

# Meck Playbook

Mecklenburg County Park &  
Recreation 2021 Master Plan  
Executive Summary

2021





# Letter from the Director

Over the past year, our parks, nature preserves and greenways have experienced record attendance. This is a huge indicator of the importance of these places to our communities. They are adaptable spaces that fill a variety of needs. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the outdoors has been the safest place for us to gather and see one other. Parks and public spaces have also become pivotal locations for demonstrations and peaceful protests raising questions about inclusivity and justice. We hear these voices and commit to creating a plan that meets the moment.

In response to world changes, Mecklenburg County has adapted to continue to fulfill its mission, though a bit more remotely. The Meck Playbook Team is taking an even closer look at community well-being and equity. The goal of our Department is to guarantee that every Mecklenburg County resident, no matter where they live, has access to amenities to be healthy, active, and thrive.

We must start by acknowledging that not every neighborhood enjoys the benefits that our Department provides, such as well-maintained parks and trails, adequate tree canopy, or fun events and educational programs. We need to do better, and Meck Playbook will guide investments to neighborhoods where investment will be most impactful.

Meck Playbook is a vision for where we want and need to go. Enacting this vision will take expanding parks, nature centers, programming, trails and recreation centers in many ways – in staff capacity, in the budget, and in creative and strategic thinking. This also includes implementing strategies to protect the natural world. If we commit to these expansions and investments, we can evolve and grow, tell more stories, and move beyond our current boundaries.

Over the last 18 months, we've worked to build Meck Playbook together and insure a more equitable, vibrant, and sustainable County from a park and recreation perspective. Thousands of voices contributed to the development of this plan via public workshops, focus group discussions, stakeholder meetings, online through surveys and meckplaybook.com, and in the statistically valid survey. This plan reflects all your hard work and ideas. We could not have done this without you.

Sincerely,



W. Lee Jones, Director  
Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation

# Why do we need a Playbook?

Meck Playbook comes at a critical time for Mecklenburg County. Charlotte is the fifth fastest growing city in the United States and is driving population increases and development across the region. At the same time, our communities are becoming more diverse, we are participating in new kinds of recreation, our natural systems are feeling pressure, and methods to fund our parks and activities are requiring greater creativity and commitment.

During this planning process, the COVID-19 pandemic has also reminded everyone of the essential value of getting outdoors, experiencing nature, and pursuing recreation activities as part of their daily lives. This is an ideal – and necessary – moment to reimagine what open space services will be in the future for Mecklenburg County residents.

Meck Playbook is Mecklenburg County's Comprehensive Park and Recreation master plan. The plan, which was previously updated in 2015, guides the development and enhancement of Mecklenburg's extensive system

while creating the foundation for individual park plans and capital projects. It establishes four guiding principles, each with a clear set of goals, strategies and recommendations for Mecklenburg County's recreation facilities, greenways, nature preserves, recreational programming, and land acquisition for the next ten years.

Today, the system includes over 230 park and recreation facilities, including parks, recreation and nature centers, nature preserves, stadiums, camping areas, greenways, multi-use greenway trails, and nature preserve land. It is critical that we take action to protect and invest in our existing system while thinking ahead to grow with the County to ensure everyone has access to this shared asset.



**Water activities and ways to cool off**



**A wealth of high-quality neighborhood parks**



**New parks in places that need them most**



A connected system



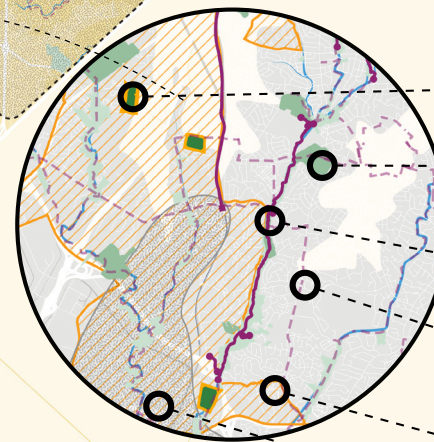
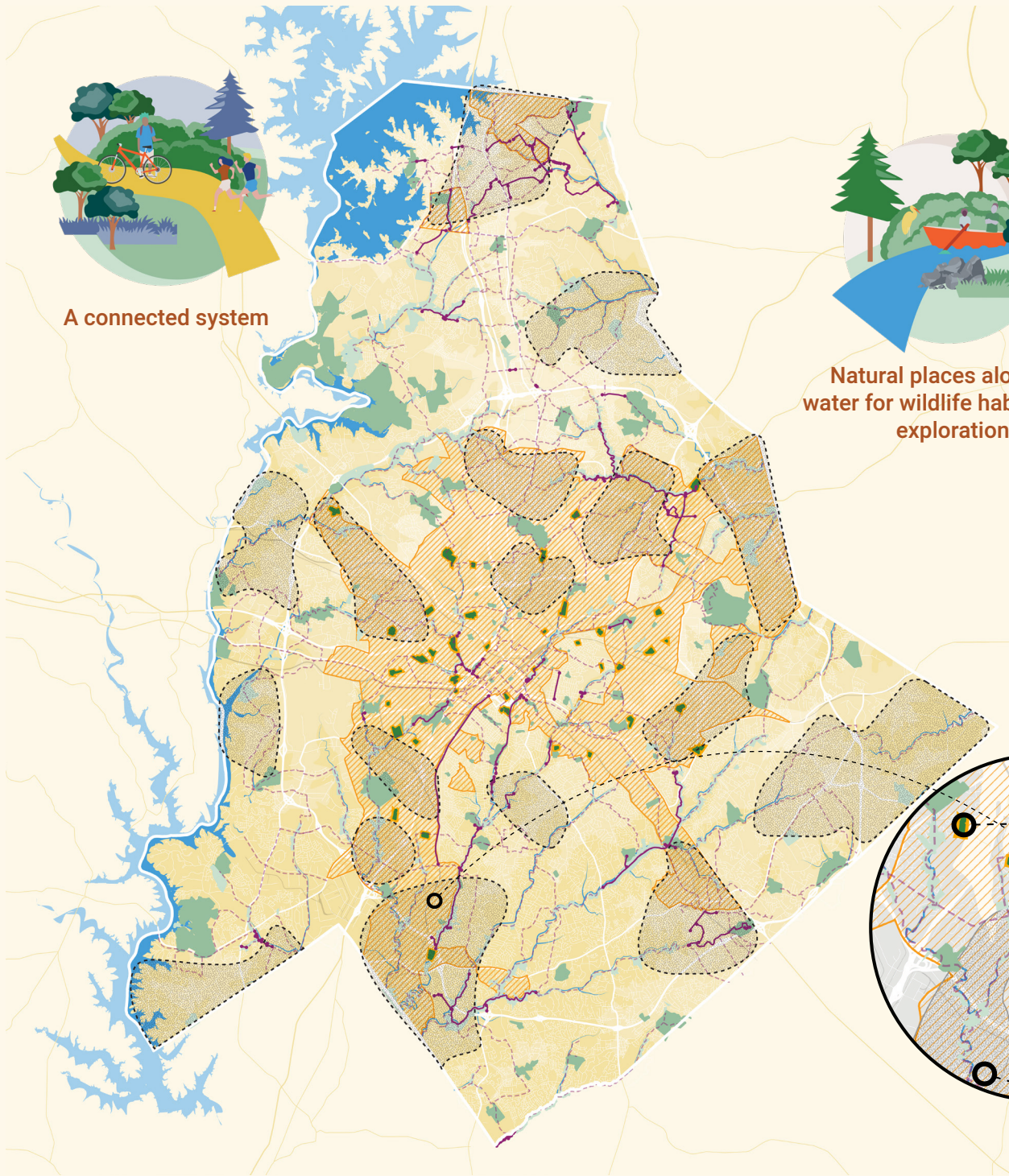
Natural places along the water for wildlife habitats and exploration



