. Parks serve an important role in the community’s ecosystem and provide opportunities for residents to connect with the area’s natural resources. Parks also improve the physical, mental and social well-being of the city’s residents and are an important part of the cultural fabric of the community. Well-planned and programmed parks create gathering spaces and recreational opportunities with fewer barriers for residents. Today, Madison Parks has over 290 parks and manages 5,700 acres of park land, and over 95% of residents live within a 10-minute walk from a park.

The 2025-2030 Park and Open Space Plan (POSP) serves as the Parks Division's five-year strategic plan. The POSP was developed under the guidance and oversight of the Parks Long Range Planning Subcommittee and approved by the Board of Park Commissioners. The POSP is adopted as a supplement to the City of Madison Comprehensive Plan and is required for participation in state and federal grant programs. An analysis of park land inventory was completed, and the POSP incorporates public feedback received, analyzes park use and trends in recreation, and takes into account overall City, County and State planning efforts to determine park and recreation needs for the community.

Madison is the second largest city in Wisconsin and is expected to grow to a population of over 309,200 with an increase of 15,000 residential units by the year 2030. The population of individuals ages 65 and older is the fastest growing age demographic and is expected to increase by about 50% by 2040. There continues to be disparities in terms of race, income, and housing. Clearly these demographic changes will require Parks to respond and adapt. For example, the number of parks and different types of amenities will likely need to increase to meet Madison's growing needs. As the population grows, housing developments are expected to become more dense with less personal yard space, further increasing the importance of well-planned park spaces that are walkable from the surrounding neighborhood. Understanding future development needs and these trends helps Madison Parks plan for how to best meet the current and future recreational needs of the entire community.

Multiple public engagement strategies were utilized throughout 2024 to understand how parks are meeting the needs of residents. The top five reasons people visit park spaces include:

- general physical activities such as walking, hiking or running;
- leisure activities, such as picnicking or nature viewing;
- attending events and festivals;
- activities involving the lakes such as boating, fishing, and swimming; and
- biking.

Overall, residents place a high value on Madison's parks and open spaces and find them to be welcoming and accessible. Residents emphasized the importance of balancing the protection of natural resources with the need for park development. Public engagement efforts did indicate a desire for increased connectivity; more focus on partnerships; improved maintenance of existing facilities; enhanced spaces and programming to meet the needs of adolescents; and strong preference that existing resources be utilized for addressing deferred maintenance of existing facilities. Likewise, engagement efforts and analysis of athletic field users demonstrate the need for the Parks Division to provide sufficient flexible playing fields throughout the city, including facilities that can accommodate larger scale events and tournaments.

As the largest public landowner within the city, the Park Division plays a major role in helping to protect natural resources. Climate change not only impacts how the Parks Division manages the land, but is also noticeably impacting year-round recreation within the community. Fluctuations in temperatures and extended seasons are resulting in different year-round recreation needs than traditionally offered. The POSP discusses the Parks Division's approach to confronting these challenges.

Despite the high value placed on parks and open spaces, Wisconsin and Madison continue to lag behind the rest of the country in terms of funding outdoor recreation according to the Trust for Public Land 2024 ParkScore report. As the park system grows, additional resources are needed to fund and maintain park facilities and spaces. Aging infrastructure and increased usage are resulting in an even greater need for resources. Madison's tax-payer funding is not sufficient to resource all the needs of the park system, and both diverse revenue streams and strategic partnerships must be pursued. The 2025-2030 POSP provides a roadmap for addressing the many challenges faced by the park system. The recommended strategies and actions build on those from the 2018-2023 POSP and incorporate feedback, trends, and data gathered throughout this planning process. The recommended strategies of the plan are aligned with the 7 elements of a great city as identified in the Comprehensive Plan. 2025-2030 POSP recommended strategies call for Madison Parks to:

- Increase connectivity between parks to enhance access.
- Reduce parkland deficiencies and respond to increasing residential density.
- Create welcoming and inclusive park spaces and programming.
- Foster meaningful connections with groups and organizations that advance the vision of the Parks Division.
- Improve public access to lakes and waterways.
- Protect and celebrate the community's cultural richness.
- Protect and enhance natural resources.
- Improve the park system's capacity to adapt to environmental challenges.
- Develop new parks and amenities in a fiscally sustainable manner.
- Secure sufficient resources to sustain service levels across the growing and changing park system.
- Pursue regional solutions to regional issues.
- Promote the physical and social health of the diverse community.

Madison Parks has a long legacy of striving for and achieving excellence. Existing resources and practices are not sufficient to maintain existing service levels and continue to build the park system of tomorrow. In order to accomplish the strategies and corresponding actions set forth in this plan, Parks Division staff, policymakers, and stakeholders must take action, think creatively, and leverage the power of partnerships.