Amenities close to home and safe to access



Indoor and outdoor programs and play



Parks in High Need Areas

Parks and Greenways

Existing Trails

Future Trails

Priority Communities

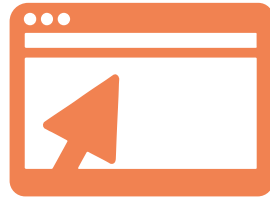
Gap Areas

# Process

Meck Playbook was created through a collaborative 18-month process, beginning in the fall of 2019 and concluding in summer of 2021. The planning process was framed around three significant milestones guided by conversations with Department staff, representatives from other towns and jurisdictions, park and recreation partners, the Park and Recreation Commission and its Advisory Councils, and other stakeholders. Most importantly, it was created with extensive engagement and feedback from Mecklenburg County residents.

## Broadening Plan Conversations

Public workshops, focus groups, community surveys, newsletters, interactive and pop-up activities, and social media campaigns have increased awareness about the plan and solicited community, stakeholder, and staff feedback. **In total, there have been:**



**3,300** unique **website** visits



**2,400** memories and **ideas** shared in-person and online



**88** public **focus group** participants (four public focus groups total)



**800 households** surveyed through the statistically valid survey



**5,300** **email** newsletter recipients



**3** **press releases** and **social media** campaigns aligned with each public workshop



**9** **pop-up** events to raise awareness

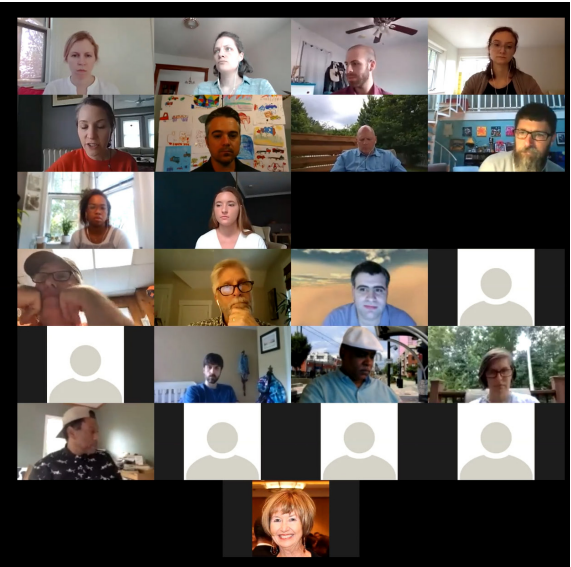
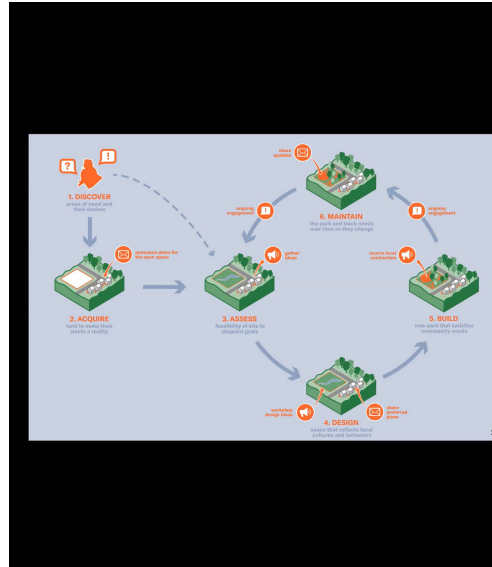
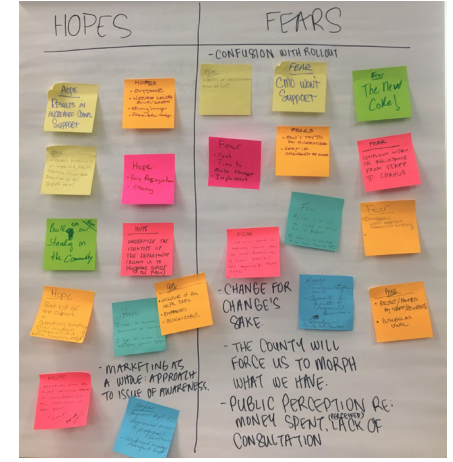


**312** **workshop** participants in **twelve** workshops



**412** participants in online survey (four surveys total)

# Engagement Highlights



## Assessing the System

In the fall of 2019, Meck Playbook utilized a combination of methods to assess the current state of the system and future needs based on population change. The methods are summarized below:

### Geographic/Level of Service Analysis

Amenities were mapped to understand geographic distribution and physical proximity to amenities and spaces.

### Demographic Analysis

A review of factors like income, race, educational attainment, rentership, age, and access to a car were analyzed to understand priorities for park and facility investment by neighborhood.

### Peer Benchmarking

A review of similar sized communities and departments with similar demographics to see how the County's amenities, funding, and staff capacity compare to one another.

### Historic and Future Projections

Historical census patterns and population trends helped to define future needs for land acquisition, population growth, and trends in recreation.

### Park/Facility Assessment

Staff and consultants visited every park, greenway trail, and facility during Fall 2019 to inventory the current state of parks and facilities and to capture qualitative and quantitative data in one database.

Recognizing the subjectivity within the qualitative assessment of care and condition, the team ran internal trainings and cross checked findings with County staff to review for accuracy.



**94** Neighborhood Parks



**26** Recreation Centers



**10** Indoor Pavilions





**48** Community Parks



**29** Regional Parks



**27** Nature Preserves



**6** Golf Courses



**3** Event Venues



**5** Special Facilities



**3** Senior Centers



**5** Nature Centers



**6** Aquatic and Athletic Facilities



**3** Administrative Facilities



**55** Miles Inventoried

The inventory does not include an in-depth assessment of the 41 historic sites or the greenway land.

A separate catalog of similar providers includes the parks, facilities, and greenways trails from the County jurisdictions.

# Vision + Guiding Principles

Across Mecklenburg County, nationally, and even globally, the role of public open spaces and recreation programs is expanding as issues of equity, public health, economic development, environmental change, financial sustainability, and cultural identity become paramount. The work that Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation (“Mecklenburg Park & Rec” notes new shorthand Department name) does for the community and

environment is central to these issues and a fundamental part of a healthy, resilient community. Recent events like COVID-19, more frequent and extreme weather patterns, and systemic racism have placed the status quo of our relationship to parks, facilities, and programs at a timely impasse.

Mecklenburg Park & Rec is positioned to protect irreplaceable environmental resources, to foster health and wellness, and to create transformative experiences. Boldness will be an important ingredient to move these aspirations forward and shepherd a more connected, resilient, and equitable future.



## Four Principles to Guide the Way!

To position Mecklenburg Park & Rec for this multifaceted role, this document organizes Mecklenburg Park & Rec's future efforts into four key principles: Commit to Equity, Evolve and Grow, Tell More Stories, and Move Beyond Boundaries.

These principles were derived from months spent engaging with the Mecklenburg community through in-person and virtual public workshops, pop-up events, a statistically valid survey, focus group discussions, and stakeholder meetings. The principles are tied to a series of goals which will be implemented through projects, programs, and policies.



1

### **Commit to Equity**

to make improvements and close gaps where it is needed most.

2

### **Evolve and Grow**

County assets to keep pace with population change and meet the needs of new communities.

3

### **Tell More Stories**

to increase awareness and make an impact.

4

### **Move Beyond Boundaries**

to better connect people and the system.

# 1 Commit to Equity

Mecklenburg County has invested steadily in its system, but quality remains uneven and priorities vary from one part of the County to the next. Committing to equity requires dedication to building relationships with local park users, listening to and

understanding diverse needs, and using data to make informed decisions.

The plan envisions four goals that will support equitable capital maintenance, reinvestment, and growth where it is needed most:



**Goal #1 Engagement** - Enhance relationships with diverse audiences and communities and incorporate their perspectives into each project or plan.



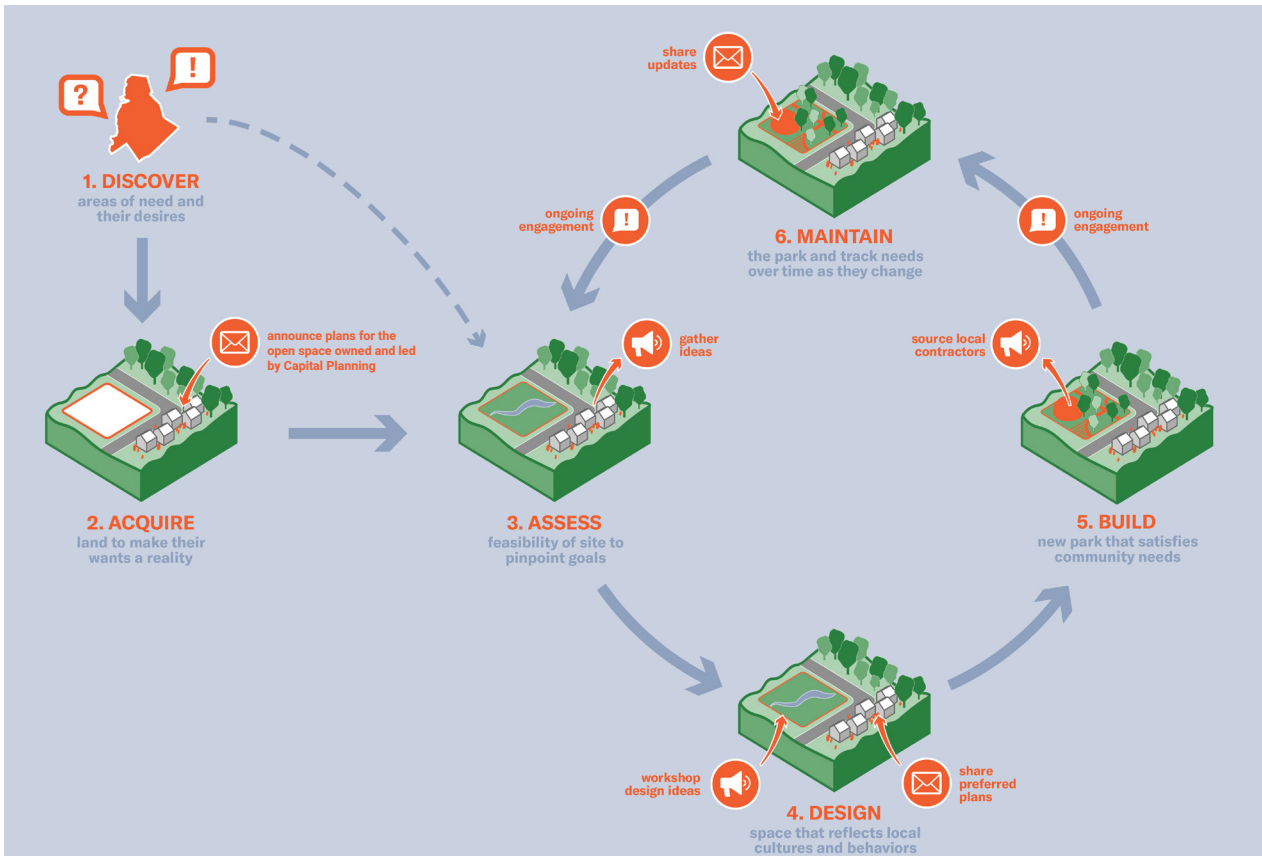
**Goal #2 Reinvestment** - Focus reinvestment in areas that have not historically received resources and places that are well-loved.



**Goal #3 New Investment** - Create the highest quality places and programs in all areas of the County.



**Goal #4 Inclusion** - Create access to opportunities and resources for all residents.



# Investing in an Equitable Future

Meck Playbook completed an inventory of all Mecklenburg Park & Rec assets to evaluate their current state. This inventory, paired with an understanding of physical gaps in park access, helps us prioritize projects in neighborhoods where that investment will be most impactful.

First, the County needs to:



**Invest in the 35 parks and 13 facilities** that are in poor condition and located in priority communities.\*

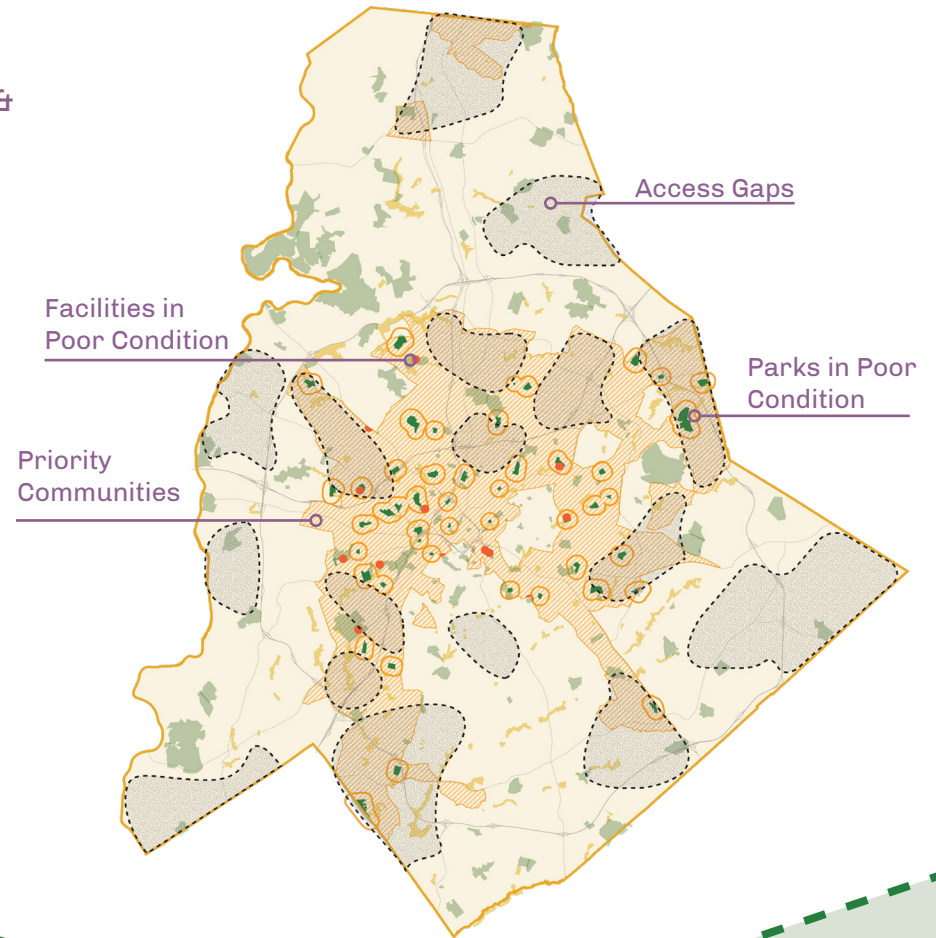
\*defined by an overlap of many factors. A selection being: communities with a higher rate of renters, youth, and seniors, poor public health outcomes, less access to cars, and greater distance to parks and open space. See Meck Playbook for full definition.

Then, the County should:



**Renovate the remaining 14 parks, 8 facilities, and 2 trail segments** that were identified as in poor condition and make investments to help close physical gaps in access to parks.

The inventory will be updated **regularly** to reflect new investments and identify additional future needs.



## Priority Recommendations

### Align Engagement Framework with the Equity and Inclusion Action Plan

Hire a Department specific Community Engagement Liaison.

### Expand a Participatory Budgeting Process that Links to Existing County Efforts

Champion an integrated participatory budgeting process to increase participation in local park projects.

### Develop a Policy for Equitable, Unbiased Access to Services

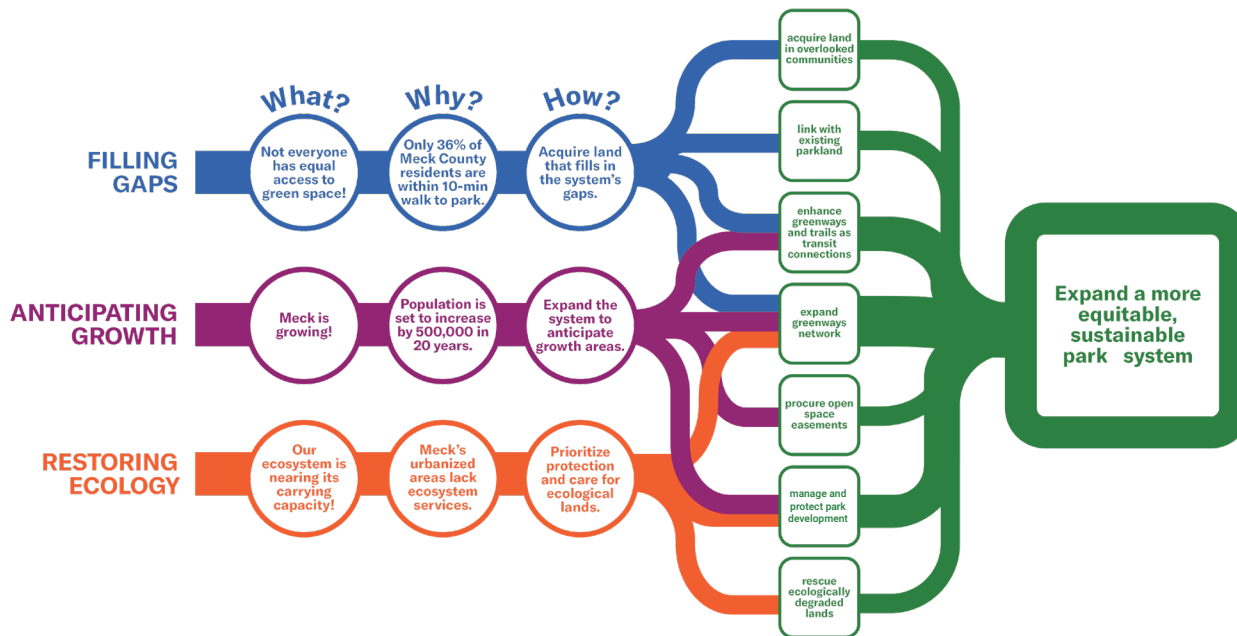
Build on the partnership with the Office of Equity and Inclusion to create a road map for improvements based on equitable access.

**Update the inventory regularly.**

# 2 Evolve and Grow

As the County's population steadily increases, open space and recreation needs and trends are simultaneously shifting. With this growth, it will become increasingly difficult for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to continue to achieve its goals. Limited staff and resource constraints have impacted Mecklenburg Park & Rec since the 2007-2008 recession.

The following goals provide strategies for Mecklenburg Park & Rec to remain nimble, yet also build its capacity to meet community needs:



**Goal #5 Stewardship** - Protect and adapt the resilience of natural areas for future generations in Mecklenburg County.



**Goal #6 Programming** - Adapt and expand education and recreation programs to be responsive to Mecklenburg County's community.



**Goal #7 Land Acquisition** - Increase the County's public open space in areas of need, growth, and environmental value.



**Goal # 8 Staffing** - Build the Mecklenburg Park & Rec team to support the system's expansive programs and land holdings.



**Goal # 9 Funding** - Recognize and invest in parks and recreation as a valuable and necessary County service.

## Customize Approach to Suit Park Type

Most people choose to visit a park not because of its ownership, but because they want to participate in a specific experience. Meck Playbook wants to amplify these distinctive experiences but knows solutions are not one size fits all. To better execute experience specific interventions, Mecklenburg Park & Rec will calculate investments and amenity needs based on the following park types:

**Local park** - Smaller parks dispersed around the County that provide reliable access to open space near the home of every resident.

**Regional park** - Larger parks that include all of the amenities of a local park and additional assets that draw visitors from across the County.

**Greenway** - A linear public space that lies along a creek or is in a floodplain, local/regional park, nature preserve, recreation center, or other natural area with trails that connect people and places.

**Special Use** - Facilities that have a singular or limited purpose. This includes golf courses, large scale water-related play (aquatic facilities, etc), or other large scale recreation-related activities.

**Nature Preserve** - Contains natural resources that can be managed for conservation and recreation. Preserves protect wildlife habitat, water quality, and endangered species. They can provide opportunities for nature-based, unstructured, low-impact recreational opportunities such as walking and nature viewing.

**Parkland Reserve** - Land held in perpetuity (or on long term lease) as open space, park, or recreation space. Often, this land is left undeveloped until CIP program funding becomes available. Parkland reserves are often, but not always, earmarked to become park space in the future. The land may have conservation easements held by land trusts or deed restrictions based on funding used to purchase the property.

## Priority Recommendations

### Expand and Protect Conservation Areas

Prioritize stream buffers and native habitat development through active management. Continue to create buffers along waterways.

### Close Gaps in Shade Trees

Continue existing tree planting strategies, while enhancing efforts like the City of Charlotte's Tree Canopy Action Plan and partners like Trees Charlotte.

Champion for acquisitions or partnerships to protect existing trees.

### Create a Land Acquisition Framework

Preserve 19.1 acres of open space per thousand residents as the County grows.

Balance three acquisition aims: fill system-wide gaps, anticipate growth, and protect the environment.

# 3 Tell More Stories

Mecklenburg County is rich in history, culture, and dynamic experiences. For many residents, the natural world is the setting for lifelong memories. Mecklenburg Park & Rec lives out its civic duty as stewards of both lands and stories. Tell More Stories aims to elevate the user experience of Mecklenburg County's unique hospitality. This can occur by connecting users to interpretation of

these stories, incorporating them into cultural programs, and ensuring that Mecklenburg Park & Rec's brand and communication strategies boldly tell a complete picture of all that is offered. This will be welcoming to all who use the system. Four goals aim to amplify histories of the past and present, while helping the next generation write new stories:



**Goal #10 Celebrate** - Highlight, protect, and share the County's historic, arts, and cultural resources.



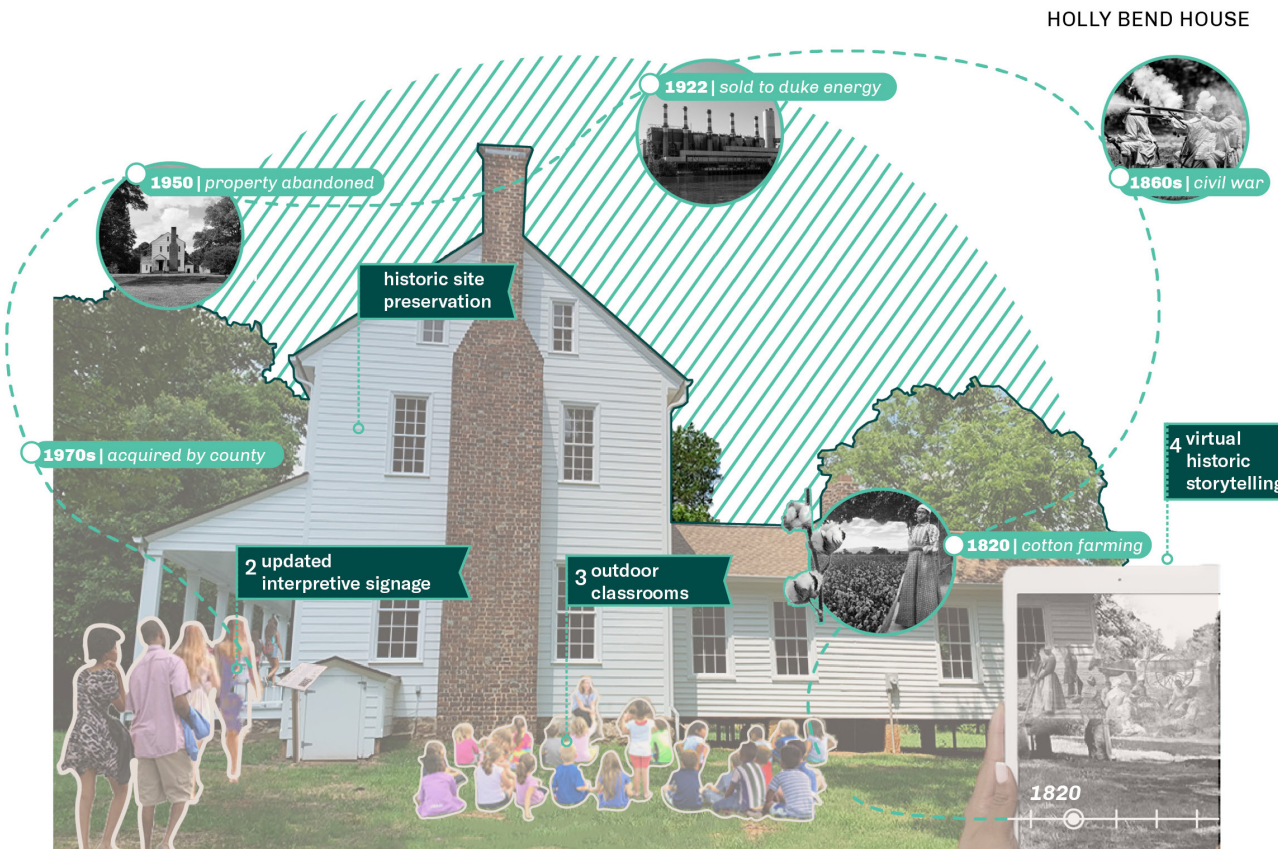
**Goal #11 Communicate**- Increase awareness of programs and facilities through more effective marketing and branding.



**Goal #12 Hospitality** - Improve every user's experience of Mecklenburg Park & Rec parks, greenways, facilities, and programs.



**Goal #13 Reflect** - Build programs and places where residents see and express their community's values, and perspectives.





Mecklenburg Park & Rec's offerings can be represented as Places, Programs, and Events. The purpose of the three categories is to provide clarity, transparency, and simplicity for a user when engaging with all Mecklenburg Park & Rec has to offer.

### Places

Greenway Trails  
Parks  
Recreation and Senior Centers  
Athletic Facilities  
Nature Preserves  
Aquatics  
Etc.

### Programs

Youth Sports  
Swimming Lessons  
Adventure Clubs  
Seniors Programming  
Camps  
Nature Programs  
Outdoor Recreation  
Therapeutic Recreation  
Fitness Programs  
Etc.

### Events

Festivals  
Concerts  
Sports Games  
Community Events  
Etc.

## Priority Recommendations

### Craft Authentic Experiences

Seek programming partners to grow capacity in cultural programming and operations.

### Invest in Marketing

Increase the marketing budget and grow the marketing team to increase and improve community participation.

### Implement a Consistent Brand Identity

Update and standardize visual communications across all facilities, programs, places, and events.

### Build Awareness

Connect with the 38% of residents who are not aware of program offerings.

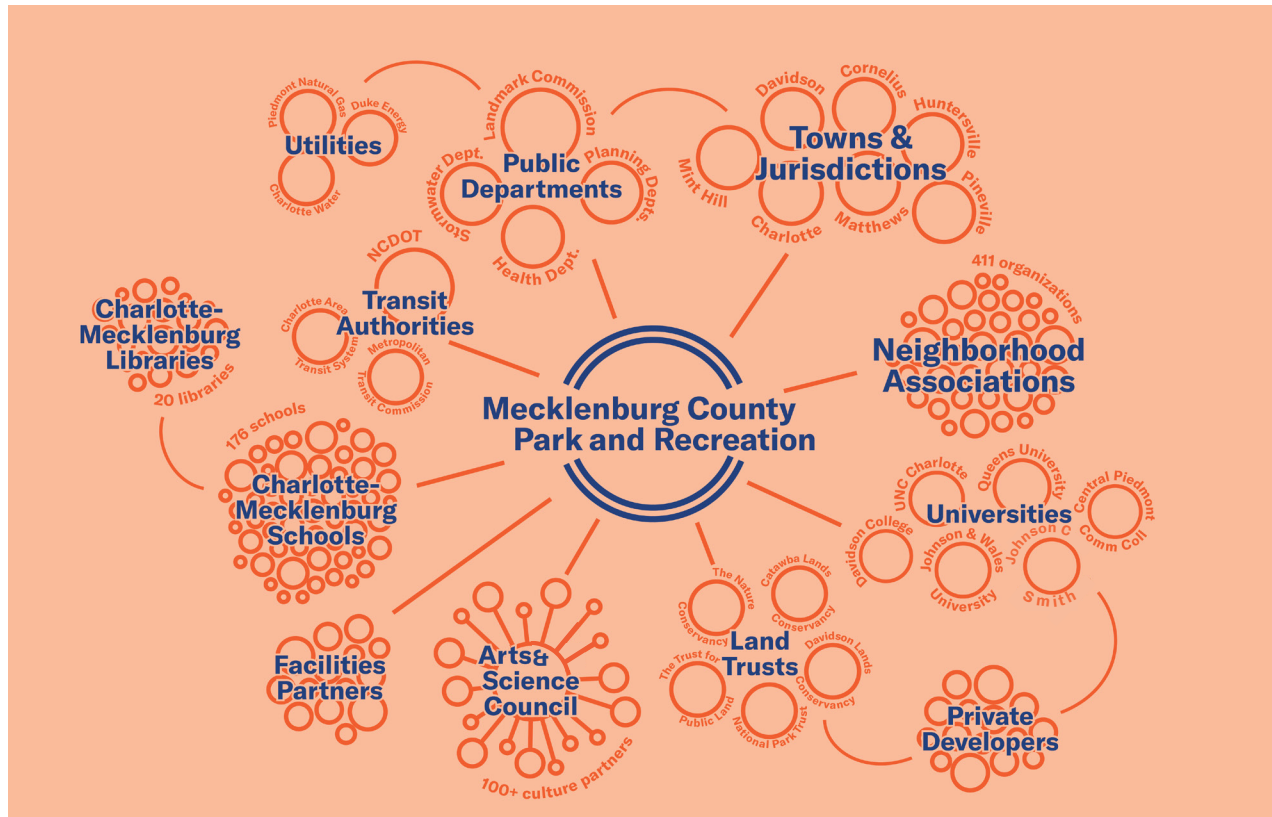
### Build Department Capacity

Fill existing and recommended positions in order to grow, achieve goals, build, and maintain places.

# 4 Move Beyond Boundaries

Mecklenburg County's greenway trails are vital, linear public spaces that connect people across different jurisdictions. They bring ribbons of nature through urban areas, offer moments of fun, integrate with transportation networks, and inspire more active, healthy lifestyles. However, gaps exist in the network of greenway

trails, particularly in east-west links in developed areas. It also means expanding partnerships, creative collaborations, and coordination with other jurisdictions and mission-aligned organizations. The following goals provide strategies to make the County more efficient, successful, and cohesive:



**Goal #14 Partnerships -** Optimize relationships with mission-aligned organizations across the County.



**Goal #15 Leadership -** Position Mecklenburg Park & Rec as a facilitator and leader in community wellbeing.



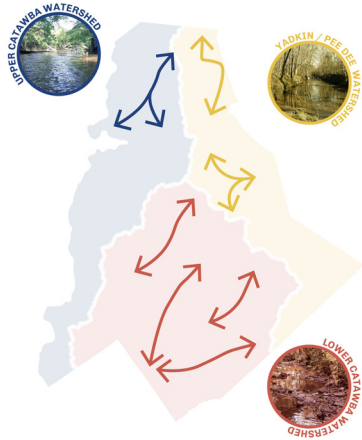
**Goal #16 Collaboration -** Coordinate with the City of Charlotte, towns within the County, schools, and mobility partners.



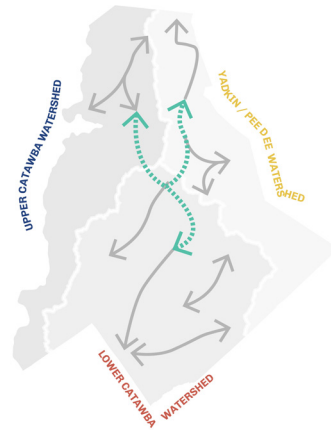
**Goal #17 Connections -** Connect parklands, greenway corridors, and trails to other community facilities and services.

To form a better system there must be a multi-pronged approach. The County must evaluate and invest in land acquisition, preserve land, plan and construct more greenways, as well as monitor and improve existing greenways.

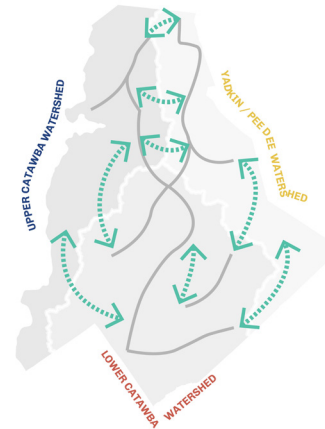
## 1 Learn from the Watershed-Driven Greenway Trail Network



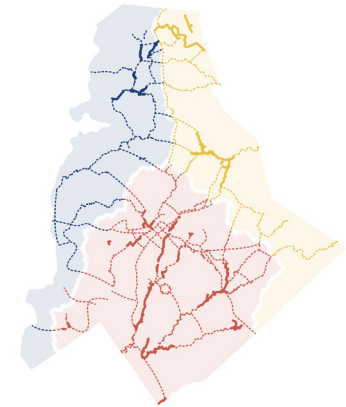
## 2 Connect the Watershed System



## 3 Span the Ridgelines to Create Broad Connections



## 4 Build out the System



## Priority Recommendations

### Grow Connections to Health, Culture, and Stewardship

Pursue partnerships to meet goals around equity, health, and cultural diversity.

### Team Up with Partners

Create funding and joint-use agreements with partners, like CMS, neighboring jurisdictions, and Duke Energy, to support new facilities and parks in growing County areas.

### Build Out the Trail System

Work with partners to expand the County's greenway trails to the full 400+ mile vision, linking trails to transit hubs, and expanding east-west connectivity.

# Go the Distance

## Next Steps

Mecklenburg Park & Rec is already hard at work making many of your ideas and strategies from Meck Playbook a reality. Remember, Meck Playbook presents a wide-reaching vision for the next 10 years.

Meck Playbook will be implemented through reinvestment in existing parks and facilities; investment in new parks, greenways, nature centers, and recreation centers; land acquisition to fill gaps in park access, account for growth, and protect natural resources; staffing to ensure Mecklenburg Park & Rec provides a well-rounded range of programs and maintains facilities at a high level; and engagement to ensure residents are actively involved in all aspects of provided services.

You can follow along with Mecklenburg Park & Rec as it checks off projects that are completed or underway. For more information about specific recommendations, check out the Meck Playbook full master plan document.



### CAPITAL PROJECTS

- Reinvestment
- Investment
- Land Acquisition

### WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

- Staffing and Hiring
- Programming
- Implementation

# Where Do We Begin?

## Staffing

As Mecklenburg Park & Rec manages more land, operates more programs, maintains more park and open spaces, and reaches more Mecklenburg County residents, more staff will be needed.

Strategic increases in staff will ensure Mecklenburg Park & Rec provides residents and visitors with the best possible experience. This includes both full time staff and volunteers.

## Programming

Mecklenburg Park & Rec already offers a commendable number and diversity of programs. It should continue to engage with residents and monitor national recreation trends to uphold this high quality of offerings.

A sample of program priorities for investment include fitness, outdoor adventure, arts and culture, education and life skills, and offerings for seniors and active adults.

## Land Acquisition

Mecklenburg County currently owns 21,000 acres of parkland. To maintain existing levels of service (19.1 acres per thousand residents), the County will need an additional 8,000 acres of new park space over the next 20 years to support the same level of service for new residents as well as plan for important environmental protections.

Filling gaps, anticipating growth, and restoring natural ecology are the three primary aims of Meck Playbook's land acquisition strategy. For more information about the land acquisition strategy, see Meck Playbook Goal #7.



# Go the Distance

Realizing Meck Playbook's ambitious vision will require a careful implementation plan. There are two ways forward. The first is to reinvest in existing parks and nature preserves, facilities, and greenway trails that need updates. Often, reinvestment uses Capital Improvement Project funding. The second is to invest, or create, new parks and nature preserves, park amenities, facilities, and greenway trails where they currently do not exist. Investment may or may not use Capital Improvement Project funding. Assets are categorized into Tiers to prioritize reinvestment and investment.

\***Priority communities** are defined by an overlap of many factors. A selection being: communities with a higher rate of renters, youth, and seniors, poor public health outcomes, less access to cars, and greater distance to parks and open space. See Meck Playbook for full definition.

## Reinvestment

### Tier One

#### Assets in Poor Condition

Assets located in priority communities\* and in need of immediate improvement. Tier One assets are in the poorest condition and in need of upgrades.

### Tier Two

#### Assets in Poor Condition

Assets in need of repairs and updates. However, they are not located in priority communities. Tier Two assets should be funded secondarily.

### Tier Three

#### Assets in Acceptable Condition

Assets are in good condition, but may need reinvestment soon. Assets are located both within and outside priority communities.

## Investment

### Tier One

#### New Facilities in Priority Communities

Assets that should receive investment first, as they will fill current gaps. This includes facilities and park amenities most requested by residents and opportunities to protect critical habitats. They are located in priority communities.

### Tier Two

#### New Facilities

Assets that while not located in priority communities, would increase access to parks, amenities, open spaces, and facilities. This includes assets not funded in previous Capital Improvement Plan cycles and land that would connect more residents to greenway trails.

### Tier Three

#### Future Facilities

Land that has not yet been acquired for development and park amenities with lower demand per resident feedback.

# Investment Over Time

The principles, goals, and strategies of Meck Playbook provide the vision for how Mecklenburg Park & Rec will grow and improve over the next ten years to help it apply equity in how and where it invests County funds. The plan prioritizes investment into three

tiers to guide the evaluation of projects for future Capital Improvement Plans, prioritize land acquisition, and develop the Strategic Business Plans.

Meck Playbook is not a static document. It is an ongoing process.

The plan will be updated regularly to ensure the principles, goals, and strategies are being applied toward all aspects of Mecklenburg Park & Rec and continue to reflect the needs of residents.

	TIER ONE		TIER TWO		TIER THREE	
	Reinvestments	Investments	Reinvestments	Investments	Reinvestments	Investments
Parks & Nature Preserves	32 Local Parks 1 Special Use Park	10 Parks (New) 5 Parks (Expansions) 1 Nature Preserve (New)	9 Local Parks 1 Special Use Park 2 Nature Preserves	9 Parks (New) 8 Parks (Expansions) 1 Previously Unfunded CIP Park Project 8 Nature Preserves (New) 1 Previously Unfunded CIP Nature Preserve Projects	27 Local Parks 13 Regional Parks 2 Special Use Parks	
Park Amenities		7 Park Amenities		3 Park Amenities		6 Park Amenities
Facilities	5 Facilities	5 Facilities	4 Facilities	3 Facilities	11 Facilities	4 Facilities
Greenway Trails	3 Greenway Trails	30 Greenway Trails	5 Greenway Trails			
Land Acquisition	Acquire land concurrently based on 3 goals: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Close access gaps, beginning in priority areas</li> <li>2. Implement the Priority Capital Investment Greenway Trails</li> <li>3. Balance growth with natural resource areas</li> </ol>		Set land acquisition targets for CIP cycle  Update the Priority Capital Investment Greenway Trail Project	Pursue land acquisition opportunities that connect residents to the greenway trail system	Work with municipalities to lobby General Assembly to allow impact fees.	Expand to create a regional greenway system

## Strategic Business Plan

Add updates that identify departmental priorities, performance metrics, and actions in support of Meck Park & Rec goals and Meck Playbook

# Staying Involved

With your help, Meck Playbook was crafted to reflect the needs and aspirations of its residents with a focus on the County's future. Thank you for sharing your memories, insights, challenges, and ideas for this plan.

Our work does not stop here. Meck Playbook includes over 200 recommendations and we need your help to make them a reality.

## How you can stay involved

- Visit <https://meckplaybook.com/> for more details about the plan, view project timelines, and sign up for e-mail updates and newsletters.
- Follow @meckparkrec on twitter, facebook, and instagram for updates about Meck Playbook's implementation and other projects that need your guidance.
- Visit [www.ParkandRec.com](http://www.ParkandRec.com) for more details about ongoing projects and ways to engage with our parks and programs.
- Contact Mecklenburg Park & Rec  
M-F : 8 AM- 5PM  
980.314.1000  
5841 Brookshire Blvd  
Charlotte, NC 28216
- Participate in other County and local planning efforts like the CATS Silver Line Transit Oriented Development Plan.



Pre-pandemic meetings invited residents to express hopes and fears for the future and land ideas in specific locations. Virtual public workshops, online surveys, and socially distanced interactive engagement tools were used after the onset of COVID-19.



# A Special Thank You!

Thank you to everyone who participated in Meck Playbook. It was through coordination with many important stakeholder organizations and partners that Meck Playbook is able to closely support and advance municipal, regional, and county-wide planning efforts.



